

Gaining and maintaining public consent: Building community relationships and overcoming 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.

On a positive note, the fundamentals for maintaining good relationships with the community remain essentially the same. What's changing is the access of potentially huge numbers of new, individual players to the conversation about you, and the significant loss of filtration, gatekeeping and validation the traditional or legacy media have provided over the years. In the new world of word-of-mouth, blogging, and the increasingly prevalent expectation that anyone offering an opinion is a journalist and treated accordingly, maintaining community relationships is rapidly becoming an all-day, everyday proposition.

The challenges for maintaining community relationships remain just as painful and just as predictable. Challenging credibility is always more successful than challenging the facts. Whatever your local needs, they are hard to prove. The threat of action by some organization or individual is always more powerful and intimidating than the action itself. Local support is essential but, as always, extremely fragile. Local support generally controls the relationship and, it seems, almost from the moment you open your mouth,



someone from the community is angry, upset or critical.


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 to remain in the local communications game.

Oh yeah, there are also the radical environmentalists, critics or politically motivated opponents. Their arguments are 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) or HOPE (Home Owners against Polluting the Environment). Even among this great variety of names, claims and allegations are patterns you can prepare for, both for establishing and maintaining community relation-

Looking for more on this topic?

There's a lot more to talk about on this topic. You may wish to join the author in a powerful 90-minute PRSA teleseminar called **"Building Community Relationships: Overcome Opposition, Gain Community Consent,"** on **Sept. 27 from 3-4:30 p.m. EDT.** Please visit www.prsa.org for more information and to register.

This teleseminar provides 1.0 Maintenance Credit towards the minimum of 10 credits required to maintain your APR. Please contact Kathy Mulvihill at PRSA, 212.460.1436 or kathy.mulvihill@prsa.org for more information. 

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ships.

Maybe we should blame the politicians, who are always face-saving, office-saving and re-election driven.

Even the public officials' behaviors are quite predictable. When you first meet them, they offer to assist you in any way possible. After a few irritated phone calls from constituents, neighbors or critics, public officials tend to be aloof for awhile. In fact, if enough phone calls are received, public officials may actually abandon you or turn up at a public meeting to lead the opposition against you. This 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 with your project while accommodating constituent concerns." 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 one you must understand. This is the pattern of democracy.

Just about everything in gaining and maintaining community relationships is predictable. Sometimes the environment is filled with irrelevant questions we take personally. For example, "Why do people with no 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 no matter how 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 remain the same. When it comes to your relationship, the community has very specific requirements. I refer to them as your communication intentions.

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 per-

cent 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. Just about everyone desires a face-to-face communications approach. 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 invincibles 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 pre-empts critics and empowers employees and supporters.

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

- Speak only for yourself. Say less, write less, but make these communications really important.

- Aim for 75-150 word responses — that's 30-60 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 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.

- Refuse to be distracted by negativity, friendly pressure or the agendas of others.

- Everything comes back around.

- Be strategic: Say, act, plan and write with future impact in mind.

- Prepare to work alone and be abandoned by just about everyone.

- Stay cool.

- Work in real time: do it now, fix it now, ask it now, correct it now and 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. **T**



James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, helps clients deal with touchy, sensitive, high-profile situations. *Corporate Legal Times* labels him one of "28 experts to call when all hell breaks loose." E-mail: crisisguru@e911.com.