Should You Take an Activist to Breakfast?

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I. INTRODUCTION

As powerful as multi-billion dollar corporations may appear, they are a great deal more vulnerable to advocacy campaigns than is realized. Whenever corporate behavior is not in sync with public attitudes, a handful of activists can generate the leverage necessary to encourage or force change. Street-smart corporations may want to invite an activist to breakfast, if only to get the word from an early warning system. For, as the saying goes, "Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come."

Corporations spend billions on advertising and public relations to create a positive image for themselves. Often image is their major asset. If a corporation or an institution is unresponsive to emerging concerns, they may be vulnerable to having that image tarnished. The task of effective activists is to frame legitimate issues in such a way as to generate the public concern necessary to spur corporate or institutional change.

For the past nineteen years, a coalition of animal rights advocates has been seeking dialogue and positioning issues as problems with solutions that benefit both humans and animals. The coalition has been able to raise public awareness and help place animal well-being on corporate and scientific agendas. Their strategies are fashioned after a pattern of successful strategies utilized in various human rights movements. These strategies are not an "all-or-none" stance, but rather a step-wise approach resulting in a cumulative buildup of activities. Transformation is a gradual process. Activists who want to influence people and institutions need to focus on one issue at a time, without losing sight of the ultimate goals.

The philosophy of the coalition can be summarized in a single phrase, "Keep in touch with reality." Dreaming that animals should no longer be considered dinner or lab tools does nothing to change their treatment. Activists need to be realistic about where society stands on an issue today and where it may be encouraged to go tomorrow. Activists need to study reality in a detached way as a guide to action. Activists must be aware of the public's inconsistencies toward animals in order to deal with those concerns. The majority of the public is strongly opposed to animal suffering. That same public most often accepts animals as laboratory subjects

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