

The Role of Public Speaking at the Walt Disney Company:

An Application of Diffusion of Innovations

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the principles of Diffusion of Innovations, this paper examines Disney's emphasis on public speaking through its various television programs, during training sessions for employees, and even at its theme parks. Introduced by Everett Rogers (1962), Diffusion of Innovations postulates that an innovation is initiated within a specific group of people. Then, it is diffused via specific channels across the larger cultural context. What this analysis has demonstrated is that stressing the importance of public speaking for Disney's employees can be an innovation that matches Disney's pre-existing system, which would require fewer changes and would be easy to adopt. The wider environment of the Walt Disney Company exerts pressures on the organization itself. If public speaking is increasingly diffusing through the organization's environment for any reason, it is likely that the organization will adopt it as a major policy or practice for its employees.

Key words: Diffusion of Innovations; hospitality industry; public speaking; theme parks; training and development; Walt Disney Company

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Introduction

Drawing on the principles of Diffusion of Innovations, this paper examines Disney's emphasis on public speaking through its various television programs, during training sessions for employees, and even at its theme parks. Introduced by Everett Rogers (1962), Diffusion of Innovations postulates that an innovation (i.e., idea, trend, or practice) is initiated within a specific group of people. Then, it is diffused via specific channels across the larger cultural context. Diffusion of Innovations is a theory that has relevance within today's organizations; new ideas and innovations are constantly being created and diffused over a certain period of time through a variety of communication channels, having tremendous effects on how employees work or how consumers like their products or services.

The Walt Disney Company has played a significant role in the diffusion of ideas, transforming the lives of millions of people. In particular, Disney has created some innovations that have helped improve the public speaking skills of many people. These particular innovations include television shows featured on the Disney Channel, Disney movies, Disney University, the Disney Institute, and the Disney theme parks. The use of public speaking at Disney has proven to be invaluable. For example, Disney movies and Disney Channel television shows contain lessons and mottos encouraging kids to speak out against what is unjust in society, to handle controversial topics respectfully, and to relate to the Disney characters to help learn how to speak.

An important conclusion of this analysis is that, since the Walt Disney Company creates innovations that can be transmitted through communication channels to a social system over a period of time, Diffusion of Innovations can properly be applied to Disney's ability to help improve people's public speaking skills. What this analysis has also demonstrated is that stressing the importance of public speaking for Disney's employees can be an innovation that matches Disney's pre-existing system, which would require fewer changes and would be easy to adopt. The wider environment of the Walt Disney Company exerts pressures on the organization itself. If public speaking is increasingly diffusing through the organization's environment for any reason, it is likely that the organization will adopt it as a major policy or practice for its employees.

Diffusion of Innovations: A Description

Introduced by Everett Rogers (1962), Diffusion of Innovations postulates that an innovation (i.e., idea, trend, or practice) is initiated within a specific group of people. Then, it is diffused via specific channels across the larger cultural context. In order to have an impact, ideas or innovations must be exciting, original, and innovative. This spreading of ideas or innovations is exactly what Diffusion of Innovations refers to. According to Rogers (1995) "diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (p. 5). Overall, Diffusion of Innovations takes a different approach than other theories of change within organizations. Rather than focusing on persuading consumers or employees to change, it regards change as being mostly about the evolution or reinvention of ideas or behaviors so as to become better matches for the needs of individuals within a specific cultural system (Peng & Vlas, 2017).

Adopting a new idea is generally facilitated by human interaction through interpersonal networks (Ekdale, Singer, Tully, & Harmsen, 2015). If the initial adopters of an idea discuss it with other members of a given organization or cultural group, those initial adopters will diffuse the innovation to other members of the organization, and so forth (Srivastava & Moreland, 2012). Hence, diffusion of Innovations offers two significant insights into the process of cultural change: (1) What characteristics or merits make an innovation diffuse successfully and (2) the centrality of peer conversations and peer networks in an organization or social system (Rice, 2017; Stoneman, 2018).

Marianne S. Hornor (1998) breaks down Everett Rogers's Diffusion of Innovations by explaining that the theory consists of four main parts: (1) innovation, (2) communication channels, (3) time, and (4) social system. She explains that an innovation is any idea, process, or invention that people perceive as new or novel, while communication channels are the means by which this innovation is communicated from one person to the next. In order to effectively bring new ideas and concepts to fruition, there must be practical ways by which these innovations can be publicized to all people. Therefore, efficient communication channels must be used in order to get this information across.

Hornor (1998) also claims that over a certain amount of time, this innovation can become adopted by a social system, or a certain number of people who are all working together in order to satisfy a common goal. When all of these four elements – the innovation, the communication channels, time, and the social system – work successfully together, the diffusion of innovation process has been accomplished. However, accomplishing this process requires a genius innovator, someone who is so brilliant that

he or she is able to completely change the world. Accomplishing this process is what the Walt Disney Company has been able to fulfill.

The Role of Public Speaking at the Walt Disney Company

Beyond doubt, Disney has been influential in the lives of millions of people. Disney has created what David Forgacs (1992) calls “Disney babies,” or anyone who was born later than 1925 and has seen any Disney movie, been to a Disney park, or owned anything Disney related. These people have grown up with the Walt Disney Company surrounding them, instilling morals, beliefs, hopes, and most of all, magic, into their hearts.

One important skill that the Disney company has helped instill into its audiences includes the ability to public speak. There are many ways that the Walt Disney Company goes about helping people improve their public speaking abilities. For example, Disney University requires that all employees of the Walt Disney Company go through certain customer service training sessions in order to be initiated as cast members and work with Disney (Lipp, 2013).

The Disney Institute, on the other hand, specializes in training many companies on the ways to transform their employees’ behavior into behavior that is considered to be following the “Disney way,” or the employee behavior standards that are encouraged within the Walt Disney Company (Ingelsson, Eriksson, & Lilja, 2012). In order to accomplish this feat, the Disney Institute incorporates many public speaking lessons within this training.

In addition, the Disney theme parks facilitate many interactions between guests and Disney employees that enhance communication skills between all of the people

involved in the interactions. If people had a deeper understanding of the ways that the Walt Disney Company's creations influenced the field of public speaking, and thus the communication discipline as a whole, they would be much more willing to take advantage of these innovations.

Disney Movies and Disney Channel

Disney uses inspirational messages contained in the company's movies and TV channels, the extensive training that Disney employees, or cast members, must go through at the Disney University (Lipp, 2013), the workshops and seminars that people can attend through the Disney Institute, and the interactions guests can have with characters and cast members at the Disney theme parks. To begin, viewers of Disney movies and the Disney Channel gain so much more by watching Disney programs than just entertainment. According to Nicholas Sammond (1999), "profound mental and physiological effects of an emotional order are produced [by movies]" (p. 44). Therefore, there is no doubt that Disney movies have the capability of instilling many mottos and messages into the lives of the children, teenagers, and adults watching them.

For years, the Walt Disney Company has been producing movies such as the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Zootopia*, and *Brave* that encourage people to speak up for what they believe in, not letting the fear of judgment stop them. Children and adults watch these movies, becoming inspired to overcome their fears of speaking up in a crowd in order to bring about the change that they desire. For example, in the movie *Mulan*, the protagonist Mulan defiantly speaks up against the men who are preventing her from reaching her full potential (Listiari, 2014). She teaches all people, especially women, not

to be afraid to voice their opinions on what is right, giving them confidence to courageously speak in front of a critical crowd (Listiari, 2014).

To prove even more how much Disney movies can influence public speaking skills, it is important to mention the remarkable story about the boy with autism who learned how to communicate through Disney movies (Suskind, 2014). Owen Suskind was diagnosed with severe autism at the age of three, causing him to be unable to speak (Suskind, 2014). However, he learned how to communicate when he started to relate to the sidekicks featured in Disney movies, reciting their lines in order to get his messages across (Suskind, 2014). These Disney movies gave him the ability to communicate in ways that his doctors and his family did not believe would be possible (Suskind, 2014). While his speech is not perfect now, it definitely has improved due to the magic of Disney (Suskind, 2014). If Owen was able to learn how to speak through Disney movies, surely it is possible that these movies could help other people with autism, and all people in general, enhance their public speaking skills.

Just as Disney movies help improve public speaking skills, the Disney Channel provides young people with TV shows that dive into discussions about how to talk about and handle controversial topics. For example, the channel released an episode of the show *Andi Mack* that taught children how to respectfully discuss issues related to the LGBT community. One of the boys in the show, Cyrus, came out as gay to his best friend Buffy, who responded with love and respect, teaching viewers to handle such situations with kindness and openness (Minsky & Gordin, 2017). The emergence of Disney Channel programs like these that show children how to discuss difficult topics will improve the ability of these viewers to respectfully public speak on these subjects.

Overall, if people continue to watch the productions released by Disney, indubitably they will learn how to improve their oratory skills.

Disney University

While Disney movies and shows help people learn how to public speak, Disney University assists the employees of the Walt Disney Company in learning how to interact with guests at the theme parks and other establishments related to the company (Lipp, 2013). Van France created Disney University in 1962 as the training school that all people becoming cast members must go through in order to learn the role that they will be taking on within the Walt Disney Company (Lipp, 2013). For Rafaeli and Sutton (1987), the company makes use of “classes, handbooks, and billboards” in order to train incoming cast members on the roles they will be playing and the positive emotions and words they must always employ while assuming those roles (p. 26). Disney legends Dick Nunis and Van France came up with four standards of service that must be taught to all cast members at Disney, including safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency (Loeffler & Church, 2015).

In order to satisfy the courtesy standard of service, Disney University teaches employees a particular vocabulary and a way of publicly speaking with guests that emphasize being friendly as well as helpful (Zalewski & Shaffer, 2011). For example, at Disney University, all cast members major in “people.” They are taught to refer to customers as guests, uniforms as costumes, employees as hosts, hostesses, or cast members, and crowds as an audience (Lipp, 2013). Essentially, parts of training at Disney University teach cast members how to be more likeable through encouraging a more magical type of language and guest interaction. Disney wants to ensure that all guests

will find the language and communication of cast members engaging and respectful, ensuring that the guests will join along in the magical conversations in order to enhance their vacation experience (Lipp, 2013).

By encouraging this positive type of vocabulary and language, Disney is essentially teaching its cast members to appeal to an audience's senses of what is acceptable and preferable to be said in society. In a sense, cast members are being taught how to be politically correct within the Walt Disney Company. These skills are directly transferrable to the world outside of Disney, as the University helps cast members learn to be cognizant of the words that they are using in everyday life and public speaking situations.

The Disney Institute

The Disney Institute delivers training and instruction on three fundamental skills: leadership, employee engagement, and service. These fundamental skills reflect Disney's accent on customer service and leadership (Croft & Seemiller, 2017). Just as Disney University teaches cast members about the ways to interact with guests, the Disney Institute provides all people the opportunity to take courses that teach them how to employ the business concepts of Disney. It focuses much of its effort on helping failing companies learn how to follow "the Disney way" (Wills, 2017).

According to a model released by the Disney Institute on its website, the engagement model that the Institute uses in order to improve these companies includes comprehending and prioritizing the needs of the company, adapting and implementing the practices deemed best by Disney, reorienting and upskilling the company's workforce, and operationalizing and sustaining for continuous success. Since public

speaking is a crucial skill required by Disney cast members, there are classes arranged by the Disney Institute for people looking to improve their public speaking skills, along with courses focused on general employee improvement (Ritzer, 1996).

While these courses can be considerably expensive, they have proven to be successful in transforming a company's team of employees. For example, the University of Chicago Hospitals and Health System was transformed in the 1990s by the Disney Institute, which helped "to create a customized learning experience for UCH employees that has revolutionized the culture of [their] hospitals" (Schueler, 2000, p. 28). Included in the training provided by the Disney Institute were classes focused on customer service, including the proper ways to speak to customers and fellow employees (Schueler, 2000). Not only does the Disney Institute help teach people how to public speak through classes, though, but the Institute also publishes several books on training employees, in case people cannot afford to have the hands-on training that the Institute provides.

Examples of the books released by or in collaboration with the Disney Institute include *Creating Magic: 10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies from a Life at Disney* and *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service*. An example of the oratory lessons provided in *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service* is its advice for a cast member to know the demographics and psychographics of the guests he or she is communicating with (Kinni, 2011).

As it is important for a cast member to know this information about his or her guests, a public speaker must also know the demographics and psychographics of his or her audience, being aware of the kind of people that he or she is talking to. The Disney

Institute has played an influential role in improving the public speaking skills of the people and companies that it has mentored.

Theme Parks

There is a tremendous amount of interaction between cast members and guests that occurs at the Disney theme parks and resorts, which include Walt Disney World, Disneyland Resort, Disneyland Paris, Shanghai Disney Resort, Tokyo Disney Resort, and Hong Kong Disneyland. From ordering food to making fast passes, a person cannot be afraid to vocalize his or her desires when attending these vacation destinations. At the same time, cast members must be prepared to provide quick information and responses to any questions that guests may have. As cast members are not allowed to tell guests that they do not know the answer to a question, they are forced to think outside of the box and speak creatively in order to provide help and information to guests (Sangiorgi, 2006). This is a great public speaking skill to have, as it helps a speaker learn how to think more quickly and creatively when giving a speech.

An effective way for a guest to improve his or her public speaking skills at the theme parks includes meeting the characters. According to blogger Liliane Opsomer on a blog post titled “Walt Disney World Character Meeting Tips” found on the website “The Mouse for Less,” “[t]he characters provide a link between the animated films and the theme parks, and meeting them is very similar to a celebrity encounter, a memory to be treasured.” Therefore, these meet and greets can be relatively intimidating, as guests might become star struck by these characters. However, as a guest continues to meet characters, he or she becomes more accustomed to talking to someone who is considered

famous or influential, acquiring the skill to be less nervous when giving public speaking presentations in front of people of considerable importance.

Diffusion of Innovations to Examine Public Speaking at Disney

Since Diffusion of Innovations refers to the permeation of a new idea or innovation into a cultural system, applying the theory to the Walt Disney Company's ability to improve people's public speaking skills is fitting.

The Innovation

First, for the theory to be applicable, there must be an innovation. In this case, the innovations include the life lessons involving public speaking taught by Disney movies and shows, the training, in particular the public speaking training, given at the Disney University, the public speaking lessons offered by the Disney Institute, and the interactions between guests and cast members that occur at the Disney theme parks.

There are many reasons that explain why these examples are innovations. For example, while there have been movies and television shows including public speaking life lessons for years, none of these productions has had as much of an influence on people as those created by Disney. Disney strategically employs pathos, lovable characters, and relatable aspects in their movies in order to emphasize identifying with one of the heroes or heroines and speaking out for what is right (Mateja, 2016).

When it comes to Disney University and the Disney Institute, these establishments can be considered innovative for several reasons. According to Van France, when Disney University was created, "[h]istorically, a university was ahead of the times, leading people into exciting adventures" (Lipp, 2013, p. 20). Therefore, the idea of attending Disney University was relatively foreign, but exhilarating. At Disney

University, cast members are given the tools they need in order to keep the magic alive and memorable, including the ability to utilize a magical conversational vocabulary (Lipp, 2013). On the other hand, the Disney Institute breaks new grounds by unlocking the secrets used to make Disney such a successful corporation, teaching them to anyone who can afford to learn the innovative ideas and processes that create the Disney magic (Cockerell, 2008).

Finally, the Disney theme parks create a unique experience that allows guests the opportunity to interact with cast members who have been thoroughly trained to perform their role and public speak. Walt Disney World allows its guests to have “controlled leisure” as a way to guarantee, through the guests’ own liberty to interact, the experience of a lifetime (Huddleston, Garlen, & Sandlin, 2017). Walt Disney was such an innovative man who thought of and created things that never existed to the quality he deemed appropriate before (Huddleston, Garlen, & Sandlin, 2017).

Communication Channels

The Walt Disney Company uses many different communication channels in order to get its messages and training across. When it comes to movies and TV shows, the TV channels and theater screens (on which they are shown) are some of the communication channels used. However, to get important ideas across, Disney includes songs that move the heart and call people to action within the movies. Yet, when referring to Disney University and the Disney Institute, the trainers and people leading the classes (as well as the books published by them) are the communication channels through which the public speaking knowledge and training information flow. By extension, within the theme parks, both the guests and the cast members act as communication channels. Cast members

provoke guests to talk and formulate ideas. Guests, on the other hand, require responses from cast members when requesting help or advice on what to do or where to go in the park. Thus, there are important communication channels through which Disney spreads innovations.

Time and a Social System

Over a relatively quick period of time, Disney transmits its ideas and beliefs to the social system for anyone who is even slightly related to the company and its products, appealing to most people, regardless of age, socioeconomic status, race, and more (Tavin & Anderson, 2003). For example, as soon as the Disney movie *Frozen* was released in 2013, earning a worldwide box-office sales value of \$1.2765 billion during its run in theaters and eventually becoming Disney's highest grossing movie (Sheu & Chu, 2017), the idea that the bond between sisters overcomes evil spread extremely quickly between most people. When it comes to Disney University, it only takes cast members about a day and a half to go through the first training session they must endure, Traditions (Martinez, 1992).

Contrasting with Disney University, the length of time necessary for the Disney Institute to transform a company's employees is dependent upon the severity of the needs of the particular company. However, according to the Disney Institute's course calendar, most training courses require one to four days to be completed. Finally, character interactions as well as cast member and guest interactions occur several times throughout the course of one day in one of the Disney theme parks, occupying little time. Therefore, it is obvious that not much time is required for Disney to wire the brains of the people

watching Disney movies, to train cast members, to teach people about the secrets to Disney's success, and to engage guests and cast members in communication.

Discussion

Since the Walt Disney Company creates innovations that can be transmitted through communication channels to a social system over a period of time, Diffusion of Innovations can properly be applied to Disney's ability to help improve people's public speaking skills. What this analysis has demonstrated is that stressing the importance of public speaking for Disney's employees can be an innovation that matches Disney's pre-existing system, which would require fewer changes and would be easy to adopt. The wider environment of the Walt Disney Company exerts pressures on the organization itself. If public speaking is increasingly diffusing through the organization's environment for any reason, it is likely that the organization will adopt it as a major policy or practice for its employees.

The particular ways by which Disney helps people develop public speaking skills include creating movies and television shows that contain lessons related to proper oratory, training future cast members of Disney as well as employees from companies throughout the world on how to public speak through Disney University and the Disney Institute. This process also involves interactions between cast members and guests throughout the theme parks. As the span of accomplishments accredited to the Walt Disney Company is so wide, it is not surprising that this company has had the capability to have such an effect on the improvement of oratory skills throughout the world. The legacy that Walt Disney left was truly a remarkable one, affecting all people in ways that even he could never have imagined.

The application of Diffusion of Innovations to the ability of the Walt Disney Company to improve people's public speaking skills is of high significance for the field of public speaking and the communication discipline at large. Communication scholars should understand that if more people were aware of the effects of the company on public speaking abilities, those people would be more proactive in taking advantage of the public speaking aid provided by Disney. They would be more attentive to the Disney movies, paying attention to the messages related to oratory contained within them. They would also be more likely to take advantage of the training and courses provided by Disney University or the Disney Institute, either by becoming a cast member or signing up for courses geared toward improving a company's business. Lastly, people would be more inclined to meet the characters at the Disney theme parks and engage in communication with the cast members. With people gaining more improved public speaking skills through all of these innovations, the world would become comprised of individuals that would be more articulate and skilled when speaking.

Overall, the theory discussed in this paper is well applicable to the case study of Disney. It is very much true that the innovations created by the Walt Disney Company facilitate the improvement of public speaking skills. However, while it is a valid theory, there are several limitations that rest upon the theory itself. For example, Diffusion of Innovations does not specify the size of the social system on the receiving end of the innovation, nor does it specify the length of time that the diffusion process requires. Therefore, it can be hard to measure the effectiveness of the theory when applied to a current innovation. Disney movies, Disney University, the Disney Institute, and the Disney theme parks are all innovations that have existed long enough to be able to

calculate the effects that they have had on the public speaking capabilities of the large social system to which they appeal.

There are other examples whereby Diffusion of Innovations can be applied that do not involve “humans” at the Walt Disney Company. For example, the theory could also be applied to the possibility of innovative holograms affecting public speaking abilities. As this world becomes more technologically advanced, the emergence of real-life talking holograms is inevitable. It will be interesting to see if people will soon be able to be projected as a hologram in order to give a speech from distant locations. Of course, it is going to take some time before this feat can be accomplished. As this world progresses, there is no doubt that more innovations facilitating public speaking will continue to be produced.

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