

DEAR SIR--YOU CUR

Read Before
The Chicago Literary Club
5 May 1969
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Each individual citizen in today's rapidly exploding population feels that his own personal control over his destiny is shrinking. There are more and more people occupying an area that is getting smaller daily. The earth is not really shrinking perceptibly, but even if California has not by this time actually slid into the Pacific ocean the inhabitable parts of the world are rapidly being devoured by parking lots, supermarkets, super-highway interchanges, missile sites and anti-missile missile sites. Even filling stations are getting bigger. Into the shrinking remainder the growing population is crowded. Forced to view his fellow man at closer range, each man becomes less sanguine about the future of the human race. His increasing frustration and the press of humanity all about him inexorably force him deeper into his shell.

This tendency to retire into the shell of family life and to ignore everything outside the small circle of job and home is increasing for another reason. American corporations have the habit of moving from one location to another, and if the whole company doesn't move, then the people who work for it are shifted from one location to another. The insatiable appetite of the modern conglomerate company adds to the problem. For when one company is bought by another, inevitably there are dislocations of personnel in the course of merging the two enterprises. After a family has moved two or three times and has been forced to break ties of perhaps long standing, it is much slower to form new connections which might soon also be broken.

For all of these reasons, people are content to "Let George do it."

But are they, really?

Occasionally one sees references to the number of pounds of letters, on each side of a particular question, received by congressmen. Corporations large and small have public relations departments, one of whose major duties is answering the letters of stockholders or customers. Newspapers have not abandoned their letters to the editor columns -- in fact many of them have been forced to set limits on the length of letters they will print and have stated they could not publish all letters.

Writing a letter to an offending public body, such as the street-car company, or to a representative in Congress, has a long and glorious history. Instead of waning, this habit has probably increased. More leisure time, plus a higher level of education so that people can express themselves with a modicum of intelligibility, has undoubtedly increased rather than lessened the flow.

Coupled with the increasing prolixity of the letter-writers is greater attention to "image" on the part of the recipients. One often rather suspects that no American corporation cares whether or not it sells any of its products provided it has a desirable corporate image. Why else advertise in Fortune? One effective way of burnishing up this image is meticulous attention to answering the letters of either pleased or disgruntled shareholders and customers. Never mind whether the automatic dishwasher cleans dishes or breaks them or covers the kitchen floor with two inches of greasy suds -- answer the complaint promptly, politely, promise the immediate attention of two vice-presidents and have the

facsimile signature of the president impressively appended. Hopefully, a copy of this reply sent to the appropriate individual at the local branch office will have a salutary effect on the resident service man and he will tend to the complaint somewhat sooner and more efficaciously than he otherwise might.

As American business and American government get bigger and more complicated, the individual on the producing end inevitably is farther removed from the consumer. Some years ago the customer knew personally the blacksmith who shod his horse, and would take his complaints about an improperly fitted shoe directly to the man who did the job. Today, a thousand men had a part in putting your car together, they are a thousand miles away, and you have only the most tenuous of connections with them. They have no relationship with you, no knowledge of the complete mechanism, no interest in the total result, and no feeling of personal responsibility. Apparently it takes a zealot such as Ralph Nader to convince the automobile producers that the customers are not happy.

While the origin of the belief that each man in the world is dependent in some measure upon all the other men in the world is ancient, it was never as true as it is today. More and more, we rely upon people whom we don't know, have never met, and couldn't find even if we wanted to. If the street in front of our house develops a chuck-hole, we don't know who is responsible, we can't find the man who is supposed to fix it, and we can't fix it ourselves (as we formerly could

with a dirt road). Even when the river floods and we have to abandon our house and seek shelter on higher ground, we don't just go there by ourselves - we wait for the local civil defense authorities or the Coast Guard to come with their boats and evacuate us to the high-school gymnasium, where the Red Cross will feed us.

When the big jets start to fly and the sonic boom breaks all the windows in our houses and possibly ruptures our ear-drums we will have no recourse. We can, personally, do nothing about it.

Or how about the war in Vietnam? No individual American citizen has the least power to affect this matter in the slightest. One voice in two hundred million will never be heard.

But corporate image-makers, public relations departments of major and minor corporations, countless state and federal legislators, the manufacturers of every major product, the officials of every state and county and city government, and even the administrator of your local hospital will vociferously disagree. Let even one patient complain about a ball of dust under his bed, and the housekeeper goes home that night with a migraine headache. Then, let the vacuum cleaner fail to pick up that dust-ball and the Electrolux company will also have a headache. So also will the distributor, and the salesman. Probably the only person involved who will not have an Excedrin headache will be the service-man, for whom it is all in the day's work and who would be fixing some other vacuum cleaner if it weren't this one. Anyway it's the fault of those

people in the factory and the sloppy way "they" build things these days.

A conviction that a letter will do the job stems from an experience in the dim dark past when street cars still ran on Clark Street. A street-car motorman clanged his bell furiously at an intersection attempting to blast his way through traffic, and when he had an opportunity to move was able to go only far enough to block the cross-walk before the traffic light changed. There he stopped. An irate letter, detailing the exact time, location and identity of the motorman evoked immediate results. An apologetic letter came by return mail, along with a stamp to reimburse me. The offending motorman was being disciplined, this offense would never be repeated, and would I please be good enough to let the company know when and where it happened again.

Reinforcement of the slowly dawning knowledge that letters do have an effect came some years later. The high-point of a family trip to the west coast was to be a return trip on the then famous Super-Chief - a train of wondrous reputation and an extra fare. After a night spent in a double compartment with a wife and three children - there were four bunks and no child would deign to share a bunk, so I leave it to your imagination as to who enjoyed a restful night on the floor - breakfast in the much-touted Super-Chief dining car seemed like manna in Heaven. Beautiful this dining car unquestionably was. Flowers on the tables, gleaming silver and immaculate linen gave zest to the appetite. The first hint of possible trouble came when the waiters all found important tasks

elsewhere. Finally cornered, one of them called the steward who, as the most experienced had been the first to disappear. After some hesitation menus appeared. Finally, some forty-five minutes after entering a dining car which at the time of our entry was completely empty, breakfast came. While it was, as I recall, a passable meal, the coffee was such as not even a hospital would serve its most helpless patient. Complaints were of no avail. One gathered that people who ate at the unearthly hour demanded by the parents of small children had no right to complain. So, out came the pencil and paper, and proper notation was made of the time, the name and number of the dining car and the exact identity of the steward. After a particularly desolate trip to Chicago the facts were made known in a letter to the president of the railroad. Within hours, a representative of the passenger service department, or some person who writes the so-called "bug" letters, was on the telephone to secure all details. They had been furnished, but were repeated. Assurance was given that this was a most unusual case, that it simply could not happen, and would most assuredly never happen again. But the matter was not closed. Some days later this representative called in person to offer the apology of the company. Still, there was more to come. After a short interlude came notice that the offending steward had been located, had been reprimanded and given a suspension. The end? Not at all, for within a week the steward himself appeared, verified that he had been suspended for a period of several days, and needed confirmation that he had personally apologized before being reinstated. Looking back on

this experience I can only hope that this difficulty with the consumer is not what caused the demise of the passenger train.

By now there could be no doubt that anyone who could state his case more or less coherently had American industry at his beck and call. But there also dawned the knowledge that this was an awesome power. By the mere writing of a letter, employees who probably had a wife and seventeen starving children eaking out a bare existence in a heavily mortgaged hovel, could be brought to the brink of disaster. But there dawned also the realization that by this means the performance of a motorman or a dining car steward could possibly be improved - and if that could happen, was it beyond the bounds of credulity to think that perhaps the same might be true, to some extent, of senators or mayors, or an errant legislator?

Some weeks ago the president of one of the major television networks appeared before a congressional committee. He was asked to testify concerning the effects of the violence seen daily on television, and whether this continual exposure to violence might not conceivably have some effect on viewers, particularly the younger and presumably more impressionable ones. Apparently he did not consider his answer sufficiently, for he replied that he did not think so since people didn't believe what they saw on television anyway. This rather extraordinary endorsement of advertising on television, to say nothing of his supposedly factual reporting of news, came as a shock - for the success of television is entirely

due to its fantastic ability to move merchandise. He has since had considerable evidence that more than just one person was moved to seek further information, for his reply to a flood of letters was sent out by a functionary who was constrained to use a "Dear Inquirer" approach, with a mimeographed letter, to reply. The reply, incidentally, was merely an appreciation of the interest shown, and enclosed a copy - undoubtedly heavily edited by the public relations department - of the original testimony. Even a letter such as this has an effect, for the faith in this particular network and television in general has changed from infinitesimal to non-existent.

The power that rests with a letter-writer stems from the fact that the person to whom the letter finally wends its way through the corporate hierarchy has no idea of the identity of the sender other than a name and address. For some years it was my duty to answer many such inquiries. There is one which will never be forgotten. It came in a typically smeary envelope, addressed in a childish hand. The writer stated that his fifty-grade class had been assigned a research project and he wanted to find out all about hospitals. Would I please supply all required data, as speedily as possible? Would I, in short, do his assignment for him? Naturally, the press of seemingly more important matters might cause such a letter to sink toward the bottom of the pile of unaccomplished duties. But, for all the person answering the letter knows, such a letter might come from the cousin or nephew of the chairman of the board of directors.

One other simple fact explains much of this power. No-one has yet devised a way to file conversations except by means of a tape recorder, which few people habitually carry with them, and the tapes don't fit the usual filing systems. But the insistence of every well-trained secretary that every scrap of correspondence and every written document be properly filed, and then refiled at the end of the year, and kept until the legal department approves disposition, is a potent weapon. If a letter should arrive making reference to previous correspondence, that previous correspondence must be found and attached. Thus a "file" is started. Having been started, it must eventually be "closed" before it can be assigned to the limbo. This means that judgments must be made. Someone must decide whether the dining car steward acted properly or not. The very necessity for an answer prompts investigation. But a simple telephone call can easily be ignored or forgotten.

It happens that the representative in Congress from the northeastern district of Iowa is a Democrat, occupying a seat normally held by a Republican. He is now in his third term. He has been successful not because he is so much more eminently qualified but because of his meticulous attention to detail. Both he and his predecessor are well educated, both are respected members of the Bar, both are pre-riot Harvard graduates, both are commonly believed to be honest, intelligent, and truly devoted to the well-being of their district and their country. On any given issue they are apt to be found holding similar views, though neither will admit it.

The detail to which the successful congressman is so devoted is his mail. Like most congressmen, this one receives a great deal. Where his predecessor was inclined to give a rather non-committal answer, very probably in a mimeographed letter which could be sent to those either favoring or opposing a particular stand, this man gives a clear statement of his position, adds a note indicating personal reading of the letter sent him. Being a politician, and undoubtedly believing that a politician's first duty is to be elected, the clear statement of his position also clearly states that there is much to be said on both sides and that future events might cause him to alter his position. His predecessor was always considered by most of his constituents to be an excellent congressman, but they never really felt any kinship with him, and did not believe that he felt any involvement with their particular problems. So, because of letters written to him, and his treatment of them, this district will probably now be known as a normally Democratic one.

As any newspaper editor will testify, letters to the editor seem to follow a pattern. If one person writes a letter complaining about holes in the streets, soon the column will be filled with reports of the location of countless other holes. During this winter there have been four major topics discussed in the Vox Pop column of the local newspaper. Cats, voting for nineteen-year-olds, legalized abortion, and sex-education in the schools are mentioned almost daily.

Possibly legalized abortion and sex education in the schools should be considered one subject. All four demonstrate the power of letter-writing. After a long campaign of letters in the newspaper and to the city council, the cat people suddenly find that the council is considering an ordinance to force the registration of cats, their inoculation for rabies even though a rabid cat has never been found, and a prohibition on their being allowed to run at large. Surely any municipality has more important matters to consider, but the insistence of letter writers and the apathy of others may result in such a law. One can but rely upon the sense of humor of law-makers, which in this instance has so far been sufficient.

One of the first major issues in the Iowa legislature this year was the matter of legalized abortion - the proposed adoption of a so-called "model statute" on the subject. Tempers grew hot, and friendships cool. Defeat of the measure on the first actual test was not regarded as defeat by the letter-writers in favor of it. Nor was it just those in favor of the measure who wrote their newspaper. Those opposed also had their say. It was interesting to note that the local newspaper, along with many others, had taken a firm stand in favor of the proposed law. But, as most newspapers will do, it had also published the letters of those taking a contrary view. One of those writing such a letter was a highly respected reporter on the staff of the paper, who wrote a well-reasoned statement of the opposing view. There is every reason to believe that the last letter on this subject has not been written, and the issue is far from settled.

The subject of voting privileges for nineteen-year-old citizens first came up in a letter to the editor some time prior to the elections of 1968. As a result, almost every candidate for the state legislature was pressured into taking a stand, and most of them apparently thought that this was a fairly easy subject on which to agree with the most vocal of their constituents, who wouldn't be able to vote anyway. There did not appear to be any organized opposition. Now an amendment to the state constitution is under consideration in the legislature. The letters are becoming more frequent. And action by the legislature is becoming more doubtful. After all, the letter-writers don't vote - not yet. By what appears to be a well-organized parliamentary maneuver, the issue will probably not reach the stage of requiring a vote. The current crop of nineteen-year-old letter writers will presently have no personal interest in the issue, and the next crop of youth may well have a different subject on which to write letters. This particular letter writing campaign is probably headed for failure, but at least it has brought an issue out in the open and caused much serious discussion.

Sex education in public schools is one issue on which almost every person has a firm opinion which he is anxious to express publicly. Locally there has as yet been no actual program proposed for this interesting subject. Citizens' committees, teachers' committees, committees of the school board and countless other committees have debated the issue. Contrary to usual procedure, the only group not yet heard from is the PTA, but they are rumored to be about to publish the definitive work on the subject. In spite of the absence of a specific proposal, or perhaps because of this

lack, letters are published condemning or praising the whole idea, as well as assuming that a particular conclusion has been reached and then attacking it.

If a proposal for sex education in the schools can draw this kind of response, just think what a suggestion for a change in the worship service of a church will do for the sale of postage stamps. After all, a religious experience is in many ways a highly personal affair, which if it affects a person at all is apt to affect him deeply. No matter what beliefs he may hold, he has undoubtedly held them for years, they are deeply rooted not only in his own habits but in those of his grand-parents, he is convinced that his is the only true belief, and any change is a corruption. It is, in fact, contrary to the will of God. Let any man who doubts this serve a short term as the chairman of a church's worship committee or a pastoral selection committee for his church. But here again, once the subject is opened, the letters flow not only from those who are against any change, but also from those who let it be known in no uncertain terms that a change is long overdue. Whereupon they expound at length on exactly what the changes should be and how they should be handled. Particularly in this instance, there is always ample authority, for anyone who cannot find a scriptural basis for whatever program he proposes has simply not spent sufficient time in his study of scripture. A recent experience in this field was most illuminating, for I was alternately convinced that there was too much music played during a service, that there was not enough, that all music should be what the author called traditional, by which I

presume he meant it must have been written more than one hundred years ago, or that the music should have a modern sound. I suppose the ear of God is as willing to hear modern progressive rock music as some of the more insipid hymns of the Victorian era.

The propensity to write letters, to sound off on any subject on which the author can claim the slightest knowledge, has had a profound effect on modern American business. It has, in fact, become a very big business. Knowing that people want to talk about products they buy or use, services that are rendered them, or companies in which they own shares, every large company has organized this situation. It probably started with the employment of one secretary to answer the complaints of customers. But then some enterprising soul discovered that this could be turned to advantage. Thus was born the market research industry. Not only do these people read all letters carefully to glean whatever ideas they may contain for the improvement of the company or its products (few do), but they actually make heroic efforts to stimulate such letters. Questionnaires are sent out by the million to inquire into every phase of the whole operation. Did our serviceman wipe his feet before he came in your house? Does the paying teller in our bank call you by name when you cash a check? Do you listen to our weather program at 7:45 each morning? How long would the electric cord on our vacuum cleaner be? Were you kept waiting in the X-ray department? This has grown to such an extent and become such an important field that the experts in it are no longer just market research specialists or market analysts. They

are now known as behavioral scientists. Their techniques have even been refined to such an extent that although only a few people may answer the questions, these experts can state with what they claim is virtual certainty exactly how all the rest of us feel on any given subject. Let a few people vote in any election and they will project the result of the election, and with vastly greater success than the Literary Digest in 1936.

Behavioral scientists operate not only in the field of elections. The cost of marketing a new cat food, or a new tooth paste or a detergent loaded with enzymes has become so astronomically high that the risk can be run only after extensive tests. During these tests, for which one single and preferably small and homogeneous market is picked, market researchers swarm as bees to honey. Armed with clipboards and pencils they lurk in every supermarket. Every unwary shopper is asked whether she bought the product, and why, or why not. Not content with just asking actual shoppers, they visit homes, make an inventory of the shelves in the kitchen cupboard, ask whether products found there represent the first purchase, or how often they are purchased, for what purpose they were bought, do they fulfill that purpose, would a repeat purchase be made. Many of these interviews are so extensive that to complete the required questions takes an interviewer and a harried housewife an hour or more.

One might suppose that this whole procedure would be considered an effrontery, an invasion of privacy, or just plain nobody's business. Not so. In fact, people have been known to complain that nobody is interested in them, for they are never interviewed by a poll-taker. There

are probably very few people who are not flattered by having their opinions sought. Most importantly, this market research technique is founded on the principle that people like to express their opinions, and that there are few things on which they are not experts. It is merely an extension, and not very much of an extension, of the urge to write letters to the editor. It is exactly the same thing, only in typical American style it has been made more efficient and is done on a wholesale scale. Where one isolated letter may or may not represent a widely held belief, extensive sampling of public opinion done on a scientific basis can confirm or deny the existence of a general demand.

This opinion sampling also has a profound effect on products sold. Formerly one could have telephones only in black, and they were all one style, with a standard type of dial. Now, they come in many colors, in many styles both large and small. From your choice of color and style and a computerized analysis of your telephone bill, the company can undoubtedly determine much about your personality, whether or not you are a person who makes many long-distance calls, whether you are apt to dial wrong numbers, and whether you require much assistance from an operator. Eventually this will very likely result in telephones again being one standard color and design - with the color and design picked so that you will make more calls with greater accuracy.

Currently there is an effort in the legislature in Iowa to permit double-length trucks -- an extra trailer hitched on behind a normal tractor-trailer combination. Although at the moment permission to operate these behemoths

would apply only to interstate highways, there is always the distinct possibility that this permission would be extended to the narrow two lane roads. One representative in the legislature has been brave enough to buck the powerful truck lobby on this matter, and has also had the effrontery to introduce legislation raising truck license fees by the same percentage that passenger vehicle fees have been increased. People of such caliber need and deserve support and encouragement, so my latest letters are of encouragement to this legislator and to others who might be persuaded to follow her example.

Indeed writers of letters do not habitually dip their pens in venom. If it were not for the well-known habit of American consumers of addressing letters of fulsome praise to the manufacturers of their favorite products, much of the most effective advertising would be lost. The unsolicited testimonial has long been the mainstay of the advertising manager. Contrary to suspicion, most of these letters are actually unsolicited. That, of course, does not mean that no editing is done, or that the letter is not returned to the sender with the suggestion that a phrase or two might be altered slightly. But the most effective letters are still the ones containing a few grammatical errors, a slight awkwardness of expression, or perhaps even a slight misstatement of fact. As consumers, we still want to know that someone else has used a particular product and found it good.

A letter sometimes serves a purpose entirely unrelated to its subject, or is really meant for the recipient of the

carbon copy. Some months ago, in response to an advertisement in a national magazine, I wrote the advertiser requesting a catalog. Weeks passed without an answer. I was anxious to know more about this product, and fairly yearned to place an order. Then came another issue of the magazine, with the same advertiser again represented. So I wrote to the manufacturer again - but this time a copy of the letter was sent to the magazine's advertising department inquiring whether this was a bona fide manufacturer. In a matter of days I received the catalog. Very shortly the manufacturer received an order. A week or so later another catalog came, which I regret, because now I do not know whether the first catalog came in response to my original request or as a result of my letter to the magazine. The interesting sequel was a handwritten note on the acknowledgment of my order saying that because of my unusual interest they were advancing the normal shipping date by three weeks.

Lest you think that letters are always successful, I must confess one great failure. For some years I, among several other people, have campaigned for a sidewalk along a particular street leading to the high school. Children are forced to walk in the street because the land on each side slopes too steeply for easy walking. This street also carries the heavy automobile traffic going to the school, as well as the large school busses. We have written innumerable letters, we have spoken to the mayor. There is still no sidewalk, and the prospects are only slightly less hopeless than formerly.

Writing a letter to a manufacturer or to a legislator or the local utility company can be a very satisfying experience, even if nothing happens as a result. But if the letter is written to a sufficiently high authority, such as the president of the company, results almost invariably come rapidly. That image must be kept in a high state of polish, and there are few things that do it as well or as surely as quick and satisfactory answers. Prompt answering dulls the criticism of an irate customer, cuts the ground from under a chronic objector, insures the reelection of a legislator. Most important, writing a letter returns some measure of control over his surroundings to a person who is otherwise just a number in the computer. He is no longer a faceless and mindless consumer, but an individual.