It was a hot summer day in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There were hordes of people enjoying the sun around the lakes of Minnesota on the national holiday of July 4th, 1977. However, the Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFACT), a new organization, had other plans. On this day it announced a consumer boycott of all Nestle products in the United States to protest against that company’s infant formula marketing practices in the Third World.

INFACT had carefully orchestrated a set of events surrounding the announcement to garner maximum media attention. The first demonstration procession marched down Church Boulevard on Sunday morning because the churches were involved in the issue. Douglas Johnson, the leader of the marchers, recalls, “each church was leafleted as we went through, we gave a talk and then we stopped by the Governor’s mansion and informed him of what the issue was.” The second demonstration took place in front of Nestle’s office in Minnesota where the group put up an eight-foot puppet of a bottle, and organized a number of skits and other programs to broaden public awareness of the issues raised by INFACT. The marchers carried a baby coffin and other banners designed for maximum media effect. The first ef-

*Interview with the author. Unless otherwise specifically stated, all direct quotes or paraphrased statements of various individuals, cited here and elsewhere in the text, are based on personal interviews or written communications with the author.

fort, however, fell short of expectations. The demonstration attracted a little over 100 people. The 103-degree heat did not help either. Doug Johnson blamed the heat for the low turnout. The scant media attention was attributed to local news “because a little girl drowned in the lake. But we got radio coverage and interviews with the media.”

INFACT’s goal was to advocate a “halt in the unethical and dangerous promotion of infant milk formula in Third World countries through widespread public education and generation of grassroots pressure against the offending corporations.” It demanded that Nestle: (1) immediately stop all promotion of Nestle’s artificial formula; (2) stop mass media advertising of formula; (3) stop distribution of free samples to hospitals, clinics, and homes of newborns; (4) discontinue Nestle “milk nurses”; (5) stop promotion through the medical profession; and (6) prevent artificial formula foods from getting into the hands of people who do not have the means or facilities to use them safely.

INFACT expected to create increased public awareness of the problem, through protest marches and other related activities, and in the process, to move the issue from the pre-problem to the problem identification stage. This was done through a three-pronged effort that began with the widespread distribution and showing of a film entitled “Bottle Babies.” This film linked Nestle infant formula products and bottle-feeding to infant diseases and malnutrition in Third World countries. This effort was reinforced through meetings in local churches, community centers, and college campuses to enlist volunteers, raise funds, and build a network for grassroots activism against infant formula manufacturers — in other words, to create a “movement.”

It was not an easy task. Like the industry, the activists also had to develop strategies in an iterative manner, learning and adapting as events constantly unfolded. However, unlike the industry, the activist groups initially did not have any established organizational forms to emulate. Nevertheless, INFACT leaders were perceptive enough to realize that in order to achieve some sort of parity in competing with Nestle for public attention, they must somehow become “larger than life.” Taking its lessons from Saul Alinsky’s teachings, INFACT, from its very inception, used all the tools of confrontation with a view to keep the issue in the public limelight and give it an international character “in order to fight a transnational corporation.”

Goals and Strategies of the Activists

At this juncture, the infant formula controversy was in the closing phase of the pre-problem stage. Therefore, one of the primary goals of the activists was to change the nature of the debate from scientific and medical issues and move it in the public policy arena with emphasis on right and wrong policy and concepts of distributive justice, that is, who deserves what and