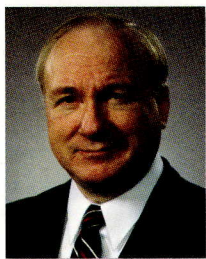


perspectives

Gaining Public Consent

How to Build Community Relationships and Overcome Opposition



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If your organization, industry, product, or service depends on your relationship with the community, you already know that the process of maintaining public consent and managing opposition and criticism is getting tougher and tougher.

We can continue to blame the media if we choose. After all, they are increasingly and uncritically publishing and broadcasting information from individuals who fail to have credentials, who are self-anointed or self-appointed, and who have done virtually nothing to authenticate the information they convey on their Web sites or blogs. Competition has forced the legacy media to abrogate their original responsibilities and carry this new age stuff in order to remain in the communications game, locally.

Oh yeah, there's also the flaming radical environmentalists, critics, or politically motivated opponents. Their arguments are always predictable: the community's health will be destroyed, property values will plummet, people's quality of life will deteriorate, there will be pressure from other publics and, of course, economic damage will become obvious if you're permitted to carry on as you've done for decades.

Maybe you're up against the folks from BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything) or CAVE (Citizens Against Virtually Everything). Perhaps it's GASP (Groups Against Systematic Pollution), HOPE (Home Owners against Polluting the Environment), PISEBY (Put It in Someone Else's Back Yard), or PEACE (Protect Environment And Children Everywhere). Even among this great variety of names, these are patterns you can expect and prepare for in establishing community relationships.

Maybe we should blame the gutless

politicians, those who are always face-saving, office-saving, and reelection-driven.

Even the public officials' behaviors are quite predictable. When you first meet them, they offer to assist and help you in any way possible. After a few irritated phone calls from constituents, neighbors, or critics, the public officials tend to be aloof for awhile. In fact, if enough phone calls are received, the public officials may actually abandon you, or may turn up at a public meeting to lead the opposition against you. This, of course, is often followed by a prolonged period of anti-corporate activism on the part of these officials. But after some time passes, you will be contacted by a low-level associate of these public officials who wants to see if "something can be done to help you get your project done while accommodating constituent concerns, fears, and questions." So, the officials begin working behind the scenes to see if a resolution can be organized. Then, they take a higher-level role in arbitrating a solution between your organization, issue, or problem and the community. This culminates in celebration as you reach an agreement with the community, and heap all the acclaim you can on the politicians you began working with in the first place. It's a pattern you can count on and, in fact, one you must get good at understanding. This is the pattern of democracy.

Just about everything in gaining and maintaining community relationships is predictable. Sometimes the environment is filled with totally irrelevant questions we take very personally. For example, "Why do people with no real credentials or expertise get credibility from the press?" The answer is, "Because." Because this is the way it's going to be. "Why do we

— who have the expertise — have to keep proving ourselves?” The answer, again, is “Because.” Because we do. It’s the way the system works. How is it that the more completely we explain something, the facts and data are still used incorrectly and we get blamed for it? Are you ready ... the answer is, “Because this is the way it’s going to be.” Or how about, “We’ve devoted ourselves to serving the public, don’t we deserve better than this?” The answer here is that you get what the community feels you deserve based on your credibility, their level of trust, and the community’s tolerance of what it believes you’re trying to accomplish.

In all of this, community expectations also remain the same. When it comes to your relationship, the community has very specific requirements. I refer to them as your communication intentions, and there are eight of them.

Candor. Disclose, announce early. Explain reasoning and reasons. Discuss options, alternatives considered. Provide unsolicited helpful information.

Openness, Accessibility. Be available. Be willing to respond.

Truthfulness. Point of reference matters more than facts. Unconditional honesty, from the start. Truth is 15 percent facts and data, and 85 percent emotion and perception.

Responsiveness. Every concern or question, regardless of the source, is legitimate and must be addressed. Answer every question; avoid judging the questioner. Avoid taking any question personally. Build followers and be nice, even in the face of anger or aggressive negativity. Anger and arrogance create plaintiffs.

Empathy. Action always speaks louder than words. Action illustrates concern, sensitivity, and compassion. Act as though it was happening to you or someone you care about.

Transparency. Our behavior, our attitude, our plans, even our strategic discussions are unchallengeable, positive, and explainable. Our families would be

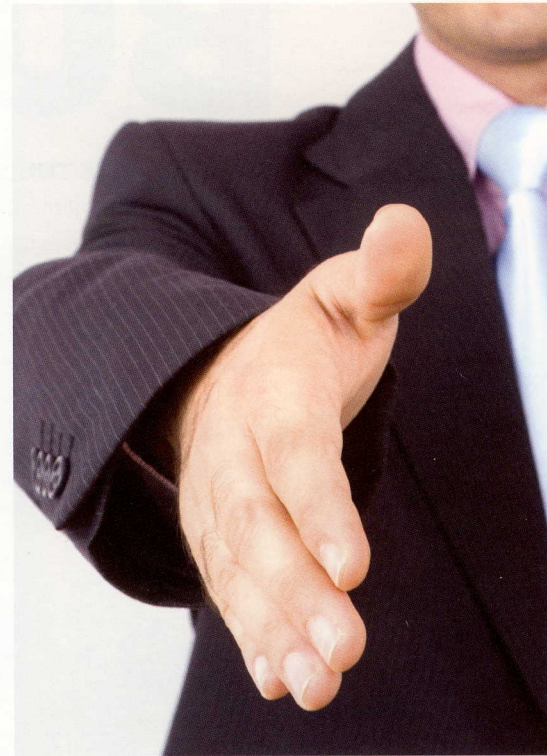
comfortable reading about our actions, decisions, and discussions on the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper. Avoid secrets (because important things and stupid stuff always come out).

Engagement. Face-to-face is the communications approach desired by just about everyone. Those who challenge us most will require aggressive positive interaction. Our base and those who give us permission to operate expect us to deal with unconvincibles and victims. Direct interactive response, even negotiation, empowers the initiator.

Clarification and Correction. Relentlessly correct and clarify the record. Prompt, positive, constructive elaboration of the facts preempts critics and empowers employees and supporters.

If you become engaged in attacks by bloggers, bloviators, bellyachers, or bullies, the rules are somewhat different, but you can relate to them. Here’s what I call my Manifesto for Victory in the New Media Environment. These are your marching orders to control your own destiny, perhaps even carve out a little victory now and then.

- Speak only for yourself, say less, and write less — but make these communications really important.
- Aim for 75 to 150 word responses . . . that’s 30 to 60 seconds reading or speaking time.
- Always let others speak for themselves.
- Be relentlessly positive (avoid all negative words) and constructive (avoid criticizing and criticism).
- Get accustomed to accommodating the long-term, relentlessly negative nature of these situations.
- Focus on the truly important 5 percent, and forget the rest.
- Emotional words plus negative language equals less truth and trustworthiness.
- Practice laggship (speak second but always have the last word).
- Be calm. Critics, enemies, agitators, and bullies are energized by anger, emotionalism, and whininess.
- Silence is always toxic to the accused (even your friends will sacrifice you).



Face-to-face communication is desired by almost everyone and can help you achieve your goals.

- Refuse to be distracted by negativity, friendly pressure, or the agendas of others.
- Everything comes back around.
- Remember, truth is 15 percent facts and data and 85 percent emotion and perception.
- Be strategic: Say, act, plan, and write with future impact in mind.
- Prepare to work alone and to be abandoned by just about everyone.
- Stay cool.
- Keep the testosterone under control.
- Work in real time: Do it now, fix it now, ask it now, correct it now, challenge it now.
- In all speaking and writing be simple, sensible, positive, and empathetic.
- Avoid the creation of critics and adversaries, they accumulate and they hang around.
- It’s your destiny. If you refuse to manage it, someone else will.

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