

# 3

## Global Public Relations and the Circuit of Culture



The previous chapters have underscored the primacy of culture in any international public relations undertaking. Because of cultural differences, what works in Timbuktu (Mali) may be totally ineffective in Tuscaloosa (United States) and even offensive in Tijuana (Mexico). Used in this sense, we're referring to culture as the characteristics, norms, and practices of a society. Although we believe this sense of *culture* plays a crucial role in international public relations practice, we also embrace the broader definition that underlies the cultural studies tradition: **Culture** is the process by which meaning is produced, circulated, consumed, commodified, and endlessly reproduced and renegotiated in society (Williams, 1961, 1981; Hall, 1980). In this chapter we explore this larger notion of culture and demonstrate how it informs our understanding of public relations campaigns by applying it to the case of New Coke®.

### ❖ LANGUAGE, MEANING, AND CULTURE

Things and events don't make sense in and of themselves. We give things meaning by defining and presenting them; we socially construct meaning. Culture forms the basis of a society's shared meaning system. It provides the classification schema we use to make sense of our world, making culture, meaning, and language inextricably linked. Notice how we extend meanings by drawing on shared cultural experience, by defining anything new in terms of what we already know. Have you ever considered trying a new type of meat, such as alligator or frogs' legs, and been told by a friend who's already tried it that "it tastes kinda like chicken"? We define the new by relating it to the old, by what our shared experience has already classified, and then stating how it differs. Your friend probably continued with something along the lines of, "except it's [tougher] [sweeter] [less juicy]."

As meanings become widely disseminated, they change over time and through use. Competing meanings emerge, often within different social groups and with differing connotations. Take public relations, for example. We've already demonstrated how hard it is to define the concept. That's because the term takes on a variety of meanings, even within a culture. In the United States, scholars commonly use the Grunig and Hunt (1984) definition given in chapter 1: management of communication between an organization and its publics. As a result, supporting terms have emerged, such as *dominant coalition* and *two-way symmetric communication*. This definition elevates public relations to a management function and emphasizes accommodation between equally empowered players.

These assumptions concerning public relations practice form the U.S. **dominant discourse**, *language signifying a particular cultural meaning, certain unstated assumptions, that color how we think and act*. Scholars from other nations claim they have difficulty getting their work published in U.S. journals unless they adopt this viewpoint, even though it doesn't necessarily represent public relations as studied and practiced in other countries.

Contrast the U.S. academic discourse surrounding public relations with that of U.S. practitioners, who often don't read scholarly journals or belong to professional associations. They say public relations as discussed in scholarship bears little relationship to what they actually do, which they often define in terms of image or impression management, persuasion, and dissemination of information. Journalists use a different discourse yet, which may stem from historical circumstance. The majority of early U.S. practitioners were former journalists, who

defined public relations by what it wasn't: journalism. If journalism was objective and had news value, then public relations was free advertising, was one-sided, and lacked news value. Public relations was the dark side of the journalistic fence.

Most journalists claim they don't use material from public relations practitioners, and relations between members of the two occupations have been notoriously poor. Because the two professions originally were closely related, however, many U.S. public relations programs remain situated in schools of journalism, which stress media writing skills and journalistic norms and values.

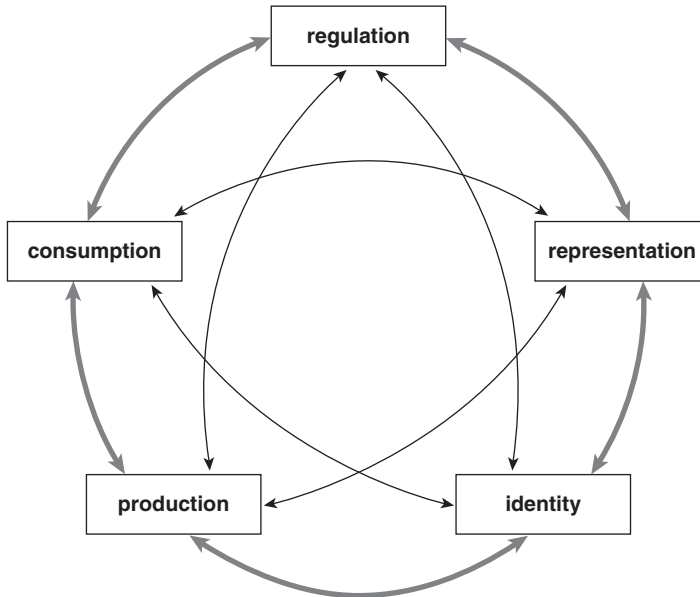
The average U.S. citizen believes public relations constitutes hype or spin and isn't a credible information source. As a result, the U.S. public historically has ranked public relations practitioners as less trustworthy than car salespeople and real estate agents (Newport, 2003). Of course, not every academic, practitioner, journalist, or citizen in the United States subscribes to the meanings just outlined. In each group you'll find a number of competing meanings as well. The positions outlined are broad generalizations, but they're coherent generalizations precisely because they form a dominant narrative, or discourse, within each group, with repercussions for how public relations is studied, practiced, and viewed in the United States.

This example demonstrates how language, meaning, and culture intertwine to create competing discourses or "truths." This notion owes much to British scholar Raymond Williams (1961, 1981), who proposed that culture actually constitutes meaning; it doesn't just define it. This conception of culture formed the basis of a new theoretical stream, cultural studies, and the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, England, in 1964. As Stuart Hall, the center's director from 1969 to 1979, noted, culture isn't just the rules and traditions of a culture as commonly described in anthropology; culture is "threaded through *all* social practices, and the sum of their interrelationships" (Hall, 1980, p. 58). Based on this broad notion of culture, a group of scholars at Britain's Open University, including Hall, created the circuit of culture model (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997), which outlines how and where culture and power intertwine to create meaning.

#### ❖ THE CIRCUIT OF CULTURE MODEL

The **circuit of culture** (Figure 3.1) consists of five moments in a process—regulation, production, consumption, representation, and

identity—that work in concert to provide a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified, and recreated. There's no beginning or end on the circuit; the moments work synergistically to create meaning. However, each moment contributes a particular piece to the whole.



**Figure 3.1** The Circuit of Culture, Showing the Interrelationships of the Five Moments

SOURCE: Graphic courtesy of Dara Curtin.

### The Five Moments

The moment of **regulation** *comprises controls on cultural activity*, ranging from formal and legal controls, such as regulations, laws, and institutionalized systems, to the informal and local controls of cultural norms and expectations that form culture in the more commonly used sense of the term. It's in the moment of regulation that meanings arise governing what's acceptable, what's correct. In simplistic terms, it helps form the context in which public relations activities take place.

For example, in many of the former British colonies in Africa, protocol is stressed, with much formality guiding interaction between

groups. One author was surprised to find when leading a series of service visits in Kenya that she was expected to make a lengthy formal speech at each stop to the assembled group, often young schoolchildren. It didn't matter that many of these children didn't understand English or that the author didn't speak Kiswahili. What mattered was the act of making the speech itself.

But constructing meaning is an ongoing process, and meanings do not go unchanged or unchallenged. What's allowable or expected in a culture often is determined by groups with economic or political power in a given situation. Specific circumstances and determined action can create competing discourses or narratives that resonate among wider social networks.

Activist groups provide a good example. When a small group of concerned citizens formed Greenpeace in Canada in 1971, they were at the forefront of the environmental movement, which hadn't yet been embraced by the majority. The media identified members as radical "tree huggers"—liberal environmental idealists—which made it difficult for them to establish themselves as credible media sources (Hansen, 1993). Environmentalism has since come to dominate many national and organizational agendas, and today Greenpeace is an international not-for-profit organization based in Amsterdam, with offices in 41 countries and 2.8 million supporters. It has influenced environmental regulation in a number of nations and constitutes an important source for international media on environmental issues. Meanings arising within a moment, then, are not predetermined but are part of an ongoing process in which the dominant narrative can shift over time.

The moment of **production** *outlines the process by which creators of cultural products imbue them with meaning*, a process often called **encoding** (Hall, 1993). In public relations terms, we can think of this as the process of planning and executing a campaign. Technological constraints play a role in the process because what's produced is partially dependent on available technology. Organizational culture provides the environment in which production takes place, such as departmental organization, management strategies, and expectations of employees or members.

For example, multinational corporations typically invest heavily in communication campaigns, but the organizational culture of each determines where public relations ranks in the organizational structure, particularly in relation to marketing and the amount of input public relations has into communication efforts. In most military organizations, a marked hierarchical structure and concerns for national

## 40 INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

security mean that information for public release must be cleared through several levels of command, slowing the communication process and restricting the scope of information released. Nonprofit organizations must fulfill their missions in cost-effective ways. Médecins Sans Frontières, for example, raises awareness of emergency medical issues around the world through an extensive network of global Web sites loaded with information for the media and the public. Production, then, creates meaning arising from organizational values, structure, and logistics.

**Representation** is the form an object takes and the meanings encoded in that form. Remember that meaning isn't inherent in the object itself but is socially constructed. Producers encode meaning into a cultural artifact, often with a specific target audience in mind. They hope to convey a certain meaning through all aspects of how they present the artifact. The content, the format, and even the method of distribution communicate an intended meaning.

In public relations terms, practitioners encode meaning into campaign materials by delineating certain target publics, scripting key messages, picking certain channels of communication, and so on. For example, when Yassir Arafat was head of Palestine, his official Web site was available in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, indicative of the target publics he wanted to reach and the global outreach of his communications. The home page contained a daily update on the number of Palestinians killed by Israelis, conveying a grim notion of the Palestinian situation and arguably designed to engender sympathy for the Palestinian cause.

In contrast, the Web site of Vaira Vike-Freiberga, the president of Latvia, is available in Latvian, English, French, German, and Russian, suggestive of a different sphere of intended influence. A link on the home page takes you to "Riga Castle," an area for children featuring pictures and a game, conveying a lighthearted side of the normally stern head of state and to the issues of national import addressed on the rest of the site.

Although practitioners try to shape discourse during production by encoding materials with meaning, some campaigns fail to achieve their objectives. Not all production efforts are successful. Failures often are attributable to meanings that arise during the moment of **consumption**, when messages are decoded by audiences. Consumers, more commonly spoken of as target publics in public relations, bring their own semantic networks of meaning to any communicative exchange. They are active creators of meaning, putting issues and products to use in their everyday lives in their own ways.

The creators of the circuit of culture note that although production provides a series of possibilities, they can become actualized only in and through consumption (du Gay et al., 1997), making consumption as important as production to ascribing meaning. Consumption, then, isn't the end of the line but another point on the circuit of culture. Consumption itself becomes a form of production as new meanings accrue to an artifact as a consequence of use.

**Identities** are meanings that accrue to all social networks, from nations to organizations to publics. A common role of a public relations practitioner within an organization is to establish and maintain an organizational identity. During production, practitioners encode organizational texts with the dominant identity they want to convey, around which they attempt to structure subsequent discourse. The U.S. Marines has created an elite identity, embodied in its advertising slogan, "The Few, the Proud, the Marines," and in its recruiting materials, which stress a yearning to belong (e.g., "Maybe you can be one of us") and the uniqueness of the "very special organization" (see <http://www.usmc.mil>).

In addition to maintaining organizational identities, practitioners often begin campaigns by segmenting publics, which creates identities for various target audiences. As we've already demonstrated when speaking about consumption, however, these groups must be understood as active constructors of meaning. Consumers also create their own identities and memberships, which may be multiple, fluid, and conflicting. And in turn, different consumer groups create and assign their own identities to organizations.

Take, for example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Some view this activist group as the leader in a righteous cause to protect basic rights, consistent with the dominant identity the organization encodes in its communication materials. But given the general lack of cultural currency for animal rights issues in the United States, others view the same organization as the lunatic fringe, criminals with no respect for property, and obstructionists who stand in the way of scientific research. Identities, then, are never fixed entities but are multiple, culturally constructed meanings that evolve and change.

The challenge for practitioners when designing a campaign is to create an identity that a product or issue and publics can share. For example, the elite identity constructed by and for the U.S. Marines is designed to appeal to young adults who want to "take control of [their] future" and "become part of the family." In Pierre Bourdieu's (1979/1984) terms, public relations practitioners function as **cultural intermediaries**, *mediators between producers and consumers who actively create meanings by establishing an identification between products or issues and publics.*

### Balancing Determinism and Relativism

The five moments—regulation, production, representation, consumption, and identity—form an interconnected whole with no beginning or end. *At any particular spot on the circuit the moments overlap in what are called **articulations**, a term chosen for its dual meaning: To articulate is both to express and to join together.* Imagine taking the illustration of the circuit shown in Figure 3.1 and setting it spinning so fast the moments blurred together. If you threw a dart at the figure, the spot where it landed would be an articulation, one of an almost infinite number of points of overlap between the moments. Each articulation signals a particular situation or instance, a particular confluence of the five moments.

The circuit, then, doesn't determine meaning in any particular situation but indicates how it will arise and that it's always subject to change. In this manner the circuit embraces a degree of cultural relativism, but it does so within a structured framework provided by the five moments, which constrain the range of possible meanings. *Meanings may be socially constructed, but they're constructed within the range allowed by institutional frameworks and based on past meanings and formulations, a concept known as **historicity**.* Meanings are then reconstructed as consumers use them in their particular social situations, which arise in the articulations.

From different articulations, different dominant and competing discourses arise. Discourse prescribes how a cultural artifact can be meaningfully discussed and used. It "facilitates cultural communication while always recognizing the persistence of difference and power between different 'speakers' within the same cultural circuit" (Hall, 1997b, p. 11). Within the confines of historicity, then, articulations put relationships and power firmly at the forefront of what meanings will arise in any given situation. As Foucault (1975/1995) proposed, power is **micropolitical**, *inherent in all relationships but lacking absolute value: Power can be productive as well as controlling, positive as well as negative, enabling as well as constraining.* However, relative power leads to a particular discourse becoming dominant in any given articulation; it prescribes whose voice will be heard. The meaning inscribed by the dominant discourse becomes the "truth" that shapes subsequent actions.

To see how this works in practice, consider the earlier discussion of competing discourses surrounding the term *public relations*. How public relations is defined in different semantic networks helps determine what will be published in U.S. scholarly journals, what types of practice will be culturally sanctioned, and how and where public



relations will be taught. However, it's important to remember that discourses arise from continuous processes within the circuit and are subject to the contingencies of articulations. Today's marginal meaning may be tomorrow's dominant meaning, and the dominant discourse of a producer may be adopted, changed, or spurned by a consumer.

#### ❖ APPLYING THE CIRCUIT OF CULTURE TO PRACTICE

To better understand the theory underlying the circuit and how it can be used to guide public relations practice, it helps to examine it in the context of a case. As Hall himself said, "Theory is always a detour on the way to something more interesting" (in Morley & Chen, 1996, p. 19). We use the introduction of New Coke® to illustrate each moment of the circuit in action. Although the case is based in the United States, it has international ramifications that we discuss in this and subsequent chapters.<sup>1</sup>

### Production

For years, Coca-Cola was the dominant soft drink brand, so much so that people commonly used *Coke* as a generic term for any cola beverage. In the 1970s, however, the Coca-Cola Company began steadily losing market share to Pepsi, particularly among the growing market of younger drinkers, who were targeted as the "Pepsi Generation." In 1981, Roberto C. Goizueta became CEO of Coca-Cola, and he instigated a culture of change in the company, telling his managers that everything about the company was open to challenge, including product formulation (Hollie, 1985a).

With support from Harold Burson (2003b), a close friend, and his international public relations firm Burson-Marsteller, Goizueta worked to create a climate of "intelligent risk taking" in the company. He added new product lines, including Diet Coke and Cherry Coke, and he expanded the business vertically, buying Columbia Pictures and starting a line of branded clothing. He also vowed to get the original flagship brand rolling again by the company's 100-year anniversary in 1986.

The top-secret "Project Kansas" was born to reformulate Coke and recapture market share within this new culture of change and innovation. The company had plenty of resources, and it threw them behind the 3-year development and \$4-million U.S. consumer testing of the new formulation. Blind taste tests with 190,000 consumers demonstrated

a significant statistical preference for the new formula, although focus group results indicated that a backlash could develop if the formula was changed. But conventional marketing wisdom held that statistics had a scientific power and veracity that the “soft” data of focus groups lacked. Continuing to produce both the original and New Coke wasn’t a consideration at the time because of technological constraints. Bottlers could not easily accommodate another product line.

Although this is only a brief overview, it points to a number of regulatory issues that informed how meaning was encoded into the process of producing New Coke. Company officials instigated change based on a felt need to retain a majority of market share. Cultural norms both within the organization and within the wider, national culture encompassed the predictive power of science, denying any truth to “nonscientific” methods. And although financial resources weren’t lacking, technological constraints contributed to the belief that only one Coke could be produced for market. We turn now to how these meanings take shape in the production of cultural texts.

### **Representation**

Coca-Cola didn’t lightly set out to take on an expensive retooling of its product line and subsequent marketing campaign. But with hard scientific evidence in hand, the management team agreed to take the huge step of reformulating the company’s flagship brand. The company’s media advisory for the introduction billed it as the most significant marketing move in the company’s history (Hollie, 1985c). Although CEO Goizueta wasn’t comfortable with media, he presided at the news conference, conveying the import of the announcement. Using a key message that “the best had just gotten better,” he announced that the formula for “old” Coke would stay locked in a bank vault, symbolically placing the old out of reach and out of mind. The event conveyed a message of a progressive company putting the past behind it and still holding on to the #1 spot in the soft drink market.

Because Coke’s slip in market share was attributed largely to the growth market of young drinkers, New Coke was designed to appeal to a younger audience. The taste was sweeter, and a stylish can design was unveiled in silver and red, rather than Coke’s traditional white and red, which introduced the wavy line design we’ve come to associate with Coke. Marketing materials stressed both the new taste and the youth aspects, with slogans such as “Catch the Wave” and a new advertising jingle: “Coke Is It.”

Everything from the product itself to the can to the campaign name was designed to convey a progressive image of a company on the move, a company and a product with which upbeat youth could identify. How could you not when Coke was "It"? If you wanted to be out front, if you wanted to catch the leading edge of the wave, as symbolized by the can design and in the promotional materials, you had to drink New Coke.

So what happened? Why did the company announce barely 3 months later that it was bringing back the previous Coke formula? The answer lies in the discursive nature of meaning, in the ways in which meaning circulates and is renegotiated in the process. It lies in the moment of consumption.

### Consumption

The novelty factor led to an original spike in sales as customers tried out the new product. During this early period media adopted the company's message of innovation, reporting Coca-Cola's move as aggressive and bold. But it didn't take long for the company to realize that trouble was brewing. Its toll-free customer line, which had averaged about 400 calls a day, was receiving more than 1,500 calls a day. And the feedback wasn't positive, nor were the more than 40,000 letters of complaint received. One woman lamented, "There are only two things in my life: God and Coca-Cola. Now you have taken one of those things away from me" (in Greenwald, 1985, p. 49). Another wrote, "Changing Coke is like God making the grass purple" (in Greenwald, 1985, p. 49).

Other consumers framed their comments in less religious and more patriotic terms: Changing Coke was like spitting on the flag or taking Teddy Roosevelt off Mount Rushmore (Morganthau, 1985; Oliver, 1985). The leader of a hastily formed but high-profile protest movement was often quoted in the media, making pronouncements such as "When they took Old Coke off the market, they violated my freedom of choice. . . . We went to war in Japan over that freedom" (in Morganthau, 1985, p. 33).

As one regional bottling company president observed, "What Coca-Cola didn't realize was that the old Coke was the property of the American public. The bottlers thought they owned it. The company thought it owned it. But the consumers knew they owned it. And when someone tampered with it, they got upset" (in Greenwald, 1985, p. 51). Consumers in this case created their own meaning for the new product,

that of an impostor, which didn't match up to the "best just got better" message that the company had spent 3 years and US\$4 million developing. One disgruntled consumer even turned the new advertising jingle inside out: "For years, Coke *was* it. Now it's gone" (in Morganthau, 1985, p. 33). Or as a restaurant owner said, "They don't make *Coke* anymore" (in Morganthau, 1985, p. 32).

Something had gone wrong, and as the comments make clear, it wasn't so much a matter of taste. Continued blind taste tests still heavily favored the newer, sweeter formulation. The religious and patriotic tenor of the complaints demonstrated the deeper meanings called into question by the reformulation of Coke. New Coke wasn't a different formulation of an old friend, it was a fake trying to pass itself off as the "real thing." What was called into question were the very identities of the product and the company themselves, forming the next moment on the circuit.

### Identity

When developing New Coke, company personnel envisioned young consumers as the major target audience. The taste of the product, the packaging, and the advertisements were geared toward a teenager or early twenty-something who wanted to be on the leading edge, part of what was happening, what was "it." What Pepsi had identified as the "Pepsi Generation," Coca-Cola identified as the "New Wave." As part of this strategy, the company tried to gain credibility by identifying itself as a bold risk taker at the forefront of development. But as outlined earlier, a key lesson of the circuit is that competing and conflicting meanings are always being generated. If a campaign doesn't establish a common identity around the product or issue and the target audience, conflicting identities arise and campaign objectives are lost.

In the case of New Coke, the problems began with the identity of the company and its flagship product. For almost 100 years, the only product of the Coca-Cola Company was Coke itself, and the identities of the two had become conflated over time. During those years, the company had spent millions of dollars developing an image steeped in nostalgia and small-town America, which they splashed on calendars, billboards, magazine ads, and myriad other promotional items.

Although the company established an internal identity as a progressive innovator when CEO Goizueta came on board, an identity the media also promoted with talk of bold and aggressive marketing, consumers held on to the old identity. The company, as embodied in its flagship brand, was an American institution built on old-fashioned American values, as noted in the patriotic theme of consumer

responses: "People felt Coca-Cola represented Americana, and they don't want Americana to change on them" (in Hollie, 1985b, p. D15); "Baseball, hamburgers, Coke—they're all the fabric of America" (in Morgenthau, 1985, p. 32).

What became evident was that consumers didn't drink a particular brand for how it tasted; even confirmed Pepsi drinkers often preferred the taste of New Coke in the taste tests. They drank a brand for what it stood for and what it said about them—for the identification it fostered between the product and their own lives. As one Coke drinker said, Pepsi "is too preppy, too yup. The New Generation—it sounds like Nazi breeding." A Pepsi drinker responded with "I think Pepsi is a little more rebellious, and I have a little bit of rebellion in me" (Morris, 1987, p. 1). Both responses demonstrate that Pepsi had captured the youth market, which identified with its message of hip rebellion; Coke was for those who wanted to celebrate traditional American values as romantically reconstructed—an idyllic, nostalgic past that never really existed but lived on in the identity of Coke as constructed in the minds of loyal consumers. With the introduction of New Coke, consumers felt betrayed, and they felt empowered to act, as explained by meanings produced in the moment of regulation.

## Regulation

After the reintroduction of original Coke, a company official flatly stated that the company had betrayed the trust of the American public. What consumers had valued as a personal relationship suddenly had been revealed as an economic one. In essence, the company declared its consumers' values invalid. Consumers tend to reject anything that challenges their shared norms. As a psychiatrist observed, "People felt outraged and ripped off because there was an implicit and explicit contract between the Coke drinker and the company" (in Greenwald, 1985, p. 49).

If shared norms are challenged strongly enough, the group holding them often feels empowered to act, even in the face of corporate power and clout. In this case, consumers exercised several options. They complained directly to the company (one consumer sent a letter to CEO Goizueta addressed to, "Chief Dodo, the Coca-Cola Company") and indirectly through the media. They demonstrated and wrote protest songs, attracting national media attention. The diehard Coke drinkers with greater resources imported original Coke from some of the 153 countries where it was still sold, most notably Brazil. And they boycotted, switching to water or, worse yet, to Pepsi.

When the company caved in to consumer pressure and announced that it would bring original Coke back as Coke Classic, its stock price

rose by US\$2.37 a share, and 31,600 calls were logged on its hotline in the next two days. Media found the announcement so newsworthy that it was featured on every evening network news show and on the front page of almost every major daily. ABC even interrupted its broadcast of a popular soap opera to share the news with its viewers.

Although consumers rejoiced in the news, one person protested by ending his contract with Coca-Cola. Bill Cosby, who had starred in commercials praising the new formulation, said his credibility had been damaged, and he would no longer work with the company. The strong sense of betrayal felt by consumers and by Cosby empowered them to act. By violating social norms, the company had weakened its relative power and lost the ability to define events. Such a fall from power by a major U.S. corporation was unusual enough to command media attention and force a disruption of accepted media norms.

### **Completing the Circuit**

This brief overview of the circuit has introduced the five moments, but by doing so separately it has not fully conveyed the synergistic, interactive, and discursive aspects of the model. For example, the company's decision to produce a new product line was integral to its new identity. But the identity of consumers was tied to the company's earlier representations, and the betrayal of trust experienced by consumers empowered them to produce oppositional meanings and ultimately to force the company to recreate an identity consistent with consumers' images.

For practitioners, some clear lessons emerge. First is the need to value qualitative data for their ability to provide a picture of how consumers will use products or confront issues in their everyday lives. Second is the need to be up front with consumers. In this case, participants in the taste tests weren't told that original Coke would be replaced, only that a new flavor was being tested. Because the company had not been fully forthcoming, consumers felt empowered to act, ultimately forcing the company to undertake an expensive retooling of their product line and a new marketing campaign.

Third, and perhaps key to this case, is the role of identity in all facets. Consumers had constructed an identity for themselves in relation to the company's old identity and brand. The campaign failed not because of actual product preference (the taste of New Coke was preferred) but because the cultural intermediaries hired by the company failed to create an identification between the new product and consumers. Ultimately, a company's identity, or that of its products or issues, is determined by the publics who consume it, not by the company itself.

Fourth, the interaction of the five moments creates variable and contingent outcomes. As this case demonstrates, science and material resources don't guarantee results. Because of the discursive nature of meaning and how it informs perspectives and subsequent behaviors, the course of a campaign is never absolute or determined. A communication campaign is always a work in progress, not a linear task with a concrete beginning or end. The failure of New Coke doesn't signify an end point on the circuit but a continuing process of redefining meanings.

The implications of the New Coke case form an integral part of cultural understanding today. Contemporary marketing experts say the company made a colossal blunder, even though at the time it was heralded as a bold and aggressive marketing move. The company itself recasts the narrative on its Web site in terms of "the power of taking intelligent risks" and the responsiveness of the company. In the words of CEO Goizueta, the most significant result of the product reformulation "was that it sent an incredibly powerful signal . . . a signal that we really were ready to do whatever was necessary to build value for the owners of our business" ("The Real Story," n.d., ¶ 6), thus emphasizing company responsiveness to shareholders, not consumers.

The continuing implications of the case also have a distinctly international angle. In 1985, New Coke was introduced in the United States and Canada. Many fewer consumer complaints were received from Canada, in part because the original formulation sold in the country was a sweeter product to begin with, so the changes weren't as apparent. But more important, the change did not challenge Canadian cultural norms.

In today's more globalized world, however, issues of national identity loom large. Consumers remarked that anywhere they went in the world, they could be surrounded with unfamiliar signs and symbols, but the Coke symbol would always be there, looking like a piece of home. This identification of Coke with the United States has spread around the world, but in myriad ways. In some areas of the world, Coke has been embraced as embodying the American Dream: opportunity and consumerism. When the authors were in Shanghai during the celebration of the start of the Year of the Rooster, the Coke symbol was prominent throughout the colorful New Year decorations. Yet at the same time, Coke has come to symbolize U.S. imperialism and neo-colonialism, often within the same countries, indicative of the multiple and conflicting identities that often form, as discussed in chapter 2 in terms of the company's operations in India.

This brief overview of the circuit of culture and the case of New Coke illustrates the basic principles of the circuit and suggests how it can inform public relations practice. The next five chapters discuss

each moment in more detail to provide an in-depth and more nuanced understanding of how the circuit can inform international practice. To illustrate the circuit in practice, we outline an in-depth case study—the World Health Organization’s smallpox eradication campaign—at the end of each of the next five chapters.

### CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Culture constitutes meaning; language, culture, and meaning are inextricably intertwined.
- The circuit of culture, which comprises five moments, demonstrates how any cultural product is imbued with meanings.
  - Regulation encompasses the formal and informal controls on culture.
  - Producers encode dominant meanings into their cultural products.
  - Representation is the form cultural products take, including the meanings encoded into them.
  - Consumers actively create meanings by using cultural products in their everyday lives.
  - Public relations practitioners serve as cultural intermediaries, working to create common identities between products or issues and consumers, as in the case of New Coke.
- Articulations are the particular situations that arise from relationships and relative power within the five moments of the circuit.
- Dominant discourses are the “truths” that emerge within articulations based on relative power and difference.

### ❖ ENDNOTE

1. New Coke, Diet Coke, Cherry Coke, and Coke are trademarks of the Coca-Cola Company. Information for this case study was compiled from the company’s Web site (<http://www2.Coca-Cola.com>) and news reports from the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and *Newsweek*.