



# Howard Chase: the man who invented issue management

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to assess the work of Howard Chase within the history of public relations, his role in the birth and development of issue management, and his relevance for contemporary practice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Research for this paper draws heavily on the speeches and writings of Chase himself, both before and after the formal establishment of issue management, as well as commentary from key writers.

**Findings** – While Chase is widely acknowledged as the founder of issue management in 1976, his writings reveal that he saw this “new science” as only one part of a much broader restructuring of management design in which he positioned public policy and profit as corporate objectives of equal importance. Analysis confirms his work was innovative and of historical significance, but it has been increasingly outdated by evolution of the discipline he created.

**Originality/value** – Despite Chase’s pioneering role, modern writing in the field usually cites little more than his definitions and his process model. This paper revisits his original concepts in their contemporary context, providing a fresh framework against which to properly assess his contribution.

**Keywords** Modern history, Social processes, Decision making, Public policy, Public relations, Organizational structures

**Paper type** Research paper

## The birth of a discipline

Of all the disciplines in public relations, issue management is the only one whose formal birth can be traced to an exact time and place. And it is probably the only one whose origins and development can be so clearly traced to one man.

Howard Chase (1910-2003) had already enjoyed a lifetime of achievement in public relations and public service when, at the age of 66, he turned his talent to the formal establishment of a new discipline designed to enable corporations to play a more proactive role in the development and implementation of public policy.

The occasion was 15 April, 1976, which saw the release of issue 1 of Chase’s new publication *Corporate Public Issues and their Management* (CPI) and the introduction of the term “issue management” (Chase, 1976a, p. 1)[1]. Chase, a man known for his use of vivid metaphor, later portrayed this moment as an event which “nailed the issue management manifesto to the cathedral door” (Chase, 1984a, p. 15).

Chase was raised in Iowa and worked as a university teacher, consultant, and corporate practitioner, and also as a senior official in the Eisenhower administration. In addition he was one of the six founders of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in 1947, was its President in 1956, and reportedly the only man to twice win the PRSA Gold Anvil distinguished service award.

Yet his legacy is inextricably linked to the work of his later years and the birth of issue management. As *Management Review* editorialised “If so unruly a child as issue management can be said to have a father, Chase is the parent” (Chase, 1982a, p. 4).



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Chase himself defined an issue as: “an unsettled matter which is ready for decision” (Chase, 1984a, p. 38) and he defined the activity of issue management in this way: “Issue management is the capacity to understand, mobilize, coordinate and direct all strategic and policy planning functions, and all public affairs/public relations skills, toward achievement of one objective: meaningful participation in creation of public policy that affects personal and institutional destiny” (Chase, 1982a, p. 1).

There have been many attempts over the years to refine and restate the definition of issue management (including Crable and Vibbert, 1985; Wartick and Mahon, 1994; Heath and Cousino, 1990; Heugens, 2005). Indeed Heath (1997) observed that no definition of issue management had yet achieved consensus. Although no subsequent development contradicts Heath’s observation, lack of consensus on an exact definition does not diminish the importance of the core concept as propounded by Chase.

It has been argued that the principal ideas behind issue management were not entirely new. For example Heath and Bowen (2002) have explored the work of the public relations pioneer John W. Hill and concluded that his writings in the late 1950s and early 1960s laid the foundation and helped establish the rationale for the discipline which would emerge two decades later.

Moreover, a much-cited paper by the public relations scholars William Ehling and Michael Hesse (Ehling and Hesse, 1983) questioned whether issue management was in fact a new concept, or simply a “pretentious” new term for everyday activities with “nothing that is scientific either in the conceptualization or in analytical techniques” (Ehling and Hesse, 1983, p. 23).

In a subsequent reassessment, Chase’s colleague Ray Ewing, who chronicled the early days of the discipline, described how some of the actual practices of issue management had existed “in protean form” before 1976:

Those of us in the corporate world developing foresight and planning techniques in the social-political arena which impacted the economic viability of our companies thought of it as an ad hoc process, not a planned and continuous process. That is, from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s we did not think of using these techniques on a continuous basis with a staff dedicated to support the process until 1976 when Chase gave the method its name. This permitted those of us in the corporate world doing issues management to share our approaches and evolve a process that described what we were doing in a real world (Ewing, 1990, p. 19).

There is little serious dispute after 30 years that Chase coined and popularised issue management. His own response to sceptics was typically colourful. In an opinion piece for *The Wall Street Journal*, which he impishly entitled “No matter how well packaged, corporate fads fail fast”, Chase suggested “issue-oriented management process, systematically integrated into line-management decision-making, is the enemy of corporate faddism. Once the high-priority issue is identified, filtered through issue task forces drawn from both line and staff, the designated issue action program produces more lasting results than any quick-fix dreamed up by the most inventive faddists. When all is said and done, the issue management process offers the opportunity for alleged rugged individualists to act less like sheep” (Chase, 1984b).

Although Chase was noted for being “congenitally upbeat” (Chase, 1999), and was an unabashed promoter of his brainchild, the principles he developed were academically robust. Accordingly, issue management quickly became established as an academic and organizational discipline and the subject of countless books, papers

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and higher education courses throughout the world. The early work of Chase and his colleagues Ray Ewing (1979) and Barry Jones (Chase and Jones, 1977; Jones and Chase, 1979) opened the way for a new generation of scholars who have substantially progressed issue management. These include Robert Heath, Richard Nelson, John Mahon, Steven Wartick, Sherry Ferguson, Kirk Hallahan, Martha Lauzen, Anne Gregory and Pursey Heugens (see for example Ferguson, 1999; Gregory, 1999; Hallahan, 2001; Heath, 1997, 2002; Heath and Nelson, 1986; Heugens, 2005; Lauzen, 1997; Mahon, 1986; Nelson, 1990; Wartick and Heugens, 2003; Wartick and Mahon, 1994).

### **Promoting issue management**

Holding a unique position in this literature is Chase's seminal work *Issue Management: Origins of the Future* (Chase, 1984a), which encapsulated his key philosophies and was said to be the first full length book devoted solely to issue management. While some of the content has been outdated by subsequent scholarship, and issue management has evolved considerably beyond just its public policy role, the importance of this book cannot be overstated.

In the years leading up to its publication, perhaps the single most important strategic element Chase brought to issue management was his conviction that its objectives could not be achieved without fundamental changes in management thinking and a new approach to management structures.

With characteristic bravado, Chase began the debut issue of *CPI* by declaring that issue management was "a breakthrough in corporate management design and practice in order to manage corporate public policy at least as well or better than the traditional management of profit-centre operations" (Chase, 1976a, p. 1). And in an important paper soon afterwards he said his years teaching issue management had "validated the original theory that public policy management is a systems approach to a management breakthrough, a vital new form of management science" (Chase, 1977, p. 26).

A few years later he described issue management as "not merely a new technique, but an innovative breakthrough in management design," (Chase, 1979, p. 34) and he continued to reinforce and elaborate this view. "This new and even revolutionary organizational design is intended to bring order, logic, control, effectiveness and economy into the twin major responsibilities of corporate management: profit and public policy" (Chase, 1982b, p. 29).

Chase himself conceded that an idea originally intended to improve techniques of issue management "evolved into a procedure for more effective participation in the corporate and public policy process, and ultimately can be seen as a vital tool in the total executive management decision-making process" (Chase, 1980a, p. 6). Indeed, he believed the role of public policy was so important that he even launched a cheeky trial balloon in 1980 to change the name of the PRSA to the Public Policy Association of America. But he concluded: "It is my appraisal that PRSA is too institutionalized to give serious consideration to such a proposal" (Chase, 1980b, p. 669).

While Chase had a sometimes prickly relationship with some elements of the public relations industry, he was committed to increased professionalisation and to expanding public relations into a broader management construction. Approaching his 60th birthday, Chase told a PRSA national conference that the rest of his professional career would be devoted to the quest to identify where the PR industry had been, where

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it was and where it was going. “My deepest personal conviction is that the arts and sciences of idea communication have been, are and will be integrated into the web of life itself,” he said. “I think we all seek a larger – not smaller – role for the creative communication of ideas than may now be found within the framework of conventional public relations” (Chase, 1969, p. 3).

### Organizational reform

In this broader context, one of his consistent themes was addressing more fundamental structural obstacles to effective management beyond just communication. Not only did Chase see the need to rethink the whole approach to public policy – from a reactive to a pro-active, participative process – he also believed it was essential to overcome traditional barriers between staff and line function within organizations.

In one of his early writings, Chase recommended the formation of a cross-functional entity which he called an “issue cabinet,” designed, *inter alia*, to:

- place the listening function at the top level of management;
- de-emphasize artificial differences between communicative functions that are essentially part and parcel of each other;
- reduce overlapping and redundancy; and
- combine the line and staff efforts in a common cause (Chase, 1976b, p. 15).

He believed that only in this way would it be possible to eliminate “antique, artificial and harmful distinctions between line and staff which to this day haunt American corporations” (Chase, 1976b, p. 15).

Later returning to this theme, Chase argued that issue management should be presented as an inter-disciplinary line and staff systematic operation which:

- focuses on definition of root causes and effects of public policy decisions;
- describes incorporation of line and staff functions into the public policy management process;
- explains preparation for effects of internal and external environmental changes; and
- clarifies means of integrating this information into the corporate strategic plan (Chase, 1979, p. 35).

Importantly, Chase recognized early on that his new approach to management would generate resistance, and that it would take bold leadership to remodel existing structures. He warned:

Expect sabotage, foot-dragging, sand-bagging and attempted pocket vetoes whenever and wherever the established corporate seats of power and authority see encroachment on their empires (Chase, 1982b, p. 29).

Sadly, his dream of organizational reform and greater commitment on the part of senior management is one element of his legacy that remains to be fulfilled.

But Chase saved his strongest criticism for the doubters and critics within the public relations profession itself. Many years after first launching issue management, he allowed himself the indulgence of some retrospection:

The pioneers in processed issue management have endured enough ‘slings and arrows of outraged ...’ traditionalists, who have proclaimed loudly (while wrapped in self importance) that ‘issue management is what we have always done.’ This usually makes their peer audiences feel good, all except for the few who believe that the art and science of management is a continually evolving – and not static – skill. It is this small group, a modern Gideon’s band mobilized against the Philistines, who recognize a blindingly important fact. We no longer need to say that issue management is good management. Today’s and tomorrow’s truth is that good management is issue management (Chase, 1991, pp. iv-v).

In addition to his strongly held and vigorously advocated views on the role of issue management within management design, and his authorship of issue management as a freshly coined “new science,” the other major contribution to the field by Chase and his colleagues was the publication in 1977 of the first formal issue management process model (the Chase-Jones model), which reinforced the foundation upon which the structure was to be built.

The Chase-Jones model, which is acknowledged as the first issue management process model, comprised four basic steps: issue identification, issue analysis, issue change strategy options and an issue action programme (Chase and Jones, 1977; Jones and Chase, 1979).

As developed and expanded, it was accompanied by a “wall chart” depicting 88 distinct steps presented as a series of concentric circles. Chase and his son Thomas later elaborated:

The model developed out of a combination of real-world experience, intellectual curiosity and scholarship. It draws on the academic research of social scientists; on the practical experience and intuition of line management; on the acknowledged skills of public relations, public affairs and communications; and on the specialized knowledge of other staff professionals (Chase and Chase, 1987, p. 53).

The “wall chart” has since been eclipsed, most likely because it was too complex to ensure lasting utility. But the basic Chase-Jones graphic is still regarded as “the most influential issue management model” (Coombs and Holloday, 2006) and provides the blueprint for most other graphic representations of key processes, which are now accepted as essential to issue management best practice (Jaques, 2005).

### **Chase in retrospect**

Unlike other management pioneers, Chase not only launched the good ship issue management, but he spent the rest of his life keeping the ship on course, modernising and refurbishing the vessel to meet new trends, mentoring and coaching new crew members as they came aboard, and actively playing every role, from captain on the bridge to stoker in the engine room (Jaques, 2004). Moreover, he lived long enough to witness the evolution of the discipline he had launched.

Yet a key question in retrospect is the degree to which Chase himself foresaw or played a role in this evolution. One limitation of Chase’s work – perhaps reflective of his famous single-mindedness – is that he did not adequately position his new discipline in relation to other associated management activities. While he considered issue management relative to strategic planning, his writings virtually ignored the crucial interface with the practice of crisis management, which was also developing at the time and demanded comparative analysis. This was left to later writers, for instance Mahon and Cochran (1991) and Register and Larkin (1997), who considered

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linkages between the two disciplines, and Jaques (2007) who developed an integrated, non-linear construct specifically designed to illustrate these relationships.

In a similar vein, Chase's singular focus on management structure, and his occasional ambivalence towards the public relations establishment, may have contributed towards his lack of attention to the communications aspects of his new discipline. Chase felt that many public relations practitioners focused too much on communication, and as a result he may have under-estimated its central importance. Here again it fell to later writers (for example Coombs and Holloday, 2006; Ferguson, 1999; Gregory, 1999; Lauzen, 1997; Watson *et al.*, 2002; Wernli and Frank, 2000) to establish and elaborate on issue communication as an explicit sub-set of issue management.

Another key area where Chase's writing has been overtaken by later developments was his failure to appreciate early enough the potential of issue management beyond the corporate construct and the public policy environment. It began as a business activity designed to enable corporations to participate in, and not simply respond to, public policy issues. And it evolved into a discipline exercised not just by corporations but also by government agencies, not-for-profits and non-government organizations to develop strategies in relation to a wide range of issues in their social and operating environments.

Although Chase himself eventually entered academia, his perspective remained largely within a business/corporate paradigm. As a result, his work and originality appears to be under-appreciated within the non-government and activist communities, who should be an obvious constituency. However, while Chase never lost his enthusiasm for new ideas, it is essential to remember that by this time he was already aged well into his seventies.

In 1988 the Issue Management Council established the Howard Chase Award to recognize excellence in issue management, and the man himself addressed the 1995 award ceremony. At the age of 85, and in one of his last significant public appearances, Chase was still looking forward to the future (cited in Jaques, 2004).

"I suggest to you that we are something in addition to facilitators," he said. "We are architects. And this is my dream for the future of the issue management movement – to do the designing, the architecture, the dreaming of a new form of corporate and social organization."

#### Note

1. The terms issue management and issues management are both in common use. Chase reportedly once argued it should be issue management not issues management, in the same way that it is brain surgery, not brains surgery.

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