Lessons to Learn From Early Public Relations Efforts

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As almost every I-O psychologist can testify, the general public knows very little about our field, confusing us with “shrinks,” management gurus, or people who administer the Myers-Briggs to label everyone with a series of four letters that the general public seems more familiar with than even we are. One labor union representative, upon being invited to speak to the BGSU I-O program, told us that his only previous encounter with I-O psychologists was when his company hired one to sing “Kumbayah” to disgruntled workers. This ignorance of our field is not surprising, as Gasser et al. (1998) found in a survey of Cedar Rapids Iowa community members that only 13.2% had heard of industrial-organizational psychology. I suspect that Gasser et al.’s results would generalize beyond Cedar Rapids.

SIOP has long tried to improve the public’s understanding of our field by marketing it through a variety of techniques, generally with little success. In this column, I detail a few select examples of the early ways that I-O psychologists marketed themselves to the business community and the general public. This is by no means an exhaustive list but only a start in what I hope will someday be fleshed out into a full scholarly article.

One of the first public advocates for applied psychology was Hugo Münsterberg, the German-born applied psychologist who spent much of his career at Harvard. Münsterberg wrote prolifically in popular magazines such as McClure’s and Harper’s, as well as writing many articles and letters published in the New York Times. Many of these articles were related to applying psychology to topics related to business (e.g., accident prevention), but others were related to issues of the day, with many of them commenting on growing tensions felt by Germans living in America during World War I (others focused on Münsterberg debunking scientific quacks of the day). Throughout most of these articles, regardless of topic, Münsterberg’s status as a psychologist was made prominent. Münsterberg was an early figure that presented the face of applied psychology to a general public. Since then, there have been few “public faces” for our field. See Landy, 1992 for more information on Münsterberg.
Walter Van Dyke Bingham, the noted Carnegie Tech faculty member, was well-known for his research in personnel selection as well as auditory perception. Capitalizing on his research and reputation in the latter, the Edison Corporation hired him to conduct some basic research related to their phonographs. Bingham was used prominently in a print advertising campaign for the New Edison phonograph machine. The ad that I found in the Bingham Archives at Carnegie Mellon has a drawing of Bingham listening to a “blind” comparison of four phonographs and rating them on nine dimensions including “impressions of realism,” “bass voice recordings,” and “emotional reaction.” The advertisement brags how the Edison phonograph won the top rating from Dr. Bingham on all nine dimensions and challenges the reader: “If it is hard for you to believe this, make the same comparison Dr. Bingham made.” The prominent use of an applied psychologist as a spokesperson for a product seems incongruous with today’s relatively anonymous I-O psychologists (for more on the Bingham-Edison research, see Selfridge-Field, 1997).

Early applied psychologists also marketed their services, ideas, and techniques to popular press magazines and industry trade journals that had a wide readership among the lay public and the general business community. Doncaster Humm, the creator of the Humm-Wadsworth Temperament Survey (HWTS), one of the first widely-marketed personality inventories developed for business applications, had a savvy marketing team that placed articles about the HWTS in trade journals for various industries as well as Time magazine and the Readers’ Digest. These articles, with catchy, nontechnical titles such as “Pegs that Fit” and “Fitting the Worker to the Job,” explained the notion of personnel selection in commonsense language while explicitly marketing the HWTS. In fact, it was a Readers’ Digest article published in 1942 (Taylor, 1942) that inspired a young Isabel Briggs to to create her own personality inventory—the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (see Saunders, 1991).

The history of I-O psychologists’ public relations efforts deserve more scholarly attention, but these few examples give some hope to those of us who struggle with making our field more visible. I am sure there are many other historical examples of I-O psychologists marketing themselves to the business community and the general public. If you have any examples to share, I would love to hear them at mzickar@bgsu.edu.

References


Taylor, F. J. (1942). Fitting the worker to the job. Readers’ Digest, 40, 12–16.