

### **Authority by Public Opinion**

Authority by public opinion occurs when a person has power or authority that is not directly related to her/his experience or expertise. Rather Public Opinion Authority arises simply because a person is held in high esteem by the public or via public outcry. An example of this type of authority is seen with scholarly or academic journals, which are more likely to publish articles written by people who are fairly established and somewhat renowned within their respective fields as compared to those written by someone who is virtually unknown. A really interesting study involved taking previously published articles that were written by prestigious and reputable authors and resubmitting them to those same journals without any alterations except replacing the original authors with “unknown names.” Out of twelve resubmitted articles, nine of them went through the review process undetected, and eight of those were rejected! This high rejection rate occurred in spite of the fact that each submitted article had been previously published and all that was different were the names.

Another similar experiment was conducted whereby a writer submitted Jerzy Kosinski’s novel *Steps*, word-for-word, to twenty-eight literary agencies and publishing houses. Ten years earlier, the book had sold a half million copies and had won the National Book Award. Now, appearing to have been authored by a lesser-known writer, the manuscript was deemed “inadequate” by all twenty-eight organizations—including Random House, the novel’s original publisher!

Here is another great example of authority by public opinion. An error in Intel’s Pentium chip was detected in 1994. News spread quickly about the flaw, and public backlash exploded, even more so when Intel tried to downplay the issue. It wasn’t long before Intel was flooded with e-mails and phone calls requesting a no-questions-asked return policy on the microprocessor. In the heat of the whole mess, complaints peaked at 25,000 in a single day! In spite of the huge public outcry, Intel refused to offer the requested return policy. Not surprisingly, the press got wind of the story and Intel’s stock dropped dramatically. Finally, Intel was forced to adopt a new return policy. What was the result of putting off public opinion for as long as they had? A mere \$475 million write-off,

that's what. In just a matter of weeks, public opinion had influenced the value of the entire company. Ignoring public opinion proved a very costly mistake for Intel.

© 2009 Kurt Mortensen