

“PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH”

Article by Tom Spencer for visitors to his website, www.tomspencer.info.

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The Federal Trust has been accurately described as the addition of a reliable noun to a dodgy adjective! In the case of the phrase ‘public affairs research’ we have a double problem – the definition of the phrase public affairs and the loose use of the word ‘research’.

When we established the ECPA in the mid 1980s, we gave some thought to the correct title for the organisation. ‘Lobbying’ is only 10% of the process of influencing decision making, the balance being monitoring, strategy formation, coalition building and much more. ‘Government affairs’ implies that the process is directed only at governments, a problem shared by ‘regulatory affairs’ with its emphasis on compliance. Public affairs is clearly part of ‘corporate communications’, but the phrases cannot be used as synonyms. Then there is the vexed history of confusion between ‘public relations’ and ‘public affairs’. One of the negative aspects of the phrase ‘public relations’ is an implication that PR is short term. Public affairs, whether conducted by corporations, governments or NGOs requires a longer term perspective. Since the 1980s new classifications and distinctions have emerged including hybrids such as ‘corporate social responsibility’. We settled on the title European Centre for Public Affairs as being the most general descriptor, even though public affairs means something different in the US context and is difficult to translate into other languages.

There has been similar confusion over the use of the word ‘research’ in this context. It is used to apply to academic studies. Sometimes it refers to research into the practice of public affairs. On yet other occasions it is research into subjects believed to be of use to public affairs practitioners.

The ECPA set itself a mission statement to “record, analyse and improve the conduct of public affairs”. Recording what actually happened at particular critical moments is important to improving overall performance. Analysing these events with a degree of academic rigour has always been part of the key promise of the ECPA, both in the context of its publications and its taught programmes.

As I review eighteen years of experience in the ECPA, I am struck by the recurrence of certain tensions in the discussion. There has long been a mismatch between the ECPA’s academics, keen to secure corporate funding for pre-existing projects, and corporate members keen to fund projects of relevance to them, but which did not fit into university or business school plans. This core tension is aggravated by the two separate traditions which characterise academic interest in this area - political science and business management. Tensions also exist on the corporate side. With some

notable exceptions the public affairs function is undervalued by line management. The function is under- resourced with inadequate provision for either training or the funding of research into the public affairs process.

The ECPA has successfully pursued other aspects of its research mission. We have produced a series of books of case studies and occasional monographs. We have supported publications such as the Public Affairs Newsletter and the Journal of Public Affairs which seek to strengthen the identity of the function. The JPA has a very ECPA-compatible mission to combine academic and practitioner viewpoints. Since its inception in 2000 I have contributed a “topical” essay in each edition. Some of these were published in my recent book “Public Affairs and Power: Essays in a Time of Fear”*.

Research of one kind or another is also provided by the large PA consultancies, either as part of meeting their clients’ needs or more usually as a form of practice promotion. NGOs of all kinds have also contributed to the research flow, using their intellectual assets and their conviction that the market of ideas is central to the conduct of successful public affairs.

It is helpful therefore to view public affairs research as taking place within a space bounded by academics, corporate practitioners, consultants and NGOs. To be effective however we need to be precise about the purpose and aims of the research. It remains my belief that the creation of high quality, relevant and clearly targeted public affairs research is central to the proper conduct of the public affairs function.

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* The book “Public Affairs and Power: Essays in a Time of Fear” is available via www.tomspencer.info or www.publicaffairs.ac



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