Selective Process Theory and Applications in Public Relations

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Abstract

Outlined in this paper, is the four-step selective perception theory in detail. This research paper will examine selective process theory and the benefits the theory has in the field of public relations. Additionally, this same four step process is then applied to the public relations campaign, #AerieReal as an example of this theory in communications. Selective process theory explains that people choose messages and media that align with their current beliefs, values and ideas as opposed to messages and media that go against their current beliefs, values and ideas. Though this theory exist, with the right research and knowledge PR professionals can use it to their advantage to sway an audience’s way of thinking.

**Introduction**

Albert Einstein noted that, “The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.” While on the surface, one may think that a person who refuses to change their way of thinking is simply stubborn, psychologist and public relations professionals know that selective process theory is the true reasoning behind this statement. Selective process theory provides insight on a person’s thought process. Leon Festinger found that because people are uncomfortable with information that challenges their values and beliefs, they generally seek information that is more atoned to their own values. Furthermore, while Einstein may have aimed to inspire world change through thinking, a PR practitioner whom completed extensive research would find that it is selecting the right audience that's crucial in targeting a desired outcome.

**Description of Theory**

 The history of selective process theory first begins in connection with another communications theory. Selective process theory gets its origins from cognitive dissonance theory. Cognitive dissonance theory states that people experience mental stress or discomfort when they are confronted by new information that contradicts their existing beliefs, values and ideas. When this discomfort is experienced, individuals attempt to reduce it and actively seek out information that reduces their feelings of dissonance. (Stroud) An example of cognitive dissonance would be overhearing a bad experience about your favorite restaurant and then searching for a good review online to confirm your previous opinion. Selective process theory explains that people choose messages and media that align with their current beliefs, values and ideas as opposed to messages and media that go against their current beliefs, values and ideas. Selective process theory is comprised of four steps: selective exposure, attention, perception and retention. Through selective processes theory, individuals interpret the media in their own way and tend to avoid messages that do not confirm their beliefs. (Whitaker et al.)

Cognitive dissonance and selective process theory are related, but there is one difference, with selective processes, an individual does not seek out information for the purpose of lowering their dissonance level. Instead, individuals only give their time and attention to messages and media that align with their preexisting beliefs. For instance, if a person believes that hurting animals for human clothing is unethical, they may be a frequent reader of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) material as opposed to *Vogue*, a top fashion magazine that features leather and fur.

The first two steps in selective processes theory are selective exposure and selective attention. These steps are synonymous and refer to the idea that individuals’ interests, opinions and beliefs influence the information, media and messages that their attention is given to. It is the nonrandom process by which people purposely choose which messages to view and which messages to ignore completely. Because it is impossible to read, hear and see every message available in the media, people selectively expose themselves to messages they feel will be of interest or help to them. Along with this, people tend to seek out viewpoints with which they expect to agree. People use the media to reinforce existing biases, beliefs and opinions. (Whitaker et al.)

After an individual meticulously chooses the messages he or she wishes to be exposed and give attention to, the next step in the selective processes theory is selective perception. Selective perception is all about how individuals interpret the information they have decided to give their attention to. People often interpret messages and choose to only hear and see the portion of the message they want to. Individuals will alter the meaning of messages so they become consistent with their preexisting beliefs and attitudes. (Smith) Thus, one message and one set of information may carry extremely different meanings for different people, depending on their various backgrounds, values, attitudes, beliefs and ideas.

The final process of the selective processes theory is selective retention. This phase is all about memory recall with the selected exposed and perceived information from various messages. People have a tendency to remember messages that support their beliefs rather than messages that contradict their beliefs. Also, individuals remember information for a longer period of time when it coincides with their attitudes and beliefs as opposed to when the information does not. Research states that along with this, people unconsciously forget or set aside the information that opposes their preexisting beliefs. (Stroud)

Throughout the various selective processes phases, it is evident that individuals both consciously and unconsciously prefer messages that align with their preexisting beliefs as opposed to those that do not confirm preexisting beliefs. In this regard, such tendencies make it less likely that the media can play a sole role in changing the attitudes and behaviors of consumers. For media consumers and individuals across the globe, messages that reinforce the values of an individual will almost always be preferred to those that do not. However, with the right research, and the correct audience, a PR campaign could persuade a change in the selective perception stage.

**Conceptual Model**

**Application in Public Relations**

 In public relations, selective exposure is prominent in the way PR practitioners conduct research to decide on who their targeted audience will be. The extent of this research includes studying the audience’s demographic in terms of race, sex, socioeconomic status and education to better understand their beliefs, values and habits. It is important for PR practitioners to know this information to better frame their messages. Additionally, they need to know what strategies, channels and tactics to use that their audience will best understand to receive their message. The last thing any company or PR practitioner wants to do, is offend a group of people. Though PR doesn’t directly seek to change a person’s way of thinking, it does aim for influencing one’s thought process whether it be in internally with self-confidence or externally in products sales.

 For example, Aerie, American Eagle Outfitter’s sister store, is a lingerie store who’s targeted audience is aimed at women ages 14-21. In spring of 2014, Aerie launched the #AerieReal campaign that announced their models and advertisements would now go without retouching. Their goal was to "challenging supermodel standards by featuring unretouched models in their latest collection of bras, undies and apparel." (Krupnick) The message comes prominent to young women both in high school and college that often suffer from lack of confidence and positive body image due to the media’s portrayal of women.

 In the #AerieReal campaign, Aerie is not seeking just to increase product purchases amongst high school and college women, but to naturally boost their self-confidence by changing the way they view beauty. These women, are at a transitional stage in their lives where they are often easily persuaded by the media and people around them. If magazines are only putting tall and slim models on their covers, this audience will conclude that only tall and slim women are beautiful. Aerie uses the selective perception theory by following the four steps in their #AerieReal campaign.

 Step one: exposing this audience to a different definition of beauty than previously seen before. Aerie showing “real” models that have not been photo shopped on social media and advertisements, challenges their previous exposure of mainstream beauty. Step two: Aerie gains the attention of their audience by making it relatable. Their newest ads show models that are curvy, have stretch marks, cellulite, scars and even tattoos, all things that would previously be photoshopped out of an ad. Step three, perception, may vary accordingly depending on the person as previously noted. Though some young women in this audience may ignore the ads for not being truthful, others that agree with the company’s definition of beauty will take note of the message. Concluding that step four, retention, will be met once this audience can relate it to their own values and beliefs.

The #AerieReal campaign has gained and retained the attention of many young women across the globe. According to *Business Insider*, the company saw a 9% sale increase in just a quarter. Aerie still faces the challenge of women who believe that their model’s size and shape may not be the normal for an everyday consumer, however, freckles, stretch marks and soft rolls of the skin are much more relatable than an impracticable figure of a supermodel. In contrast to competitor Victoria's Secret who received backlash from their “Perfect Body Campaign”, Aerie is making strides in the right direction. (Masaryk)

**Conclusion**

Selective process theory tells us why we may read the same articles, watch similar television shows or shop consistently at the same stores due to our thought processes. Avoiding discomfort is natural when things challenge our already persistent way of thinking. This is a big challenge companies face when introducing new products and ideas to the market. Nonetheless, research and knowing the right audience can help break down selective process theory, allowing PR professionals to reach a “stubborn” audience and still invite new things into their lives that coincide with their values and beliefs.

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