On July 5, 1962, a full-page advertisement featuring a bottle of milk surmounted with a skull and crossbones of a death's head appeared on the back page of the New York Times. On August 23 Grade A Producers in Minnesota went on dry feed as a precautionary measure against radioactive Iodine 131. In June a series of three articles by Rachel Carson entitled The Silent Spring, which had as their theme the presence of poison residues in the nation's food supply, appeared in the New Yorker. The articles were later published as a book and appear again this month as the September selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. During August New Jersey papers carried screaming headlines which declared that milk pricing practices in the Garden State were taking an unnecessary million dollars annually from consumers. On August 27 the Tampa, Florida, Tribune printed a long editorial on the milk business entitled The Consumer Doesn't Count.

The list could be expanded at length: Dr. Sacket, President of the Association of General Medical Practitioners, denouncing milk as a food beyond the first year of life; a nationwide television program billed as The Fat American; newspaper articles using “Americans are drinking less milk” as a lead or referring to the “distressed dairy industry.” The catalogue of horrors is seemingly endless so that the inevitable annual statement by some athletic coach at some institution who solemnly assures a waiting world that athletes who drink milk can't spit appears as a welcome comic interlude. Indeed, as a distinguished public relations man in the dairy industry observed recently, it is getting so that whiskey is the only safe thing left to drink.

On the basis of these published reports, the milk business emerges as an industry maintained largely by a moronic price support program administered by empire building bureaucrats and perpetuated by vote seeking politicians; an industry that distributes a product loaded with radioactive material that will cause cancer, cholesterol that will cause heart attacks, fat which will make one fat and a mysterious ingredient that makes it impossible for All-American halfbacks to clear their throats. Furthermore, the stuff is grievously overpriced and, therefore, people are staying away from the dairy case in droves.

Bear in mind that the stories have been told and told again by all of the high-powered media of modern communications from New York Times to the Goose Corners Bugle, from Time Magazine to the Police Gazette, from the National Broadcasting Company to a party line in Nebraska.

Effect of Unfavorable Publicity

In 1958 a study of the food preferences of men in the armed forces found that of 438 food preparations served to the nation's fighting men, the first choice, the best liked, the number one food preference of the men in uniform was fresh fluid milk. Since that time four different surveys, one made by the International Paper Company, one made by the American Dairy Association, one made by the Milk Industry Foundation and one made by the Ladies Home Journal have shown some awareness of the criticisms that have been directed at milk and dairy products, but none of the studies showed any clear and definite reaction on the part of consumers. Most of the studies showed no reaction at all.

Here is what the Ladies Home Journal had to say in a report dated May 1: "Half of the women we interviewed told us they were using more whole milk than formerly for two primary reasons: the increase in family size and growing children. The rest of the women were equally divided between using less milk and just about the same as formerly. The main reason the one group was using less was that the family had grown smaller in the last two or three years; several other women mentioned using powdered milk in place of whole milk." The latter group gave as a reason the fact that powdered milk was "... less expensive and the kids have learned to like it better than whole milk."

These findings correspond exactly with the attitudes revealed in the Milk Industry Foundation survey conducted in late April and early May this year. The Foundation was primarily interested in finding out the effect that the vast amount of sensational publicity on fallout had had on consumers. Not wishing to prejudice the respondents, these two questions were asked first:

1. Would you estimate that you are using milk more or less often than you did five years ago?

2. Do you think that you will increase your use of dairy products during the coming spring and early summer, decrease your use or will there be no change?
Of the 463 housewives interviewed in eight cities north, south, east and west, 218 said they were using more milk than they did five years ago, 197 said they were using about the same, 46 said they were using less and two did not know how their present use compared with five years ago. Of the 46 who said they were using less milk, 28 said the reason they were using less was because the children had grown up and the family was smaller. Sixteen spoke vaguely of health.

Even more startling was the response to the second question. Remember, now, for three months the story of the "heavy fallout" in the spring had been blazoned across the front pages of the nation's newspapers. Consumer Reports had hammered at the subject in issue after issue. The Women's Strike For Peace had used the theme as a battle cry. Yet, of 480 responses to the question of anticipated changes, 115 said they would increase consumption, 337 said they would not change their pattern, one had no opinion and 27 said they would decrease their use of milk. And the reason? Of the 27 who would decrease consumption, 25 said they preferred other drinks in the summer, one said because they would be on vacation and one didn't really know why.

In subsequent questions interviewers raised the question of fallout. When the subject was raised there were some people who expressed concern; however, the striking characteristic was the fact that until the subject was introduced into the questioning not one single individual mentioned it as having any effect whatsoever on their use of milk. Note the response to the question on use of milk during the anticipated period of "heavy fallout." From 480 responses, 452 said they would either increase or use the same quantities of milk as before. Only 27 said they would change their pattern of consumption and the reason for that change offered by 25 of the 27 was that they preferred other drinks in the summer time. Nobody made even the slightest reference to fallout.

**Consumer Reaction Unpredictable**

In terms of the practical application of public relations theory, the apparent lack of reaction among consumers to the tremendous amount of publicity detrimental to fluid milk and dairy products is a baffling and somewhat disconcerting result.

A rather standard description of public relations says: "Public relations involves communicating information to many different groups factually and accurately and expressed so that it can be easily understood and accepted by people with a limited knowledge of the field."

Certainly the amount of space and time devoted to the shortcomings of milk and the dairy industry over the last few years have been of a sufficient volume and of sufficient intensity to satisfy the most exacting specifications on the matter of coverage. Certainly the ideas have been expressed in the simplest of terms—radioactive materials in milk will produce cancer—cholesterol found in animal fats will produce heart disease—the price of milk is too high—Americans are drinking less milk. These are straightforward statements that can be easily understood by people with a limited knowledge of the field. By both of these measures—extent of communication and simplicity of the ideas being communicated—nobody in his or her right mind would drink milk. Yet this did not happen. Instead the men in the armed services declared milk to be their number one food preference, homemakers say they are either increasing their use of milk or are not changing the amount used, except for those whose families have grown up.

The answer can be but one or both of two reasons. Either the vast communications effort failed to communicate or, if it was communicated, the message was not accepted. Probably it was a combination of both, although the latter may have been more important than the former.

The description of public relations activity cited above uses the term "many different groups of people." This is a well-recognized principle in public relations. It is often simplified in the single word "publics" meaning that the general word "public" refers to a theoretical body that is in fact made up of many smaller "publics." The public is everybody possessed of a wide variety of conflicting and complementary ideas. The "publics" that make up the "public" on the other hand, are distinguished by one or more dominant ideas that set them apart from other groups. Thus, in the dairy industry there are consumers, producers, labor unions, management, regulatory groups, all a part of the industry but each with a different interest, a different relationship to the whole. Each group is a "public."

It is an extraordinarily difficult task to communicate with these various groups in terms that can be understood in the first place and accepted in the second. The tendency is to couch a communication in language that the writer finds meaningful rather than in language that the person to whom the communication is addressed will find meaningful. The most common result of a studied attempt to be meaningful for people who have but a limited knowledge of the field is to "write down." This is somewhat worse than no communication at all because it tends to give an impression of patronizing which builds up resistance rather than understanding.
The failure of consumers to react to the sensational treatment of dairy foods by the popular media may possibly have some relationship to the failure of the communicator to speak in a language geared to a particular "public." Certainly such new terms as micromicrocures, polyunsaturated fats, and carcinogens are sufficiently formidable in their own right as to constitute matter not easily digested by less erudite folk. Examples of this problem are myriad. One of the more illustrative of these occurred in Providence, Rhode Island, several years ago. The newspaper had been conducting an investigation of the quality of milk in that city. In discussions of the subject the paper referred to coliform bacteria, always adding in parenthesis "a bacteria usually found in the intestinal tract." One lady called her milk distributor on the telephone and said, "Now I understand why my baby always goes to sleep after drinking your milk. You put chloroform in the stuff."

However, it does not appear that failure to communicate the potentially dangerous nature of radioactivity nor the possible relationship between coronary diseases and cholesterol was as important as the refusal of consumers to accept the allegations as reported. Perhaps the statement should be qualified by saying that it is not clear whether there was a refusal to accept or because people have been subject to such a torrent of unmitigated sensation for so long that they have built up a protective shell or a protective porosity. Since 1929 through the depression, through the rise of Hitler's Germany, Korea, through the cold war, through the arms race, the news has been an almost uninterrupted train of disaster. Radioactivity and polyunsaturated fats may just be two more hazards in a life increasingly characterized by hazards so tremendous and so terrible that the mind hears without heeding or reads without absorbing the implications.

**Consumer Confidence in Milk**

Perhaps there is a third element in the problem, a positive element which is of more significance than either the failure to communicate or the protective shell. This element is the esteem in which milk has been held for so many years. Call it the "image" if you will, although the term suffers from overuse. People like milk as the food preference study in the armed services demonstrates. People value it for its nutritional properties as study after study has shown. This appreciation of both the taste and nutritional properties of milk and dairy foods constitutes a bulwark that is enormously difficult to breach.

Furthermore, the adverse criticisms of milk and dairy products are not in accordance with every-day experience. Radioactive fallout is not apparent to any of the senses. Polyunsaturated fats as opposed to saturated fats can be distinguished such as the physical difference between butter and oleomargarine; but in terms of immediate and noticeable effects on personal health, there is no readily apparent difference. In the simplest form it is a matter of seeing and believing.

Finally, there is the matter of confidence. Such subjects as cholesterol, iodine 131 and strontium 90 are highly technical. The average consumer does not feel competent to make a judgement on such complex issues. However, consumers know that there are public authorities and private groups serving the public who are competent to make such judgments. Consumers place the greatest reliance, therefore, on the advice and actions of the public health authorities and the dairy industry. In practical terms the attitude is expressed in the statement "If it wasn't safe they wouldn't allow it to be sold."

The "they" is the sanitarian, the public health official, the milk processor. It is difficult to conceive of a more eloquent demonstration of public appreciation for the work of public health agencies and milk distributors than this. In the face of an intense and ceaseless barrage of the most sensational kind of criticism, public confidence in the integrity and responsibility of public health agencies and the dairy industry has remained unshaken.

There are two places where characteristics of some dairy products, generally considered to be undesirable, can be seen. In those two places a clear-cut and unfavorable reaction is readily observable. It is generally accepted, because it can be seen rather easily, that the consumption of substantial amounts of fat will make a person fat. Ergo, milk fat is fattening. With both male and female members of the population concerned with physique, there has been a decline in both butter and cream consumption as well as a gradual decline in the general milk fat content of whole milk. Ice cream remains a distinguished exception. Despite its undeniable fat content, the taste pleasure afforded by that inimitable delicacy, more than offsets whatever contributions it may make to unused energy.

A second obvious and undesirable aspect of dairy products, confined almost exclusively to milk fat, is price. With milk fat selling at more than three times the price of vegetable fat the price differential is something that can be seen and understood. A respondent in the Ladies Home Journal survey summed up the proposition when she said, "You mean real butter? Why I don't buy real butter at all because of the cost. It's more expensive and we just
use margerine.” It should be emphasized that this reason for the use of vegetable fats rather than milk fat was given in May of 1962. After years of exposure to the endless discussion of a relationship between animal fat and heart disease, price was the justification for using margerine instead of butter.

If consumers did not react very markedly to the castigations of the dairy industry, there was one public in industry’s complex that did react. That public was the management group. It is a logical and understandable phenomenon. No one is likely to sit still when the product of careful and strenuous effort is publicly criticized, and unjustly at that. Any organization producing merchandise for sale is naturally and properly sensitive where its virtues are involved. But when that virtue is subjected to such a lambasting as dairy products have received it would be remarkable indeed if the reaction of the industry had been any less marked. As a facet of practical public relations it should be noted in passing that this management reaction posed one of the more acute problems to public relations men in the milk business. A major task has been to persuade the industry to keep its collective shirt on, to develop its public relations program on the basis of reality rather than on the basis of its own emotional reaction.

**FEATURE**

**SOME REFLECTIONS OF A PAST-PRESIDENT OF IAMFS**

W. V. Hickey

After six years of service on the Executive Board of the International Association of Milk and Food Sanitarians, Inc., it may be well to reflect on these years and make some predictions for the future.

The opportunity afforded me to serve as an officer of IAMFS has been an opportunity for growth. This experience, along with others, has convinced me that we still have a potential for personal and emotional growth.

At the time of my election, I became associated with six other men—five of them elected officers and one of them our Executive Secretary, “Red” Thompson. Over the intervening years this group has changed through the addition of one man and the retirement of another each year. That virtually indestructible man, “Red” Thompson, stays on and believes me, this is a real tribute to him—he is most patient and long suffering. The abuse that he has taken from me alone, with patience, understanding and forgiveness is beyond comprehension. For this, “Red”, I offer my sincere apologies, my regrets, and my thanks to you for being so understanding.

As for my fellow officers, both past and present, I extend my thanks and appreciation for the opportunity to work and associate with them. Make no mistake, not all of our relationships have been entirely pleasant. At the moment I cannot think of an officer with whom there has not, on one occasion or another, been disagreement—sometimes violent disagreement. This has in no way lessened my respect or my admiration for the dedication each has shown to furthering the cause of public health in general, and the IAMFS in particular.

Regarding controversy, Dr. George James, New York City’s Acting Commissioner of Health, said recently: “Argument and controversy are part of the advance of medicine and public health. To be disturbed by it is to abdicate leadership, for it is in controversy that human values change most. Where there is a subject that appears controversial,