

Environment, Health and Safety Series 21



**NATIONAL ASPHALT
PAVEMENT ASSOCIATION**

Taking the High Road



*A Guide to Good Community Relations
for the Hot Mix Asphalt Industry*








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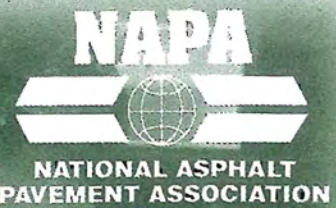
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***A Guide to Good Community Relations
for the Hot Mix Asphalt Industry***



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Key Words:

Community Relations, Communications, Crisis Management

On the Cover: *A child and his father (in hard hats) enjoy operating heavy equipment under the close supervision of a Poe Asphalt Paving Inc. employee. They are participating in an annual event, Kids' Heavy Equipment Day, which Poe Asphalt Paving of Clarkston, Washington, stages each year as a benefit for the Boys' and Girls' Clubs.*

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The Jobs Partnership of Raleigh, which provides welfare-to-work training and places its graduates in full-time jobs, began as a collaboration between C.C. Mangum Inc., Raleigh, North Carolina and a local church. The concept has now spread to twelve other cities and three foreign countries.

Introduction

Asphalt pavement companies offer a lot to our communities. We provide materials, equipment and manpower for building and maintaining two million miles of our nation's streets and roadways. Our product minimizes inconvenience for motorists during construction, and improves quality of life for all Americans. We operate clean facilities and make a product that is 100 percent recyclable. We contribute to the communities where we operate.

Despite our track record, however, we are caught—like other industries—in the dilemmas of modern life. Activist groups have developed strategies for successfully opposing the development of all sorts of commercial and industrial sites.

It's been said that all politics are local. All commercial and industrial enterprises, too, are local. This handbook has been developed specifically for members of the Hot Mix Asphalt Industry who wish to foster good relationships with their local communities. To achieve such a relationship requires a constant process of communication, openness, and trust—a process that can't be developed in a day. This handbook will help you design and implement an ingenious, comprehensive community relations plan. It will also help you if you are already operating in crisis mode and can't wait for the results of a full-fledged program to kick in.

The process of information, participation, and conciliation involves building and maintaining a community relations program that runs as smoothly as traffic on a newly paved asphalt road.

Here's what Steve Henderson, environmental director for E & B Paving Inc. of Anderson, Indiana, wrote in his company's successful application for a NAPA Community Involvement Award in 1998:

Our community involvement program has the usual elements — contributions to charitable organizations, 4H sponsorships, etc. We recognize, however, that this is no longer enough in today's business environment.



School children tour a Hot Mix Asphalt facility owned by E&B Paving, Inc., Anderson, Indiana.

Two of the biggest problems our industry faces today are actually intertwined. The first problem is burnishing our collective image. The environmental and zero-growth forces have targeted our industry. The public is starting to be besieged with misinformation, and the public perception of us is not good. The second problem builds on the public perception in that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find and retain quality personnel. With this in mind, E & B Paving has begun to expand its program to try and address these issues.

In a few short sentences, Henderson has identified the scope of the challenge and even a frequently overlooked benefit of a good community relations program—its role in instilling pride and loyalty among employees. Good programs build morale. When employees work alongside neighbors, these programs also build friendships for the company in the community. Additionally, successful programs can be used to attract favorable news coverage about the company. They make people feel, "that's a good company."

Don't feel, though, that community relations involves always saying yes. Nor does it involve adopting cookie-cutter or one-size-fits-all programs. The scope and scale of an appropriate community relations program will vary, according to resources and comfort level of the company. No one expects the owner of a service station

selling Exxon gasoline to commit the same amount of time and money to a community relations program as the Exxon Corporation would. But the reason to conduct a well-run community relations program is the same regardless of a company's size: The asphalt paving industry has a good story to tell, and each of us should be equipped to tell it well to outside audiences such as neighbors, political leaders and the news media. By doing so, your company becomes identified as a community leader and good corporate citizen—a company worth working with and working for.

A word of warning: When dealing with those who want answers, provide them. But with those who want an argument, be wary. Remember that your business objective is to win contracts, not debates. You gain little by becoming mired down in contentious arguments with those whose minds will not be swayed. Instead, you will be better able to accomplish your business goals by taking the high road towards providing accurate information, participation in the community, and conciliation.

The principles for designing, implementing, and evaluating a community relations program remain the same, regardless of the size of the company or the amount of time, money or equipment it commits. A comprehensive community relations program is more than a one-time project. It's more than an ongoing process and commitment. It really involves creating a spirit of community participation within and throughout the company so that doing good deeds—both planned and spontaneous—becomes part of your company's culture. Some of the best examples of good community relations programs are, indeed, the spontaneous acts of kindness performed simply because they're the right thing to do. No manual can teach them, and they go a long way in establishing and cementing a company's reputation in its community. For example:

- An elderly woman wrote to Lakeside Industries of Aberdeen, Wash., to thank two Lakeside employees for towing her stalled car to a service station and letting her use their portable phone to call for a ride. These two employees took the time to help a neighbor. She reciprocated, by telling their company and by telling her friends about their act of kindness.

- Russ Matthews, an employee of the Rogers Group of Gallatin, Tenn., carefully maneuvered a pit loader with rescue workers aboard the catwalk to reach a woman whose car had stalled out on a flooded roadway. Water was rising around the car as the rescuers secured the woman in a safety harness and helped her climb onto the catwalk. Then, with six people aboard the catwalk, Matthews put the pit loader in reverse and drove about a quarter-mile to safety. The company rewarded Matthews with The Rogers Way Good Citizen Award and a gift certificate.

These are just two examples of how NAPA members do more for their communities than build roads and highways. Other examples appear later in this manual. NAPA members are accustomed to doing good deeds. But in some instances, the community relations program is informal and unplanned. This guidebook will help NAPA members understand what needs to be done to set up, manage, evaluate and improve a community relations program for those in the Hot Mix Asphalt pavement industry.

The guidebook examines how to establish and administer each of the two components of an overall community relations program:

- **Participating** in or sponsoring community events or programs.
- **Communicating** information about a company and its plans.

There is overlap, of course, between the two. Taking part in a community event may provide a forum for your company to communicate its message. And being active in the community builds trust and respect within the community so that when your company speaks, the community is primed to listen.

Depending on how your company wants its community relations programs to be structured, responsibility for these two components can rest with one individual or with different individuals, with one department or with different departments. If responsibility is dispersed, there must nonetheless be close coordination to ensure your company seeks publicity appropriately for good deeds and, conversely, is in a position to line up community allies when bad news may loom ahead.

Start Your Program Now!

If you don't yet have a sense of urgency about the need for good community relations, develop one. . . right now. If your company does not have a community relations program yet, now is the time to begin planning it. If you have a program in place, now is the time to evaluate it and improve it.

Has a crisis already struck? We hope your neighbors aren't haranguing you or clamoring to stop you from building or expanding. We hope that reporters aren't waiting for you in the parking lot. If any of this is already happening, odds are that your company hasn't yet established itself as a sufficiently good neighbor and a trustworthy source of credible information. Even though you're starting at a disadvantage, it's still not too late to start.

There is no time to waste. The goal of a community relations program is to build up an inventory of trust and goodwill, and that takes time. See Chapter Seven of this book, "**What to Do If It's Already Hit the Fan**" (page 15), for ideas on how to respond if you are in a crisis situation.



The exhilaration of a race well run is shared by a participant in the annual run sponsored by Lakeside Industries of Aberdeen, Washington, at a park Lakeside built next to its plant.



Lakeside Industries gives tours of its facilities to school groups.

Let's assume your company has no program. Where should you start? Go to the top. Your chief executive, who sets the tone and direction for the company, must clearly be committed to increasing the company's visibility and participation in the community. Half-hearted support isn't enough. Insincerity is transparent.

If the CEO shares your strong commitment, persuade him or her to enunciate it clearly and decisively throughout the company. NOW.



Youngsters enjoy their ride on a skid-steer loader at the Construction Industry Exhibit at the Indianapolis Children's Museum. Milestone Contractors, L.P., Columbus, Indiana, was a major donor to the exhibit.

Participating in Community Events

Taking part in community programs—by providing volunteers, funds, equipment and facilities—can be a great opportunity to build teamwork and company pride. It can also help raise your company's visibility in the community and build friendships with other community leaders.

But if the structure of the community relations program isn't clear, it can also become an unexpected drain on energy and money. There will be no shortage of requests to weigh. Learning how to say no is important. You may become deluged with requests from worthy causes, and you'll need to learn to say no without losing friends.

If you're starting from scratch, be realistic. Don't expect too much, too soon. Just like building a roadway, make sure the foundation is strong before proceeding. In building a community relations program, start selectively, and

build on successes. This holds true whether your program will make donations to worthy organizations or include commitments of your company's staff, equipment and facilities, as well.

Is it better to participate in a lot of community activities or to take a broader and deeper stake in one program? This depends on both your comfort level and your expectations for the program. If the goal is to involve your employees in community efforts, they will feel good about themselves and their colleagues by taking part in a March of Dimes walk-a-thon, for example. But if your goal is broader—such as increasing your company's visibility in the community—you need a program that helps your company stand out from the crowd by linking it closely with a particular event.

Here are some examples of NAPA members who took ownership of community projects.

- ❑ Morse Brothers Inc. of Tangent, Oregon, created the "Let's Rock" curriculum for kindergarten through fifth-grade students. Morse provides the educational program free of charge to help about 300 schools in its market area meet statewide earth science requirements.
- ❑ C.C. Mangum Inc. of Raleigh, North Carolina, developed a program to incorporate waste asphalt shingles from a CertainTeed plant into its Hot Mix Asphalt pavement. Four years earlier, CertainTeed's waste accounted for 40 percent of the total load for the Greenville County landfill. Now this "waste" is no longer being wasted. North Carolina's governor recognized this partnership with his Award for Excellence in Waste Reduction.
- ❑ Fred Weber Inc. of Maryland Heights, Missouri, no longer flares methane gas from its landfill into the air. Now, the company recovers landfill gas and supplies it at no cost to Pattonville High School, adjacent to the landfill. The school uses the gas to fire boilers for its heat and hot water. The school district's costs to modify the boilers and install piping have a four-year payback period. This project qualified for the Governor's Pollution Prevention Award. The project was featured in USA Today, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Waste News, Air Conditioning, Heating and Refrigeration News and Missouri Resources.
- ❑ Lakeside Industries of Aberdeen, Washington, built Lakeside Park next to its facility. Several hundred people each day use the park's picnic areas and running/walking trails, which are paved with asphalt, of course.

continued on next page

- ❑ Poe Asphalt Paving Inc. of Clarkston, Washington, sponsors "Heavy Equipment Day at Poe Asphalt" each spring. Townspeople operate equipment under close supervision. The project raises money for Boys and Girls Clubs—and generates publicity as well as goodwill. The local newspaper ran a photograph of a child and his father in hard hats in the cab of earth-moving equipment. One grandparent described the event for the newspaper as "Disneyland for a day."
- ❑ Rockford Blacktop Construction Co. of Loves Park, Illinois, worked with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Conservation 2000 Ecosystems Program to rebuild a portion of the creek bed of Hall Creek. The company contributed rock, equipment, and staff to build a state-designed series of dams. This volunteer project proved so successful that it may open up a new line of business for the company. Company officials told *Asphalt Contractor* magazine that they would like to use what they learned about stream management and natural resources preservation to create a specialty market.

Other companies have developed similarly effective programs on a different scale. Many asphalt pavement companies have donated the use of their staff, materials and equipment to pave tennis courts, riverfront walks, golf-cart paths and parking areas for municipal or non-profit projects. Another company increased its visibility to the extent that it became a community landmark. Duval Asphalt Products Inc. of Jacksonville, Florida, flies 1,500-square-foot American flags on 110-foot and 135-foot flagpoles at two locations. The flags are the largest in Jacksonville, and each flag is visible for several miles from its site.

Some companies find it useful to appoint Community Affairs Committees that include a number of employees and selected members of the community. Doing so enables two important constituencies to become involved in your program. Rank-and-file employees gain a say in how the program is developed and implemented. Community members can help the company learn which issues are important to them. Community membership can also afford companies a heads-up on community reaction to their initiatives.

Here is a checklist to help your company build partnerships with community organizations that meet company and employee needs as well as community needs.

✓ *Address company issues early-on, such as:*

- ❑ What is your company's philosophy on the use of its people, money, facilities and equipment in community programs? If none exists, develop a mission statement regarding community service.
- ❑ Which department (for example, human resources, marketing, or communications) should have responsibility for the volunteer program? Should an inter-departmental committee be appointed? Should it include rank-and-file employees as well as managers? Should members of the community be asked to serve on the committee?
- ❑ If your company has more than one operating location, should administration of the volunteerism program be centralized, or should each location develop its own program?
- ❑ How many employees will be available to participate, during which hours and shifts?
- ❑ Is participation to be restricted only to employees at a specified location (such as your headquarters), or to a specified shift?
- ❑ Which company facilities and equipment will be available for use in a volunteer program or project?
- ❑ What is the company's policy on workers compensation for an employee who is injured while working on a company-sponsored, company-endorsed or company-promoted volunteer program?

- ☐ Does the company have retirees who also could be included in the program? If so, what is the policy on health coverage if a retiree is injured on a company-sponsored, company-endorsed or company-promoted program?
- ☐ Will employees be paid for time off from work to coordinate or participate in volunteer activity?
- ☐ Will the company reimburse employees for any expenses incurred while serving as volunteers?
- ☐ Will initiation of a volunteer program require notice or negotiation with a labor union?
- ☐ Do you know which activities employees participated in previously through company sponsorship or on their own? Consider conducting an audit or survey of such activity to ask about programs with churches, schools, soccer teams and other organizations. You may be pleasantly surprised by the level of activity in community events. An audit of volunteer activity will enable you to create a company profile of its community involvement and a benchmark for evaluating progress.
 - ◆ Which prior volunteer programs did the company's management consider successful, and why? Which programs were considered unsuccessful, and why? What types of programs do managers endorse and want to encourage?
 - ◆ Which prior volunteer programs did employees consider successful, and why? Which programs were considered unsuccessful, and why? What types of programs do employees endorse and want to participate in?
- ☐ If there is an existing volunteerism program, can it and should it be expanded?
- ☐ How will the program be evaluated? Develop any necessary administrative forms (such as time records, equipment and facility usage records and evaluation forms) and procedures.

✓ *Discover which community needs are unmet.*

- ☐ Which programs are other companies in your community supporting?
- ☐ Visit other companies and community programs to learn what is being done.
- ☐ Contact the local United Way or local, state or national volunteerism councils for leads on unmet needs.
- ☐ Visit potential non-profit partners to observe the quality of the program and to learn their needs.
- ☐ When an agency or program has been selected, be clear in stating duties, extent of support, goals, and expectations for both your company and your partnering agency.

✓ *Prepare for internal opposition.*

- ☐ Be able to cite specific reasons for undertaking the program.
- ☐ Be prepared to justify the costs and possible benefits of the program. For example, by checking with other companies in your community, you may learn whether their employee morale increased and their absenteeism declined. Other companies may also share experiences in how volunteer work helped employees develop leadership, teamwork and communications skills.

✓ *Develop a budget.*

- ☐ How much money will your company provide for the program? Will you fund it fully? Or will employees be expected to raise all funds or a portion of funds?

- ☐ If fund-raising is conducted, how will fund-raising be managed and audited? Will employees feel pressured to contribute?
- ☐ What happens if participants don't raise enough money? Should funds be returned to donors, or will money be applied to different projects?
- ☐ If your group considers sponsoring a raffle or bingo game to raise money, are there provisions of state laws or local ordinances that must be met?

✓ *Recruit volunteers.*

- ☐ Enthusiasm is contagious. Build enthusiasm by conducting group meetings and holding one-on-one conversations. Develop flyers, posters and articles in the company newsletter.
- ☐ Cynicism can also become contagious. Include people on the recruiting committee who enjoyed and benefited from volunteering.
- ☐ Begin recruiting as soon as your company knows what it wants volunteers to do and when. Allow several weeks for recruiting to avoid a last-minute rush that might make "volunteers" feel coerced to participate.
- ☐ Train volunteers. Help them understand what they will do, including whether they will be working with people with disabilities, for example, and whether they might be asked for interviews by reporters covering the event.
- ☐ Depending on the event, your company might want to offer participants special T-shirts or caps that identify them as employees.

✓ *Evaluate the program and communicate its successes.*

- ☐ Evaluate the project. Develop and distribute an evaluation form to all participants, including the agency that benefited from your company's work. A good questionnaire can provide useful information on whether employee or community attitudes toward your company are changing, in addition to indicating how future projects can be improved. Design the questionnaire to be easy to tally results.
- ☐ Recognize employee participation and accomplishments, through complimentary letters, certificates, a special meal for volunteers, articles in the employee newsletter, etc.
- ☐ Communicate often to your internal audiences. Issue status reports and a final report internally. Use whatever means your company deems appropriate, such as paycheck stuffers, employee newsletters, e-mail, voice-mail, elevator cards, bulletin boards, new-employee orientation sessions, packets, etc.
- ☐ Determine the appropriateness of notifying area news media about the event, inviting reporters to attend and/or providing reporters with results, photos and video from the event. In most instances, you will want to try to generate publicity. Successful programs have legitimate news value and are important to the community, as well as to your company and to the participants.

Your best chance to receive news coverage is when a reporter receives adequate notice, decides to attend your event, and prepares his or her own story about your event. Don't expect control over the contents of the story. Reporters, however, can be helped to find the best people to talk with at or after an event.

Additional information about working with the news media is available in the ***"Communications and Media Relations"*** tab of this binder.

Communicating with the Community

How do you want the community to learn about your company and your plans—through you, or through your opponents? Battles aren't won by those in retreat, and battle is not too strong a word to use in describing the situation facing asphalt pavement contractors in some parts of the country.

There are many ways to get your message to the community—directly, through open houses, plant tours, speakers' bureaus and written materials, and indirectly, through the news media.

You need to inform the community about your plans even if your proposal is not controversial. As noted in NAPA's *Guide to the Zoning and Permitting Process for the Hot Mix Asphalt Industry (HS 20)*, adjacent property owners and residents have interests and rights and, as voters, they may exert a strong influence with

local government officials. Elected officials win re-election by paying attention to constituents' concerns.

How can you identify your neighbors? Property ownership is a matter of public record. Planning department staffs, real estate assessment offices or other local officials will be able to help you obtain mailing lists with names and addresses of owner-occupied properties. These lists will help you identify residents of most single-family neighborhoods.

Note, however, that property records show the owners, not the renters, of stores and apartments. Identifying renters by name may require more enterprise, such as purchasing lists through a database firm or going door to door.

In some instances, you may be able to post your invitation or fact sheet on a community bulletin board or in



Paving work donated by Newton Asphalt Co. Inc. of Alexandria, Virginia, prepared the Catoctin Skatepark for use by skateboarders and in-line skaters.

a community center. Or you can place an advertisement in the local newspapers, radio stations, and local-access cable TV channels, or seek to place a free announcement

on community calendars offered by the same media.

Whether you are targeting neighbors, local officials or reporters, keep three rules in mind.

1. Keep it simple.

If what you say isn't understood, you're not communicating. Keep fact sheets to one page. Keep presentations brief. If you say too much, the listener feels overwhelmed. If you speak in jargon, the listener tunes out. Many physicians are notorious for speaking in doctor-talk, but they are not alone in using jargon. Terms we take for granted in our everyday business conversations—such as Hot Mix Asphalt—aren't necessarily understood by the general public.

2. Take the high road, and stay on it.

Don't let a personality clash with a vociferous opponent divert your energy or resources from the task at hand—obtaining the contract or permit.

Taking the high road involves stating your side fairly, honestly and directly. It also involves countering falsehoods. Don't let yourself take criticisms personally, however, and don't try to correct all misstatements. You risk looking petty, and you don't want to elevate the importance of your opponents or their remarks by drawing undue attention to them. If they're wrong on major points, correct them. But don't help turn bit players into media stars.

One way to stay on the high road is to create a forum that doesn't help your opponents make points and win converts. If you are concerned that opponents might try to dominate an open-house meeting for neighbors, select a format that minimizes their chances to filibuster or monopolize discussions. Don't make your meeting resemble a public hearing. Instead of having your speakers seated at a table and questioners lined up at a microphone, use a format that encourages conversation, not confrontation. Arrange the room or rooms with a series of displays about different parts of the project in particular and the industry in general, and have knowledgeable representatives at each station. If someone is concerned about possible traffic delays, for example, the resident can talk with someone about traffic, not other concerns.

3. Continue communicating after you win the contract or permit.

Offer the community status reports, including information on how the next steps will affect them. For example, after Milestone Contractors L.P. of Columbus, Indiana, began work on a large pavement rehabilitation project in Richmond, Indiana, Milestone arranged to meet every Friday morning with affected merchants. The weekly meetings kept merchants apprised of which streets would be closed off and what alternative routes would be available. Milestone also prepared a newsletter for the merchants, and some of the merchants displayed the newsletters for their customers to read.

Communicating through the News Media

Taking part in community events might put your firm in the position to meet reporters when you're talking about "good news" events that benefit the community. These opportunities, however frequent or seldom, offer more than free publicity. They also offer the chance to establish working relationships with reporters and editors, which can be crucial to your success if a crisis occurs.

The tab in this binder labeled "**Communications and Media Relations**" contains excellent articles about establishing and conducting relationships with the news media. To reinforce the advice, here are a few tips to keep in mind before, during and after a news interview.



The Rogers Group of Gallatin, Tennessee, donates the use of the company tent to community groups for fund-raisers and other events. Rogers Group employees take care of transportation, setup, and dismantling of the tent at all functions.

✓ Before a news interview

- ☐ Prepare for the interview by gathering some co-workers, listing the three to five most important points you want to make, anticipating tough questions, and rehearsing and refining answers.
- ☐ If appropriate, prepare a fact sheet with pertinent facts and figures about the project to give the reporter during the interview. A brief fact sheet makes it easier for the reporter to prepare the story. It also increases the likelihood the facts and figures you want the reporter to use will appear correctly.

✓ During a news interview

- ☐ Use plain language, not jargon.
- ☐ Keep in mind the key points you listed and rehearsed, and state them frequently.
- ☐ Get the bad news out all at once. Don't let it fester and seep out day after day.
 - ◆ Reporters will keep digging if they suspect you are trying to hide damaging information.
 - ◆ Reporters will stop digging when everything sounds like yesterday's news.

- ❑ Stay “on the record” at all times, meaning that you will say only what you are willing to have quoted.
 - ◆ If you don’t want to see something in print with your name attached to it, don’t say it.
 - ◆ You may still be quoted even if the reporter isn’t writing down what you’re saying or if the camera appears to be off. Many an off-hand comment made while escorting a reporter to the elevator has wound up in a news story.
 - ◆ If you’re appearing on a live interview, watch what you say during commercial breaks.
- ❑ Expect tough questions and trick questions.
 - ◆ If you don’t know an answer, say so. If you promise to get information for the reporter before the deadline, make certain that you do. If you make a promise, keep it. Reporters judge your credibility.
 - ◆ Avoid answering hypothetical questions.
 - ◆ Don’t be intimidated by silence. When you’re done with **your** answer, stop talking. Don’t feel the need to fill a gap in conversation.

✓ *After a news interview*

- ❑ Don’t confuse the length of the interview with the length of the story.
- ❑ The reporter may call you to double-check facts, but don’t expect the reporter to read the draft to you.
- ❑ Pick your fights carefully. Correct errors of fact, not opinions or misjudgments.



Between 200 and 300 people a day use a running/walking trail that Lakeside Industries of Aberdeen, Washington, built next to its plant.

The Emergence of the Information Superhighway

Publishing a newspaper or running a television news operation requires considerable investment in staff, equipment and offices. But relatively little investment is needed to establish a web site on the Internet. It's even cheaper to publish an opinion in a discussion group. So today, nearly anyone can become an international publisher—inexpensively, instantly and broadly, through links with additional sites.

Additionally, these non-traditional providers of news face no third-party filter—reporters, editors, TV producers—to make decisions about the merits of information before it becomes distributed worldwide.

How reliable is material on the Internet? The level of accuracy and dependability varies greatly. NAPA and some NAPA Members make news and information available on their sites. But there is a great deal of misinformation, and even some “disinformation”—deliberately false statements.



Further, it is difficult to be certain of the source of information found on the Internet. Some people who advocate a particular position conceal their identity when putting information on the Web. In a small town or even in a city, where people get to know one another, the source of a piece of information can be evaluated fairly readily. Internet readers face more difficulty in evaluating the expertise, objectivity and accuracy of an Internet writer.

The lesson here, though, is no different now than before the Internet became widely accessible. Monitor the Internet to know what's being said about your firm and your projects, but don't use heavy artillery when a little mousetrap will suffice.

When dealing with the new media, just as in dealing with the community or with traditional media, keep your eye focused on the goal—winning the contract, not the argument.



To keep the community of Richmond, Indiana, informed about the reconstruction of East Main Street, Milestone Contractors L.P. sponsored a "Big Dig" celebration which included tours of the project, a look at heavy construction equipment in action, and free refreshments.

What to Do When the Heat's On

Wouldn't it be nice if your neighbors didn't raise any questions or issues with your company until you've had time to design and implement a community relations plan so comprehensive and ingenious that it wins a NAPA Community Involvement Award? Wouldn't it be nice if crises waited until you were thoroughly prepared to deal with them? Dream on!

If you're facing a crisis right now, you can't afford to wait for the results of a community relations program to kick in. But there's no need to surrender. Here are some things you can do immediately to soften the impact and, hopefully, turn the tide in your favor.



NAPA Members participate in a media training workshop called "How to Sit on the Hot Seat Without Getting Burned" at an Annual Convention.

✓ *Find out the nature of the issues or concerns.*

- ❑ If a public hearing is already scheduled on an issue, arrange to meet **beforehand** with the opposition. Even if it's only a few hours before the hearing is scheduled to begin, make company leaders available to discuss the matter.
 - ◆ Show you are reasonable, you respect your neighbors, and you are willing to listen. Give them a chance to state what's on their mind. Listen before responding.
 - ◆ State your company's position simply and clearly, without the use of industry or legal jargon. Sometimes an issue arises because your position or your plans were misunderstood or misinterpreted.
 - ◆ Before any appearance or discussion, rehearse presentations, and coach presenters to keep their cool. Don't give your opposition the chance to cast your company's representatives as belligerent.

- ✦ If appropriate, offer a tour of your facilities to let neighbors see for themselves that the facilities are clean and efficient, and that you are concerned with safety and environmental matters.
- ☐ Try to determine how much—or how little—support the opposition has. Find out what other neighbors think. Some of them may be on your side—and be willing to say so.

✓ *Show you are a good corporate citizen.*

- ☐ Clean up your buildings and grounds, as needed. If you're being put under a microscope, look your best. Freshen the paint. Remove unsightly scrap. Improve the landscaping.
- ☐ Quantify the extent of your recycling efforts, including the community's cost savings realized through your use of recycled asphalt pavement on recent jobs.
- ☐ Find out which community activities your employees have participated in—on their own, as well as during company-sponsored or company-endorsed events. Develop a profile of your community activities around a theme, demonstrating that your company and your employees take an active role in community life.
 - ✦ List activities in which the company donated the use of personnel, materials and equipment, such as paving a hospital's parking lot or tennis and basketball courts for the city recreation department. Quantify the time and money that the recipient organizations saved as a result of the donations.
 - ✦ List corporate donations of money.
 - ✦ List church-related, family-related and other volunteer activities your employees perform, such as coaching a soccer or Little League Baseball team and taking part in building a Habitat for Humanity house.
 - ✦ A long-time employee or a retiree who has been involved in community activities might serve as a good spokesperson on these community-related matters.

Conclusion

Asphalt pavement companies today must do more than build roads. They must also build relationships with neighbors, local officials, and the news media. By doing so, they improve morale and instill a spirit of cooperation that helps identify them as good corporate citizens. They can also develop early-warning systems to detect when and where opposition may be forming against plans to expand their operations or build specific roads.

Good community relations programs aren't pre-fabricated units that can be assembled overnight. First and foremost, good community relations programs require top executives to make strong commitments to their success—the commitment to help meet community needs and the commitment to inform the community of upcoming plans. Together with costs, there are benefits, and executives who understand the business value of such programs become their best proponents. With a CEO's strong endorsement, program planners are empowered to proceed.

This guidebook provides tips for administering, evaluating and publicizing successful programs in community relations. It offers factors to weigh and practical suggestions to consider. But it's not a step-by-step set of instructions. Each NAPA-member firm must customize its own program to ensure it addresses its own circumstances and limitations as well as its community's needs.

Three strict rules, though, do apply when communicating with

neighbors, governmental officials, and the media: Keep your message simple and in plain language. Keep your goal in mind—to win business, not a debate—and stay on the high road to avoid personal clashes. Continue communicating after your plans win approval.

Here's one last thought as you consider ways to become more involved in your community: Enjoy what you're doing. Take on projects that you sincerely believe in, and put your company's heart into them. Participate in programs you and your co-workers will enjoy, and by all means, have fun.



A child tastes the excitement of operating heavy equipment under the close supervision of a Poe Asphalt Paving Inc. employee. Poe Asphalt Paving of Clarkston, Washington, stages Kids' Heavy Equipment Day each year as a benefit for the Boys' and Girls' Clubs.

Ten Tips for More Successful Community Meetings

by Roberta L. Harper
ICF Kaiser Engineers

Land use can be a contentious issue for any industry, and even for public agencies. The members of the Water Environment Federation (WEF), a federation of waste water treatment facilities, engineers, and others in allied fields, have encountered challenges from activists. This article, originally published by WEF, provides a blueprint for working through community meetings.

Years ago a construction project could be designed, funded, bid, and built, all with engineers and project managers talking only to each other. Not so today. The public is no longer passive in environmental decision-making. Citizens are increasingly knowledgeable, active, wary, and ready to thwart any project they oppose. They are quick to anger if shut out of the decision-making process for projects which involve their communities.

Organizations which fail to plan for public involvement early on may find their projects beset by rumors, fears, and misinformation. Through skillfully placed pressure, opponents can delay or even kill a project by attacking the funding source, the zoning, or the legal authority.

Many sophisticated organizations and industries realize that no matter how skilled their engineering departments, it is good business to have communications professionals bridge the gap between the technical staff and the public. They have commissioned effective community relations teams to go into the neighborhoods well in advance of planned projects, identifying the issues, pinpointing the opinion leaders, planning for public involvement, and formulating the most effective information exchange program.

Others, however, still consider "dealing with the public" part of the contractor's job, in effect relinquishing the important work of public information to professional engineers who may be brilliant designers and builders, but poor communicators. In addition, by the time the contractors are on the scene, the challenge is not effective communications, but damage control.

How can an organization win community support for environmental projects? By recognizing the need for communications strategy, by involving the community early, and by presenting information more effectively.

The ideal situation is to work in an agency or industry where the corporate leaders have the vision to recognize the importance of early public involvement. But my presentation today is not about the ideal world, but rather the real world. It is addressed to those of you who may have felt "thrown to the wolves" at a public meeting. It attempts to establish a starting point in viewing community interactions from the perspective of the listener, not the presenter. It provides ten tips for more successful public meetings—tips which are fast, easy, cheap and do-able.

Tip 1—Speak to Personal, not Global Concerns

Let's pretend for the moment that you are addressing a community meeting of residents who are protesting the rumored siting of a wastewater treatment facility near their homes. What kinds of concerns would they have? Probably concerns related to construction safety for their kids . . . noise of machinery . . . dirt from construction vehicles . . . disruption from road closings. . .

How about after construction when the plant is completed? Odors . . . property values . . . air quality . . . truck

traffic . . . safety . . . All of these concerns are very personal—the same kinds of concerns you probably would have in a similar situation.

How many people do you think were drawn to the meeting out of concern for the greatest good for the greatest number of ratepayers? . . . or that your agency would not meet the NPDES limits . . . or regional flooding problems in a three-county area?

Probably none. Yet often agency representatives respond to personal concerns with vast, big-picture language because they are really talking about their concerns. The agency and the public are talking on different planes right past each other. The inevitable result is a total lack of communication and heightened frustration.

In presenting your case to the community, translate everything into "How will it affect ME?" Answer questions in terms that are relevant and understandable to each individual in the audience, not in terms of your priorities or those of your agency.

Tip 2—Select Speakers Wisely

Who will represent your agency at the meeting? No matter how skilled your technicians or how fact-filled your attorneys, without basic credibility your message will be rejected by a hostile audience. How do you project credibility? Certainly not by beginning every sentence with "Honestly . . . or "Truthfully . . ." Credibility must be built over a period of time by actions, not assurances. You can't declare it. Credibility is granted or withheld by the audience. You must earn it.

But there are some pitfalls to avoid and some techniques which might help to build a sense of credibility with the audience. An important factor is thoughtful selection of speakers.

Many agencies, when the stakes are high, automatically reach to the top of the corporate organizational chart and tap the highest-ranking people. Let's be honest. When credibility is an issue, perhaps a politician, a lawyer, and a consultant are not the best choices.

I propose that you begin your search for the best representatives by asking your human resource department to provide you with a list of all your employees who live in the community where the plant will be located. Perhaps a mechanic in your machine shop is on the bowling

team with some of the union men at the community meeting, and his kids are in the same day care as four other parents. He knows the issues from his community's viewpoint and might be willing to speak on behalf of the agency. Certainly he would not be in a position to explain primary and secondary treatment of the proposed plant, but then—who in the audience cares about that? They want to know if they can trust your organization. Does your agency know what they're doing?

Your mechanic might say that in his 17 years with the organization, he has seen the emphasis on quality in the shop and knows this organization doesn't do schlock work. He trusts the management and has confidence in them. He might also have reservations about a facility so close to his home, but he knows people who live near other treatment facilities and they don't seem to have problems. So he's OK with it.

Or you might contact a property owner who lives next to a recently-completed site, someone who might have sat at the same kind of community meeting five years ago and had the same worries as the people in the audience. She can vouch for the fact that the plant was completed exactly the way the drawings were presented, the landscaping actually improved her view from the kitchen window, and the agency has been accessible and responsive on those occasions when she has had complaints about odors.

In short, don't automatically rely exclusively upon the top guns of the organization for the presentation. Know the concerns of the audience and think of who might best address those concerns. Of course the technical people must be available to answer questions. But sometimes the stage can better be set by people from the audience's own, or similar, communities who share common problems and can speak more closely to them. Explore the options. Think creatively. At this point, credibility, not technical wizardry, is your biggest hurdle.

Tip 3—Speak the Language

The time has come for your portion of the presentation at the community meeting, followed by the firing squad known as Q & A. Your palms are damp. You're thinking of what you're going to say, reviewing in your head the facts and figures you will present. Wrong! You already

know your stuff. Now is the time to be listening. Hear the themes running through the audience's concerns. Find the patterns. Listen to their meanings as well as their words.

When responding to a questioner, summarize what you have heard him/her say, i.e. "From what you said, I understand that you are worried about . . ." When the questioner has affirmed your correct interpretation, proceed to answer the question. Whenever possible and comfortable, use the questioner's language and phrases. This ensures the questioner that you not only listened to the question, but actually heard what he/she said.

Once I was at a community meeting where the crowd was extremely hostile at the prospect of a reservoir in their community. One person in the audience wondered whether the meeting was a sham, if the agency really wanted their input or if, in fact, the whole thing was a "done deal." The consultant representing the agency assured the resident that he was, indeed, interested in his opinion and the decision was definitely not a *fait accompli*. Imagine how that enhanced credibility! To answer a perfectly acceptable slang term with a French phrase is insensitive, if not arrogant.

Guard against jargon. Unintelligible language such as *acre-feet of capacity* or *BOD levels*, *MGDS*, *WRPS*, is meaningless to your audience and hints of a snow-job. Remember the first tip—talk in personal, not global terms. If the statistics are important, translate them into recognizable comparisons or examples.

Tip 4—Admit the Downsides

It is safe to assume that everyone in the audience has made difficult decisions in his or her lifetime. They understand the decision-making process. You weigh the advantages against the disadvantages and decide accordingly.

So why would it be necessary to hide the disadvantages of your proposal? Your audience knows wastewater treatment plants smell—sometimes pretty bad! Admit it! Then tell them what you plan to do to minimize the problem. You might consider renting a few buses and hosting a tour of one of your similar facilities so they can see how you have handled the problem in other areas.

They know construction is messy and disruptive. Don't pretend otherwise. Explain why the trucks are going

through the Quiet Valley Subdivision. What were the alternatives?

Let your audience know how you arrived at your decision—what pluses and minuses you evaluated. They will be more accepting if they can see the deliberative process and if you admit that no decision is perfect but that the one you have presented seems to be best, considering the factors you have outlined.

Are there health risks involved? If so, be honest. But remember to use consistent terminology and unit measurements when describing risk and use familiar examples to personalize the information. Avoid using comparisons such as "It is safer to breathe air near a treatment plant than to smoke one pack of cigarettes a year." Any risk comparisons, particularly the type of involuntary vs. voluntary action, infuriates an audience and trivializes their concern. Anticipate questions about health risks and have honest, understandable answers ready.

One assurance the community needs—and is entitled to—is the assurance that they will be able to contact someone who is responsive and responsible in the event of a problem or complaint. You must have a 24-hour phone number for residents to call. This phone number needs to be answered by a live person—someone trained to deal with the public effectively.

Nothing is more frustrating than trying to find someone to respond to your concerns and getting a voice mail message such as "if the odor from the plant is making your eyes water, please press 2."

Perhaps the night calls can be funneled through plant operations; perhaps through security. However you choose to handle them, be sure they are documented, investigated, and that the caller is promptly advised of your actions in response to the call. This is the way to build credibility. It will serve you well in the future.

Tip 5—Check the Room In Advance

Now let's look at the advance preparation for your community meeting. What should you have done days before the meeting date?

If you were smart, you took a careful look at the meeting room and, if the meeting is being sponsored by

another group such as a city council, you met with their representatives to clarify the agenda, format, and facilities.

- **Will your speaker be at the same eye level as the other speakers?** Sounds silly, but it's very important. Be sure your representatives will not be speaking from the floor while the opponents are on the stage.
- **Will there be space for your displays such as easels, flipcharts, etc?**
- **Will there be a screen for your videotape or slides?**
- **Will the microphone cord reach the easel display where you plan to indicate points on the map as you talk?**

Check all equipment. Nothing is more embarrassing than trying to convince the audience you are technically competent to build and manage a \$9 million plant when you can't work the slide projector. Leave nothing to chance. Bring your own equipment, if necessary. Take extra extension cords and masking tape. (Never go to a meeting without masking tape. I don't know why, but you will discover ten places where you need it if you neglect to bring it.) Rent sound equipment, if necessary. In short, know exactly what you need to make sure your presentation is as effective as possible—and get it.

Tip 6—Always Face the Audience

Suppose you arrive at the meeting with four representatives and discover only one chair reserved for your group on the stage. But there are three empty chairs in the front row. Take them? Never!

Even when you are not speaking, you are representing your organization. Sitting with your back to the audience denotes indifference and rudeness. If you will be speaking one at a time, have the other speakers at the back of the room. Each, in turn, walks to the front and faces the audience for his/her presentation. If you all will be participating in a question/answer session and cannot all be accommodated on the stage, pull the front row chairs off to the side where you can sit facing into the audience and the speakers' platform.

Tip 7—Develop a Mailing List

Any of you who have friends in the advertising or marketing fields know the time and money that are spent on that crucial element of any information campaign, identifying the target audience. Determining which people from among the masses are interested in the product and are potential customers or clients is an expensive and inexact science, but one that is absolutely necessary for any information program.

As you stand on the stage and speak to the community residents, your target audience is right before you. They have self-selected. What a gold mine! Don't let the meeting end without identifying every person in your target audience by name and address.

But once again, give some thought to how to develop that list. If you pass around a clipboard with a ripped off sheet of yellow ruled paper that says "Sign-in Sheet," what are your chances of ending up with a good mailing list? Very slim. Particularly if the audience is hostile, they will be in no mood to cooperate and either pass it along without signing or write so illegibly that it's impossible to read the name.

Once again, plan ahead. Have a number of attractive, pre-printed sheets on a registration table at the back of the room. Rather than labeling them "Sign-In Sheets," head each one with language such as "If you would like additional information about this project and a notification of subsequent meetings, please print your name and address below." Instruct your staff people to frame the request in that manner—"Would you like to give your name to receive ...?" How would this change the dynamic? "Additional information available only to us?" "Personal notice of the next meetings?" "Where do I sign?"

Suppose there is no room for a registration table at the door. (Of course you would have discovered this when you checked the meeting space earlier!) Then bring four or five personable employees from your staff, equip them with clipboards, and brief them on how and when to approach the residents to request their names and addresses. The value of the mailing list will more than compensate for the overtime pay for your staff people who attend the meeting.

Tip 8—Use the Mailing List

How often have you reflected on a conversation or a meeting and thought of the perfect comment after everyone had gone home? Or you couldn't put your hands on the information you needed when the question was asked? This is the time to use your mailing list.

During the meeting, have two people from your staff write down general questions from the audience and take notes on the meeting. There's no need to have a court reporter's transcript or a verbatim tape recording of the entire meeting. You can do better, much faster and less expensively, by having someone just jot down the gist of the questions.

The day after the meeting, prepare a letter to all attendees and guests thanking them for taking time to attend the meeting and reviewing for them some of the questions which were raised. This is where you have an opportunity to present your best response. List each general question or category of concern. After each, indicate your response. Now you can refine your language, add the information you wish you had said, or use the data which was not readily available. This will be your best opportunity to provide a positive, lasting impression on each member of the audience as individuals, not as part of a group. This is your chance to provide a message directly to the citizens without having it filtered by the media or by group pressure.

In preparing this mailing, be sure to work with the communications professionals in your organization. In some professions, particularly engineering, technical staff have yet to recognize communications as a valuable and specialized skill. Too often, letters or brochures emanate from the engineering department which make perfect sense to other engineers but are totally unintelligible, or just insufferably boring, to the general public. Use your public information staffs and compose the mailing thoughtfully, but quickly. A prompt follow-up is essential or you will have lost the opportune moment of highest interest and receptiveness to your message.

Do you think the recipient of your letter will read the information and throw it away? Probably not. Everyone likes to be in the "in" group. Because he or she received a mailing, individually addressed, about a topic of community interest, chances are your letter will be shared

with friends or neighbors at the office or over the back fence. Be sure to have a box at the end of the letter for anyone who did not receive a copy and would like to be on the mailing list to write or phone your office. Build your mailing list carefully. Use it often. After the initial mailing, use it to advise citizens of upcoming meetings or progress reports on the project, or any other news you might be able to provide. They need to know you are thinking of them.

Tip 9—Be Flexible, Wherever Possible.

Know in advance of the meeting where you have wiggle room and don't go in with so rigid a mindset that there is no room for flexibility. The community is angry about the prospect of losing sleep because of the 24-hour construction activities? Perhaps you could shut down between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.. Of course, this might mean this phase of the project would take six months to complete rather than four, but if that is the will of the community, you could arrange it.

The construction traffic should go on Elm Street rather than Oak Street? Explain why Elm was chosen but be willing to reconsider.

Still worried about possible odors? Perhaps additional landscaping and berms would help. This could be done.

At all cost, avoid being "muddled" by neighbors with two different views. Be sure to funnel all requests for changes through a single community leader such as the mayor. Set up a system whereby the mayor, on behalf of the citizens, sends an official written request for any changes in plans. Determine at the public meeting when the mayor will provide this letter (two weeks is a reasonable time) so all citizens know their time frame for submitting requests.

When you have the list, evaluate each request and accommodate as many as possible and compromise on others. Prepare your official response to the mayor.

Immediately thereafter, use your mailing list again. Send a letter to each person on the list, telling him/her what requests you have received and providing your responses. Group the requests by those you are unable to meet—and explain why—and finish the letter by indicating where you will be able to make changes to accommodate their requests.

Citizens Advisory Groups: The Pluses, The Pitfalls and Better Options

by George F. Ferris

Disembarking from a flight to Los Angeles recently, I was greeted with what I thought was good news—the people behind the rental car counter told me I had accumulated enough points for a free upgrade to a luxury-class vehicle.

I felt quite comfortable driving away from the airport in my big luxury car. However, my joy was short-lived.

The client I was in California to see is located at the top of Big Bear Mountain. If you've ever seen a movie with a car careening out of control around many hairpin turns before plunging to its doom over an impossibly high cliff, you can bet this is where it was filmed.

As I inched my way up and around those treacherous curves in fear of my life (no guard rails, of course), it quickly became apparent that my big luxury car (which had seemed to be such an asset) was a dreadful liability. It had very poor maneuverability and gave me a terrible line-of-sight of what lay before me. In short, I had the wrong tool for the job at hand.

That's the way it often is with Citizens Advisory Groups (CAGs). In some circumstances, they can work very well for your water company. However, in others, these groups can account for a whole new set of problems on top of the ones that they are supposed to be solving.

When Should You Start a Citizens Advisory Group?

There are many times when forming a Citizens Advisory Group turns out to be a good choice. Here are some circumstances I can think of:

1. When community relations need improvement.
2. When community relations do not need improvement.
(This is actually the best time!)

3. When there is misunderstanding about your operation and intentions among key stakeholders and opinion leaders (health officials, politicians, etc.)
4. When you have a core group of people who...
 - you know (or at least know the background of),
 - you can work with,
 - will offer something to the group/community, and
 - have no other agenda that is apparent.
5. When you have the resources (both time and money) to commit to it.
6. When you have a genuine willingness and ability to change.

If You're Going Through with a CAG...

Set It Up Right—Screen potential members and choose carefully from among those who make the first cut. All or most of the members should be customers of yours. Your best candidates will be people who represent relevant groups such as health care, teaching, labor, small business, industry or government.

Avoid people with hidden agendas or specific axes to grind. More generally, stay away from aspiring politicians and everyday folks who give you the impression they are seeking the limelight.

Don't succumb to the thinking that you need more "everyday" people. Everyday people do not get involved because they are not interested or qualified. Using them so you can look "democratic" is a mistake—a disservice to them and the community. Everyday people will look up to, and listen to, experts and opinion leaders such as those listed above. So, do not exploit them. Use the people who will accomplish the task.

Look for amenities to the community you can offer. The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District in Chicago has an excellent policy of offering excess plant properties or grass-lined storm water reservoirs as ball fields or park areas for the communities. This builds good will in the community and provides a concession point in your negotiations.

Tip 10—Take Kenny Rogers' Advice

I hope these ideas will be helpful in re-thinking your strategy for public involvement. I urge you to try these techniques for your next meeting. If, however, you are facing enormous stakes, either in terms of time and money already invested or in the importance of the project to the agency's operation, consider my last tip—take Kenny Rogers' advice!

In business, as in poker, it's important to *"Know when to hold 'em; know when to fold 'em."* If there is a lot at stake you might want to consider hiring professionals to create and guide your community relations program. This is a decision to be made early in the planning process, not when you encounter a brick wall of opposition as the earthmoving equipment is driving to the site, all because you overlooked community concerns years ago when your project was on the drawing boards.

No communicator, no matter how skilled, can turn a room full of roaring lions into purring kittens by saying a few words. But I hope these past few minutes have prompted you to think about how you might approach community relations from a different perspective, leading to more skillful presentations and better relations with your publics.

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Run It Tight—Without exception, your organization should chair the meetings and be very clearly in control of them. The members of our Citizens Advisory Group should have only one title: member. Don't hold elections that elevate them to any other position.

You should have clear goals for your group in mind. Explain these goals unequivocally at your first meeting and set the ground rules for how you hope to accomplish them. Also, have an agenda for every meeting, and stick to your start and end times.

Finally, do not imagine that you (or anyone else from your company) can just stroll in and run things by the seat of your pants. Use a professional facilitator. This is someone who knows how to involve everyone in the group, while still maintaining control over it.

Use It Or Lose It—Be sure to have regular meetings, but not too often. If you are facing a particularly big problem, your Citizens Advisory Group might meet monthly. The usual interval should be quarterly (and every six months is OK when things are going smoothly).

Some other ways to use the group include

- Issue press releases both before and after the meeting.
- Pose for a group press photo.
- Send out press releases about appointments to your CAG.
- Run a feature in your newsletter (if you have one).
- Ask one or more members of your group to appear at other public functions.

Keep Control—It is best to establish all ground rules at your first meeting. One important topic that must be discussed right away is how the press will be handled.

Ideally, the press should not be invited to attend CAG meetings. The presence of the press can inhibit free and honest speaking. However, if your organization is municipally owned, you may have to invite the press because a CAG meeting may be considered a "public meeting."

The preferred method is to issue a press release after the meeting to detail what took place. This way, you can work out an agreement, as a group, on what the press will be told.

Minutes of each meeting should be sent to each member, along with any updates needed to keep them

informed between meetings. In addition, poll your members in writing from time to time for possible questions or potential problems they may not bring up at meetings but will tell you confidentially.

The Wrong People

Many well-intentioned utilities have courted disaster simply by forming a CAG when they never should have in the first place, and compounding the error by putting the wrong people on it.

Lesson 1: The wrong people (even some of those you thought were the right people) can tie you and your group up forever with irrelevant details. The wrong members are usually either well-intentioned people who complicate things, or people who have an agenda of their own that conflict with the purpose of the CAG. Here are some types of people to beware of.

Time Suckers—He/she could be the type who gets philosophical and wants endless discussion but little concrete action, or who wants to examine all of your test results, discuss the test protocols, etc. They may be technically-oriented and have general knowledge, but may not understand your particular discipline. Often, they know just enough to be dangerous.

With these folks onboard, you will soon find that the Citizens Advisory Group now runs your operations and your life. You will be so busy getting answers to their questions and satisfying their requests that you cannot do your job.

Political Grandstanders—Brace yourself for long-winded speeches about the rights of the people. It's a pretty safe bet that folks like this do not understand that a water utility (even one that is municipally-owned) is still a business, and needs to operate like one.

Media Stars—Unless your group is tightly-controlled and you have agreed in advance on how the press will be handled, there is a chance that one or more of your members will succumb to the lure of the media spotlight. Sometimes all it takes is that first appearance on the 11 o'clock news to whet a member's appetite for fame. This is when you have a real problem—a media star who is speaking for himself or herself rather than for you. There is really no control over what he/she might choose

to say, or what kind of demands he/she might make (publicly, no less).

Better Options

If you have come away thus far with the impression that I am not a big fan of Citizens Advisory Groups, I may have to plead at least partially guilty. I believe that in many cases, there are other options that are preferable.

However, just as I earlier recommended not jumping into a CAG, I also believe you have to examine these options carefully before choosing one. The ones you elect to use will depend largely on the particular problems your company faces.

In most cases, I have found that determining the best options and implementing them involves three important steps: Learn, inform and add value.

1. Learn—A maxim I have lived by throughout my years in business is this one: the biggest obstacle to learning is thinking you already know. Before plunging into any public relations initiative, you first have to determine where you are now. This involves asking many questions of your customers. You cannot knowledgeably address any problems or issues until you know more about them. You need some customer research.

The questions you ask your customers should be designed to learn about their overall awareness of your company, their current perceptions of your operation, the value of your service to them and any specific concerns they have about their water service.

A variety of research tools can be used to learn about these issues. Surveys are valuable in helping to gauge your current status. They may be conducted through the mail or telephone. Telephone surveys are somewhat more labor-intensive and costly, but they tend to have a greater rate of return.

Also remember that surveys should not be a one-time event. Since situations and perceptions change, research should be an ongoing priority. Many companies conduct surveys quarterly or semi-annually, targeting a different segment of their customer base each time. Others send a mini-survey to any customer who has recently contacted a customer service representative or has encountered service personnel.

Focus groups can help you learn more in-depth, qualitative information about your customers and their perceptions of your company. It is best to leave the creation, conducting and analysis of both focus groups and surveys to professionals in the field.

2. Inform—If some of your customers have a negative (or at best non-committal) view of their water service, it is a good bet you have not done much to inform them about your company. The most successful businesses in any field are those that take the time to educate their customers and make doing business with the company easy for them.

Thus, you have to clarify the most basic issues such as how to read their water bill or report a problem. You also need to give them the bigger picture such as how their rates are set, where their water comes from and how it is treated.

School and civic group presentations offer another vehicle for informing your customers, as do booths at fairs and other public events. In service areas where computer usage is high, some companies have turned to Web sites to inform their customers.

It should be remembered that misinformation and the resulting ill feeling are quick to rush in to fill the vacuum left by a lack of good information. A proactive approach to informing your customers will pay dividends in greater customer satisfaction.

3. Add Value—Your customers need to be reminded of how essential water service (including fire protection) is to them—and that you provide that service at a cost that is surprisingly reasonable given its importance.

In the case of investor-owned companies, they also should be informed about the taxes the company pays and how they benefit schools and local municipalities. Finally, customers need to know that the people at the water company are no different from themselves and that they care about providing good service.

How do you get this message out? There are many different ways. A regularly-published newsletter will keep these issues fresh. TV, radio and print advertisements also may be appropriate. In the case of municipally-owned and -operated systems, these can sometimes be run at no cost as Public Service Announcements. Additionally, keep a steady stream of press releases coming toward local newspapers, TV and radio.

You will naturally focus on your residential customers, but do not neglect key stakeholders in your service areas such as political leaders, the media and executives of your larger commercial and industrial customers. Regular meetings with them are a good investment.

One vehicle I have seen work extremely well is quarterly Public Forums, in which officials from your company appear regularly in various portions of the service area to face the public and their elected representatives. If you are having problems, you can expect these to be a little contentious at first. However, as time goes on and it is evident that you are making a sincere effort toward resolving the issues, things will calm down.

An added benefit of Public Forums is that political leaders will love you because you are taking some of the heat off them. There is also a chance that a PUC might

accept them as a substitute for a Citizens Advisory Group. If so, jump at the chance—since clearly you as a company are presenting this forum. They are much more controllable than a CAG.

The Bottom Line

When all is said and done, a Citizens Advisory Group may still work for you (if it is developed and run properly). Just remember to explore all of your options before turning to this one. Also remember that other communications efforts, such as the ones just discussed, may work to make a CAG unnecessary.

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