

French and American Business Relations
A Public Relations Strategy for Postwar Consensus

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I. A public relations problem on a transatlantic scale

The American movement for a boycott against French products and companies came about as a reaction to ideological and strategic differences between the military leaders of the United States and France. Their differences were based on a dispute over whether or not military force would be necessary against Iraq because they had refused to comply with a United Nations (UN) resolution to disarm themselves of weapons of mass destruction. Numerous discussions regarding the use of force were held in the United Nations Security Council. A rally by each country's representatives for support of their causes resulted in a bitter division in February of 2003 that changed the relationship between the two countries after a long history of friendship and exchange. This division is historical in that France is one of the United States' oldest allies and the cultures are intermingled in many ways including through business.

The boycott presents a public relations problem for French companies doing business in or with holdings in the United States. This essay will assess the problem and its roots as well as propose solutions for research, evaluation and possible action on reaching a consensus.

II. How we arrived here

Ideological differences about the war in Iraq.

This essay is not about whether the actions and decisions by the boycott group or the political leaders involved is right or wrong, but rather, an assessment of the situation and what could be done about the division as it pertains to business. A brief summary of the events leading to the division is outlined below.

The key people in the discussion are George W. Bush, President of the United States, Jaques Chirac, President of France, Tony Blair, Prime Minister of England, Colin Powell, United States Secretary of State and Dominique de Villepin, French Minister of Foreign Affairs .

During a January, 2003 meeting at the UN that was supposed to be on the topic of terrorism the differences between France and the United States on how to solve the Iraq crisis became very apparent. De Villepin was said to have surprised Powell with an unannounced press conference rejecting a war on Iraq. Powell felt deeply betrayed by de Villepin's tactics and position that was exacerbated by de Villepin addressing Powell while leaning in toward him from across a table. (Frontline, April 3, 2003)The relationship between the two leaders was deeply strained as a result of the failed meeting.

Later in that same week, Blair proposed to Bush that a second resolution should be put in front of the UN Security Council making a case for war. Bush agreed that a second resolution may be necessary to sway the council.

In early February, while addressing the UN Security Council, Powell made a case based on weak intelligence evidence for why disarmament by force was necessary. French intelligence officers went on record the very next day rejecting the evidence and publicly doubting the connection the United States was making between the al Qaeda terrorist network and Iraq.

By mid-February, a representative from the United States was addressing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) requesting military aid for Turkey. This request was denied. France argued that an approval for aid would indicate that war was imminent, and from the standpoint of the French government, it was not.

By late February, Bush and Blair had proposed that a second resolution be drafted for presentation to the UN Security Council. Chirac publicly stated that any further resolutions would be vetoed in the council. This unprecedented ideological division thrust both NATO and the UN Security Council under suspicion of their usefulness to the United States. However, France's rejection of the United States' proposal infuriated Bush and caused a firestorm of anti-French sentiment amongst many Americans.

Throughout the debate, much of the discussion surrounding the crisis focused on French financial interests in Iraq, which, it could be speculated, would be a significant reason for rejecting military action against them. The French also have a very different relationship with the Muslim world than does the United States. Many of the French oil companies contracts for oil distribution are based in Muslim countries.

The debate is important because it is as much a discussion of post-Cold War world order as it is a discussion of unilateral versus multilateral political ideologies (Frontline, April 3, 2003). France had decided along with Germany and Russia, that at a certain point in the discussions, no consensus had been reached as to whether or not UN weapons inspections were successful in identifying weapons production sites in Iraq. These three UN Security Council members were rallying for more time to allow the inspections to produce evidence of the illegal sites or the weapons themselves. Additionally, the three members (France in particular) were rallying for further diplomacy with the Iraqi regime so that war could be avoided. This is a critical difference between France and United States that is rooted in how the two cultures view problem solving. It is critical to assess the problem solving tactics in order to fully understand why France would disagree so strongly with military action. This assessment of the tactics, because of their roots in cultural norms, would also apply to strategies for dealing in transnational business.

Additionally, a renewed interest in patriotism since the September 11th attacks in the United States

provided a stage on which to perform the boycott. These differences between the United States and France were viewed by supporters of the boycott as a risk to American security and a display of extreme weakness on the part of the French leaders. A long standing American cultural perception of the French people as arrogant and difficult resurfaced in an ethnocentric display of overwhelming rejection of their proposals for more diplomacy as well a call for a boycott.

Cultural differences in how problems are solved.

Problem solving tactics are rooted in cultural norms. Any discussion of cultural norms requires a degree of generalization, and therefore, there exists duplicity and exception. The Iraq crisis and the division between the United States and France illustrates these cultural differences. Any consensus that would be reached must consider the varied approaches to problem solving, sources of authority and how they affect an individual. The social norms that shape these approaches in each society are as important as the material ones. (Finnemore, p. 128) Cultural and social norms affect individual behavior on a subconscious level and often project their boundaries onto other cultures.

The call for further diplomacy in the Iraq crisis versus the use of force is clearly in line with the French cultural norm of discussion and theorizing versus the tactical, results oriented American norm. If the French norm is one of discussion and theorizing and less on bottom-line thinking, then many French business people view the quality of their interpersonal, working relationships as a priority. (Hall, p. 120) The key to understanding the French approach to problem solving is to understand their passion for discussion, logic and presentation of an idea. (Asselin, 151-152). They are not as focused on results as their American counterparts but more on how a decision was reached — the quality of the discussion. This is exemplified in the tradition of presenting financial reports at business meetings. Many French executives will provide an entire history of figures identifying patterns in the figures and no assessment of their value to the organization. That assessment, it is felt, is up to the individual and it would be considered insulting to derive a conclusion for someone (Hall, 102-104). A lively discussion should be stimulated upon presentation of the figures. This practice is in stark contrast to the American tradition of presenting a full value assessment with key points and facts highlighted. That is to say, the French report would provide each week of financial reports over a 1 year period and the American report would provide the figures based on a quarterly basis with the bottom-line clearly identified. A concept of individuality is shared by Americans and French but manifests itself in different ways. It would be considered a bad idea not to empower your American employees with the information necessary to make decisions, whereas, to the French, it is a bad idea to assess information for someone else.

The long standing tradition of centralized authority in France is illustrated in the structure of many of their company offices (Hall, 91). The person of the most authority is often placed in the middle of the space with subordinates being placed in a circular fashion around the leadership. This representation of French authority appears in the decision making process as well. It is very often only one person who holds the authority to make a decision. This is in contrast to the American ideology that groups of executives are required to reach a decision and the group's authority is that of consensus. The French willingness to veto a second resolution for military action in Iraq on their own exemplifies this centralized, and individual authority, whereas the Americans were searching for a "coalition of the willing" or a group consensus. The duplicity of these statements is proven in what actually happened where the United States decided to circumvent the UN Security Council in the end and proceed without consensus from the member nations.

To summarize, when considering a method by which transatlantic business consensus would be reached, it is critical to consider who the primary decision maker is in the French company. Additionally, identify what group of decision makers are being addressed on the American side as opposed to a specific individual. Understand that in order to arrive at a course of action, French companies will need to discuss the various scenarios and the outcome in more detail and for longer. However, it should be noted that in a strategy to properly communicate to Americans, the message should be succinct and as clear as possible with a summary of the key points identified upfront. Any discussion targeted at the general American public should be equally as clear and concise with an exact call to action.

III. The boycott and its vehicles

NewsMax and e-mail chains

The self proclaimed originator of the boycott against French business is NewsMax, an internet-based news source. (www.newsmax.com) Their tactics for disseminating the call for a boycott were (and still are) tactical in nature with overstated language, dramatic scenarios and many falsifications and misinformation. These tactics immediately thrust the campaign under suspicion to a public relations practitioner. However, it should be noted that because of the highly personal nature of their complaints and the renewed interest in patriotism, the general public is open to receiving a message of this nature. That is to say, that because of the American need for decisive action and results, a boycott is a simple way in which an individual can participate and feel though he or she is "making a difference."

NewsMax is using language such as, "*Boycott France NewsMax.com, America's leader in online news, is*

leading the nationwide campaign to boycott France, her companies, products and services.”

“NewsMax unashamedly stands for America and American values.”

“We will not forget how France worked tirelessly to support Iraq — and blocked a UN vote to demand complete and immediate disarmament of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.”

There is overstated and dramatic language used to further their cause. “...worked tirelessly to support Iraq...” is one of the statements that exemplifies a biased point of view on the part of this “news” organization. There is no support for this claim. To claim that they are “...America’s leader in online news...” is also not supported. Because of these statements there is little reason to believe only this source as a reason to participate in the boycott. In an assessment of the e-mail circulated by NewsMax citing a specific list of companies to boycott, there were numerous falsifications and errors. David Emery from About.com’s Urban Legends (<http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/bl-boycott-france.htm?terms=Boycott+France>) reviewed the e-mail and points his readers to an additional source for verification of the claims (<http://www.boycottwatch.org/misc/france-04.htm>) One in particular stands out as a gross error on the part of the boycott team, that of French’s Mustard located in Rochester, NY.

Fox News and Bill O’Reilly

Bill O’Reilly a major figure in news reporting also joined the call for a boycott.

(<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,80769,00.html>). O’Reilly’s regular news program on the Fox News cable station provides a very broad forum for the boycott group to pursue its interests.

Additionally, many Republican Senators in the United States government called for a renaming of french fries to “freedom fries” in the dining halls of government buildings.

Although much of the boycott is sensational and not necessarily rooted in fact, it’s affect on the American attitudes toward France can be measured. Stephen Moore in his op-ed article for the Modesto Bee in Modesto, CA (<http://www.modbee.com/24hour/opinions/story/867660p-6058303c.html>) cites in late April that French wine sales are down by 10% and that American travel in France is down by 20%. He also cites that “one of the major French restaurants in New York has closed...” Moore’s article, in the tradition of the boycott, provides vague details and no sources for his claims.

It is interesting, however, that Moore’s article cites a quote from the Washington Post, claiming the boycott

to be one of “moral condemnation.” In an effort to understand the boycott and its reach, one would have to consider that this statement is true. The boycott is staged on the revived and emotionally charged American passion for patriotism. The general American public is in a delicate, emotional state of reactionary and at times irrational thought. Americans are subconsciously open to the idea of a boycott because it is a results oriented action designed to inflict a “punishment.” The messages that supporters are receiving regarding the boycott are sensational and appeal to deep emotions. Typically, a boycott is imposed against a company for unethical business practice including overstatement and falsification. What should be noted is that this boycott is ignoring overstated and false reports in order to arrive at its conclusion. When considering a communication to this group, emotionally appealing, factual claims would be critical.

IV. What can be done about it

Using the R.A.C.E. model (Wilcox, p.7) to develop a public relations campaign must include the four principles of Research, Action, Communication and Evaluation. For the purpose of this essay, everything is assumed as a *possible* action. Before implementing a campaign and targeting specific media sources, familiarity with the available media is critical. Clearly understand whether or not they are viable or appropriate and who the gatekeepers are.

Research. Assess the affect of the boycott

What is the real effect of the boycott? To reach a conclusion on this question there are numerous other questions that would need be answered:

What percentage of Americans are currently supporting the boycott?

How have the percentages of support changed since the war has ended?

What has the affect on American workers employed by French companies been?

What are the reactions of the French population?

Figure 1 is a proposed timeline for research that would last from July to December of 2003. The key components of the research are both primary and secondary research tactics. A web based survey could be developed and posted at a URL such as *www.transatlanticsurvey.com*. The reason for not using a URL such as *frenchamericanrelations.com*, or something to that effect, is because although the boycott has been imposed specifically on France, other European Union members may be effected by the American responses to these political divisions, and additional surveys could be conducted at this web site. How will people know the site exists? Through a calculated series of activities such as lurking in pro-boycott

news groups and establishing an additional, grassroots style news group, supporters could be notified of the sites existence. The moderator of any such newsgroup would be a representative of the campaign research team. The survey questions (Appendix A) are designed to understand a variety facts surrounding who is participating in the boycott. An understanding of who these people are and what their motivations are will help to clarify a message to them. Additionally, it will help to understand why they feel a boycott is necessary. Using the Linkert scale and simple yes or no questions the survey would be a valuable tool in understanding the public relations challenge before and after the proposed campaign. An announcement about the research program and the existence of the survey could be released to business editors at the following newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Sun Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*. Their choice to write about the research would later set the stage for future releases to be discussed in the Communication section.

One on one interviews with both French and American management teams whose companies are targeted on the NewMax list would prove to be very useful in determining an exact messaging strategy. (Appendix B) Their attitudes on the boycott may be varied and surprising. The primary answers one would need from these people would be with regard to financial impact, employee attitudes and the affect on new business efforts.

At the end of the research phase, a full, translated report scheduled for February 2004 could be presented to the UCCIFE.

Note that the anticipated response from the UCCIFE does not match the American need of being specific, measurable or time bound due to the French cultural norm of reviewing a problem from many different angles. This process would take an unspecified amount of time and involve numerous point/counterpoint discussions regarding the data. A solution might be for the agency to identify a single person or a 2-3 person group to live in France and work with the UCCIFE group as observers. Regular reports on the nature of the discussions must also be viewed as "in development" because no consensus would be reached in a succinct way that would identify a specific yes or no on how to proceed. A strategy to gain the UCCIFE as a public relations client would have to include eloquent and detailed reports of the data gathered during the research phase. It is very likely that the UCCIFE would want to conduct their own research to understand the problem. Urging the UCCIFE that an American perspective on the problem is useful to solving the problem may be cause for contention and should be handled delicately. The centralized, autocratic authority model in French culture would dictate that they identify the problem through their own research methods. To be unprepared for this social reality would be a mistake. It may actually be more useful to identify a team of delegates made up of people from multiple American and French chambers of commerce as the clients working together to reach the goals.

Action. Program planning.

To determine further action and planning at this phase would require active participation by the UCCIFE. The objectives are defined as shifting attitudes on the boycott and reaching a consensus for a 21st century business relationship that is vital and healthy. The plan is to engage in a 4 month campaign in 2004 that includes print and broadcast media as well as events and journal articles.

Using the Ketchum model for program development (Wilcox, p. 146), an assessment of the boycott could begin by creating an outline for presentation to a group such as the Union of French Chambers of Commerce and Industry Abroad (UCCIFE). (www.uccife.org). The outline should address all of the key aspects of the plan including facts, goals, audience and messaging. Due to the nature of this challenge, a presentation to a group like this would want to separate the research possibly under a separate budget. It may come to pass that after the research phase, no action would be required.

Facts

1. There is an American boycott on French products and companies rooted in political and ideological differences on the recent war in Iraq.
2. Although the boycott's "reasons to participate" are often erroneous and unsupported, the distribution channels are far reaching and broad.

3. The American need for quick and decisive action is rooted in deep, emotional reactions to events such as the tragedy of September 11th.

4. The French and American business communities are linked through long-standing transatlantic relationships.

Goals

To effect a change in attitude toward France and the American boycott. Reach a consensus that fosters growth and a 21st century relationship based on mutual understanding and multilateral business objectives by the end of Q4 2004. Synthesize primary and secondary research to quantify the affects of the boycott.

Audience

The boycott supporters, the franco-american business community leaders and management, the americans working for french companies, the american tourism industry and transatlantic investors.

Key Message

The business communities in France and United States can still work together and business relationships can remain strong, important and vital.

Communication: Developing a strategy to meet the goals.

For the purpose of this essay, let's assume that the research data allowed for a communications plan to be developed based on the goals specified as:

"To affect a change in attitude toward France and the American boycott. Reach a consensus that fosters growth and a 21st century relationship based on mutual understanding and multilateral business objectives."

Additionally, let's assume that the data provided in Moore's article for the Modesto Bee were real. If French wine sales are down by 10% and American tourism in France is down by 20% these are very real business problems. Furthermore it's important to address the "moral condemnation" and aid in mutual understanding. Each of the proposed actions outlined below are specific, measurable and time bound.

In March of 2004, an agency specializing in print and broadcast media development and with experience with French companies must be identified. This could be through the standard process of reviewing agencies who have responded to a Request for Proposal. As indicated in Figure 2, the launch date for print and broadcast media would be September 2004 and run for four months during business and international news programs such as CNN's *Wolf Blitzer Reports*, FOX News' *The O'Reilly Factor* and

NBC's *Meet the Press*. The print campaign would be run in business and news magazines such as *The Economist*, *Forbes* and *Time Magazine*. Additionally, a delegation from the UCCIFE and specific boycott target companies' management teams could be scheduled for a publicized "round-table" discussion with the editors. This process would allow for objectivity amongst the editors who would have already reviewed press releases regarding the campaign development and fact sheets on the change in the business climate as a result of the boycott. The target months for articles to be published regarding the topic, would be immediately following the round-table discussions. The hope would be that specific editors and managers would also do one-on-one interviews and articles about the target companies.

Additionally, July 4th and July 14th celebrations would be an excellent opportunity to invite press coverage of the campaign effort. July 14th is the French celebration of independence. A delegation of French and American business people could be established to speak at celebration events in both countries. Press releases announcing the events and interviews with the delegations could be established in June and July of 2004.

Figure 2: Campaign Schedule

2004	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Identify International Agency	█									
First Round Concepts		█								
UCCIFE Presentation I			█							
Second Round Concepts			█							
UCCIFE Presentation II				█						
Economist, Forbes, Time Pitch Articles/Fact Sheets		█								
Editors Round Table w/ UCCIFE			█							
Television/Print Production Begins					█	█				
Identify Broadcast Media				█						
CNN Blitzer Reports							█	█	█	█
FOX News O'Reilly Factor							█	█	█	█
Meet the Press							█	█	█	█
Print Media (Economist, Forbes, Time)							█	█	█	█
Identify July 4th Organizers		█								
Washington					█	█				
New York					█	█				
Invite Business Delegation to 4th				█	█					
Schedule Intvws. w/ Delegation				█	█					
Press Releases on Exchange				█	█					

Evaluation. *Develop a plan to assess the effectiveness of the campaign.*

Measurement of the effectiveness of the campaign would be based on several factors. The first of which would be to point directly back to the research phase. The boycott target companies could provide their revised financial reports at the end of the campaign. The American and French managers could be asked to provide revised statements. Lurking in the pro-boycott news groups and requesting participants to take the same surveys at the end of the campaign could reveal a possible change in attitude. Additionally, the campaign itself may be scrutinized there. The same research could be conducted in 2008 to measure a shift that is far removed from the original date of the campaign.

The print and broadcast media campaign impressions should be measured as well. Circulation of the three magazines (*The Economist*, *Forbes* and *Time Magazine*) could be calculated against newsstand sales for the four months that a print ad was running. The broadcast media buys could research the Nielsen data for the dates and times the television spots were scheduled to run. Cumulatively, these impressions should be factored against survey data to determine the success of the overall campaign.

It is important to note that although the boycott and attitude shift against France was swift, undoing any harm that it may have caused will take years if not decades. The success of a campaign like this is also measured through theoretical terms and cultural norms of what is and is not successful.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural norms that dictate how problems are solved and the sources of authority allowed for France to disagree with the United States during a critical period in world history. The resulting, emotional backlash against France in the form of an American boycott on French products is an activity that could be measured in public relations terms. Research data, once collected and synthesized, could be very useful to transatlantic companies feeling business pressure as a result of the boycott. Additionally, a strategy to reverse a negative trend in French and American business relations could be developed based on the research conclusions. Through strategic and tactical public relations efforts that are specific, measurable and time bound, consensus could be reached for the benefit of France and the United States in the 21st century.

VI. Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire:

1. Are you

A. male

B. female

2. What is your zip code? _____

3. What is your approximate annual household income?

A. Below \$10,000

B. \$10,000 - 20,000

C. \$20,000 - 30,000

D. \$30,000 - 40,000

E. \$40,000 - 50,000

F. Over \$50,000

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

A. High School

B. Two years of College (Associates)

C. Four years of College (Bachelors)

D. Masters degree

E. Doctorate

F. Other, please indicate _____

5. Are you participating in a boycott of French products?

A. Yes

B. No

6. List five of the companies you are specifically boycotting

7. How would you rate the effect the boycott is having on France?

(1= none at all, 5= very effective) 1 2 3 4 5

8. When do you think the boycott will end?

- A. Never
- B. Sometime
- C. Shortly
- E. Very soon

9. Do you think the boycott has affected American workers?

- A. Yes
- B. No

10. Do you think the United States needs France?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Appendix B

French and American Management Interview questions:

1. How has the boycott affected your day-to-day routine?
2. How has the boycott affected your business? (ie: profits, distribution)
3. How has the boycott affected your employees?
4. Do you feel that the boycott is a just one?
5. What steps have been taken to reduce the affects of the boycott?
6. What communications have been provided to your employees regarding the boycott? What are the sources of the communications?
7. When do feel the boycott will be lifted?

VII. References

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