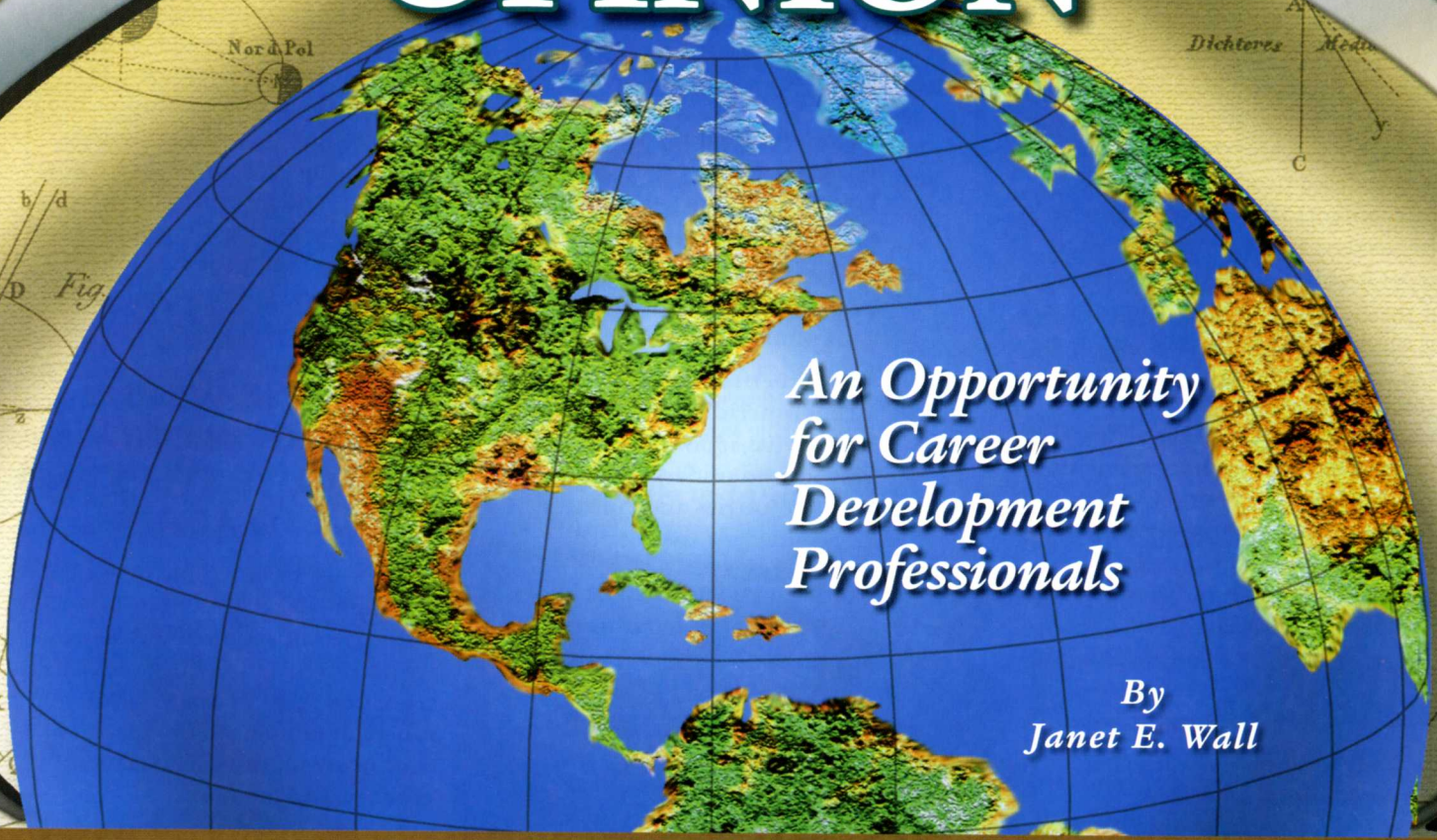
# CHANGING WORLD PUBLIC OPINION



## *An Opportunity for Career Development Professionals*

*By Janet E. Wall*

In the past, Americans have been seen as having a "can do" spirit, being innovative, creative, freedom-loving, independent, and accepting diversity of its population. Recently, however, various polls show that Americans' standing in world opinion has plummeted. Career development professionals are in an excellent position to help turn world opinion back to favorable by changing how others perceive the U.S.

Public opinion about America has been sinking throughout the world over the past several years. There was a surge of global support and unity after 9/11, but that support has severely eroded. For example, the citizens of many countries perceive the U.S. to be more dangerous to world peace than North Korea, Russia, China, and Iran. When a sample of citizens of 20 different countries was asked which country was the greatest threat to world peace, almost all named the United States as the number one threat.

Good relations with other countries are important for everyone's safety and security. Since 9/11, more than 30 terrorist organizations have emerged and that trend is not expected to stop. Various governments that are sympathetic to the need to stop terrorism hesitate to get involved with the U.S. because of their citizens' negative opinions of America. Even the economy is at risk due to foreigners boycotting American products. Negative opinions are focused on the American government due to disagreements with policies and actions across the globe. But now, foreigners are transferring their anger to the American people.

## VIEWS ABOUT AMERICANS

Many recent polls warn that the views about Americans are sliding. Favorable opinion of Americans has declined substantially in such countries as Great Britain, France, Germany, and Spain, and with friends and allies such as Jordan, Indonesia, and Turkey. Overall, Americans are thought to be dishonest, greedy, violent, rude, and immoral.

Not surprisingly, in Muslim countries attitudes about Americans and the American way of life is even more negative. In some Muslim countries, anti-U.S. feelings are so high that a substantial portion of people felt that suicide bombings against civilian Americans were justified.

More disturbing news comes from a poll conducted in South Korea which found that a majority of young Koreans said that if a war were to break out between the U.S. and North Korea, they would side with their neighbor to the North. This is jolting given the historically close relationship between the U.S. and South Korea.

Why are Americans viewed with such hostility and animosity? International relations experts attribute this to four general areas:

1. Disagreement with current U.S. foreign policy;
2. Perception that the U.S. has been exploitive of other countries and has acted in a unilateral fashion;
3. General distaste of American pop culture, including TV programs, music, and movies;
4. Ugly American concept – that Americans are arrogant, insensitive, ignorant, and lack respect and understanding of other countries and cultures.

## AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS

You may be wondering what all this has to do with you. You may think you have no ability to change world opinion or help facilitate world peace and understanding. American citizens can affect the first three areas through votes and political activity. However, career development professionals everywhere can impact how Americans are perceived. This can be done by encouraging our students and clients to study other cultures, by learning other languages, by learning about and communicating with people from other countries, by accepting that we live in a global economy, and by exploring other parts of the world. We need to know and understand people in other countries and cultures, and do our best to help them understand us.

## CHANGING WORLD PUBLIC OPINION: PROACTIVE STEPS AND A CALL TO ACTION

Here are some simple ways career development professionals can make a positive impact on how Americans are perceived across the globe. These are actions that fit easily within our sphere of influence as counselors, educators, advisors, facilitators, coaches, and mentors.

### Promote Other Language Acquisition

Encourage students to learn a foreign language as part of their academic program. There is a saying that if you speak three languages you're trilingual, if you speak two languages you are bilingual, and if you speak but one language then you're an American.

Understanding the need to communicate better with our international colleagues, more and more schools are beginning

to emphasize language as part of the curriculum – particularly Arabic, Farsi, Mandarin, and Spanish. Given our presence in the Middle East, it may be surprising that of the 1000 people working at the U.S. embassy in Iraq, only six were fluent in Arabic and that only 10% of U.S. colleges offer Arabic language courses. The U.S. departments of State and Defense have recently provided substantial funding to promote other language acquisition, but it will take some time to see the impact of those dollars.

Use the power of the Internet to encourage communication with pen pals from other countries to practice and improve language skills. A good place to start that initiative is http://www.mylanguageexchange.com/. Beyond language refinement, it is important to be able to exchange our ideas, values, faith, activities, and opinions. That exchange goes in both directions helping others to understand us and for us to understand others.

## Appreciate the Global Economy

As you talk with students and clients about occupations and jobs, remember to emphasize the fact that we live in a global economy. The economies of all countries will be increasingly dependent on and intertwined with people, products, and services from other countries. U.S. businesses operating globally need people who can speak the languages of other countries, and can understand and work successfully within foreign cultures.

## Advocate Involvement in Cultural and Educational Exchange Programs

Promote participation in language and cultural exchange programs. This will enable young people to understand the differences between American life and that of other countries. Encourage involvement in programs like the junior year abroad, the Fulbright program, and similar programs sponsored by U.S. departments of State and Education. Go to http://exchanges.state.gov for more information on programs available to U.S. and foreign students from the State Department and to http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/iegps/index.html to find initiatives supported by the Department of Education. The National Security Educational Program (NSEP) (http://www.nsepnet.org/AboutNSEP.asp) provides scholarships and fellowships for language and culture training related to national security issues. Study abroad opportunities for U.S. students can be found at: http://exchanges.state.gov/education/educationusa/abroadstudy.htm.

Check out the offerings of the Institute of International Education (IIE). Its goal is to help promote close connections between the people of the United States and

those of other countries. This is done primarily through programs in higher education for faculty and students that help build leadership skills and the capacity of persons and organizations to address local and global issues. Their website (http://www.iie.org/) is a portal from which to seek opportunities sponsored by the U.S. government, the governments of other countries, and private sector foundations such as Cisco, GE, and Lucent Technologies.

## Use Resources from the Private Sector

Don't overlook opportunities in the private sector such as those developed and promoted by the Rotary Club International. For information on scholarships and other special programs go to http://www.rotary.org/foundation/educational/amb_scho/centers/index.html. Kiwanis International (http://www.kiwanis.org) sponsors service programs to help children have better lives both here and abroad. The Business for Diplomatic Action has a program in cooperation with Young Arab Leaders to place qualified young people from the Middle East in 6-12-month fellowships in U.S. multinational corporations. They also offer programs and resources for businesses that can be found at www.businessfordiplomaticaction.org.

## Share Information about Service Opportunities

Highlight opportunities to your students and clients about assisting people in developing countries through organizations such as the Peace Corps (http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm). Persons wishing to make a career transition might be interested in knowing that the Peace Corps is actively recruiting older Americans to contribute their expertise.

Encourage high school and college students to consider Foreign Service as a career (http://careers.state.gov/officer/index.html). This career promotes the settlement of disputes through diplomacy, not force. Competing successfully for this opportunity requires a broad understanding of U.S. culture and government policies, as well as how the U.S. fits into the global village.

## Participate in and Encourage Educational Opportunities

Learn about the International Baccalaureate program (http://www.ibo.org) and see if it resonates in your community. This program is designed to promote international understanding and helps students think and

act more broadly and sensitively as world citizens. Though predominantly a secondary school program, its middle and elementary school programs are gaining popularity in the U.S..

## Learn About Other Cultures and Countries Firsthand

About 80% of Americans do not have a passport. Get yourself a passport or dust off the one you have and use it to explore other countries. See how other people live and think. Take the initiative to visit other parts of the world that you may not know much about – the Philippines, Chile, Tunisia, Slovenia, India, Guatemala, Cambodia, Uzbekistan, Thailand, and others. See what they think of the way of life in the U.S.. Try to understand what influences their perceptions. Through your own actions, gestures, and behaviors, show the positive side of America.

Before you go, learn a few words in the local language of the country you are visiting. A start at basic language acquisition is available for no cost over the Internet at http://www.word2word.com/coursead.html. Read their local press (for free translations of foreign media go to www.watchingamerica.org), and engage your entire family in learning as much as you can about the culture and heritage of the place you are visiting. There are some excellent materials and practical advice available on www.worldcitizensguide.org.

## Be an Ambassador

Karen Hughes, former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs for the U.S. Department of State, has stressed that when Americans travel abroad they are ambassadors for the U.S. (Winick, 2007). Sometimes this is the only contact a person has with America, and his or her perceptions come from this visit. As we career development professionals often tell our students and clients when they interview for jobs, permanent impressions are made within the first few seconds of an initial meeting. This applies when we encounter people from other countries as well.

Take a genuine interest in the people and attributes of other countries. My personal experiences in other countries verify that people will go out of their way to assist you if you show an interest in their language and country. You don't need to be language fluent, you just need to try a few words and you will be loved and welcomed.

When you see persons who are visiting from a foreign country, don't avoid them, but instead engage them in conversation. Be proactive, welcoming, and friendly. Help them with directions, their questions, and whatever else they need to enjoy and appreciate America. Show them the positive aspects, like warm hospitality and caring for others. Each of us represents our country to every foreign visitor, so it is important to make a good impression because it is an impression that will last.

## Act Locally to Influence Globally

Learn more about other countries and international issues through events offered by your local World Affairs Council: http://www.worldaffairscouncils.org/. See if your city is partnered with a sister city by visiting http://www.sister-cities.org/. If you have a sister city, why was that city chosen? What are the shared economies, values, and goals that encouraged the relationship?

Consider volunteering for your local International Visitor Council as a professional resource, cultural tour guide, or home hospitality host. See http://www.nciv.org/gi_volunteer.asp for more information.

Host a foreign exchange student in your school and home and encourage others in your community to do the same. You and your family can directly influence the perception that a foreign youth has, as well as help you learn about their country. Hosting opportunities can be found at http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/students/. Your local college or university international programs office may offer opportunities to host international students or visitors for a just a meal or for a weekend.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the perception of America and Americans is badly tarnished. Juliana Pilon, professor at the Institute of World Politics, sounded a warning bell when she stated that "I worry about the fact the America is disliked by people who don't understand it; that Americans don't understand that others don't understand them; that Americans themselves don't understand others and often have no clue how to go about it – worse yet, don't even care" (Pilon, 2007, p. ix). We need to care about the perception of Americans by the rest of the world. We need find the common values of family, faith, and education for the common good of all of us that occupy space on this planet. Career development professionals can, by our own actions and by providing career advice to others, take

important proactive steps toward helping everyone become better world citizens.

International relations experts claim that it may take a few generations to change world opinion about America and Americans. If that is true, let's start the clock now rather than later. To sum it up, the words of Marian Wright Edelman seem particularly poignant. "We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee." It's up to each of us to take those small steps that can make a huge difference.

*Dr. Janet E. Wall is a career development practitioner specializing in assessment, occupational information, career interests, technology, and program evaluation. She worked for the Department of Defense overseas schools and the Johns Hopkins Center in Italy, designed the award winning ASVAB Career Exploration Program, and headed the office that created ACT's DISCOVER program. She is currently president of her own consulting company, Sage Solutions, which caters to both domestic and foreign clients. She has lived in, worked in, and/or visited more than 50 countries. Janet is a certified NCDA Career Development Facilitator Instructor and holds a certificate in distance education from the University of Maryland. Contact her at sagesolutions@earthlink.net and visit her website at http://www.home.earthlink.net/~sagesolutions. A copy of the many references supporting this article can be obtained through an email request.*

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