

## **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

We're all familiar with the scenario: the sponsor of a solid waste disposal facility - waste-to-energy plant, landfill, medical waste incinerator, material recovery facility (MRF) - develops a project that meets all applicable regulatory standards.

The developer identifies a site that meets the facility's technical requirements. He meets privately with the local mayor and town council members. Each expresses support for the facility, indicating that the community needs additional tax revenues and would welcome the facility with open arms. Local business leaders also voice support.

Word of the facility spreads quickly among local residents. Its environmental impact raises the concern of a local conservation commission member, who discusses it with a newspaper reporter. She writes a story that appears the next morning. The newspaper article, which is full of distortions and factual errors, is how the majority of local residents first learn about the new project.

Townpeople, alarmed about the project's reported negative impact on their community, turn out in force at the next town council meeting to voice their concerns. Property owners near the proposed site announce they will organize an opposition group. Faced with vocal project opponents, the mayor and council members decide to reconsider their initial support and publicly voice their strong concerns about the project.

The once confident developer is suddenly playing catch-up. He spends most of his time putting out fires all over town instead of resolving important permitting issues. He is forced to respond to negative misinformation that is spreading among citizens in the community. Suddenly, the project is in serious jeopardy.

### **The Roots Of Resistance**

This scenario happens in nearly all areas of the country. Community opposition to needed and environmentally safe projects burns brightly. Spurred by several technological accidents in recent years - Chernobyl, Bhopal, the Challenger, Exxon Valdez - people are becoming increasingly distrustful of government and industry.

As a result, solid waste disposal project developers can no longer assume that the traditional siting and permitting process is sufficient to ensure a facility's success. Project sponsors should heed the words of the political pundit who said, "There are no political leaders, only followers." Regardless of a facility's engineering and design, a project must gain enough public acceptance to overcome the many obstacles raised by opponents.

## **The Comprehensive Community Relations Plan**

A highly effective tool in promoting needed support for your project is a comprehensive community relation's plan.

Developers of more than 30 planned projects nationwide have used the following 10 steps.

If implemented properly, they will help you promote public and political support for your project, influence permitting officials and expedite project permitting.

### **1. Plan Early**

A community relation's plan crafted early in project development can help shape public opinion in support of your project.

Nearly every project has a good story to tell - increased host community revenue, jobs, environmental improvements. Each of these benefits will help win local support if the right messages are properly communicated to the appropriate audiences.

Too often, project sponsors fail to take the steps necessary to control the flow of information about their project. Failure to provide carefully prepared project information will lead to speculation, rumors and the spread of misinformation. One or two vocal residents opposing your project can quickly coalesce into a group with considerable influence among local officials.

Waiting to become active until after strong opposition surfaces is a costly and often fatal mistake. Your community relations should be as integral a part of early project development as engineering and design.

### **2. Do Your Homework**

Developers obviously want to maneuver their projects through permitting as quickly as possible. As a result, many have charged into a city or town without having taken the time to gather sufficient knowledge about their host community.

One private developer announced a project that soon drew surprisingly intense environmental opposition from local residents. Only months after announcing the planned facility did the developer learn that the town was home to Ralph Nader.

Who are the political movers and shakers? They are not always the mayor or the city council. Are there any local activist organizations likely to oppose your plant? Concerned citizens may already have a convenient vehicle to thwart your project. Who in the community do residents most respect? You will want them on your side. These and other questions can be answered by solid research.

A good example of the benefit of solid homework occurred on a proposed MRF project in the Midwest. The developer assumed he should meet first with the mayor, city council president, council members and other local officials to discuss the

project.

Then the developer's public affairs consulting firm discovered that after meeting with the mayor, the developer should immediately meet with the city clerk - a player far down the list of municipal officials. Further research indicated that the project should next be discussed with the local newspaper editor because the clerk soon would be alerting him to the planned facility.

Key audiences heard about the project first from its sponsor. This successful project announcement strategy enabled the developer to get off on the right foot in his new community by controlling the flow of information about the project.

One effective research tool is a public opinion research poll. Opinion research enables you to determine more accurately key factors about a community, including local attitudes toward a planned project, residents' concerns and credible local opinion leaders. Most important, opinion polling will enable you to test and identify specific messages that will increase public support for the planned facility. Those messages later become the basis for your project communications program.

Thorough research is the foundation upon which a successful community relations program is built.

### **3. Develop A Strategic Plan**

You have millions of dollars on the line - money that could be wasted unless you win local support for your project. Don't try to conduct community relations on the fly by implementing programs piecemeal.

Your best bet is to develop a comprehensive, coordinated plan of integrated strategies to guide your community efforts. You should:

- \* Clarify the current situation by listing all of the factors that will affect your project.
- \* Define your community relations' objectives in clear, concise terms.
- \* Analyze your obstacles, inventory your tools, identify all stakeholders and specify your goals with each.
- \* Develop an integrated plan of strategies that overcome the obstacles and achieve your objectives.
- \* Determine the resources at your disposal, including personnel and budget.
- \* Develop an implementation schedule, including deadlines and assigning responsibilities for each task.

It is important to use trained professionals who are experienced in project siting and permitting to develop and implement your strategic community relations' plan. Just as you would not want a banker to design your facility, you should avoid assigning an engineer with little or no public relations experience responsibility for managing

your community relations program.

Take the time and effort necessary to develop a solid strategic plan. It will become the bible of your community relations program.

#### **4. Budget For It**

Now that you have committed to a strong community relations program, dedicate sufficient finances to its implementation. Time is money, and more than one developer has had to delay project permitting to scramble for the capital necessary to pay for unexpected delays caused by NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard).

In one case involving a proposed landfill project in the Mid-Atlantic region, the developer budgeted \$30,000 for community relations. The extent of his community relations' plan was to produce a video and hire a local consultant to write press releases. Failure to develop a more comprehensive strategic plan early in project development resulted in strong local opposition to the planned facility.

Efforts to overcome the flood of negative publicity and save the project were ultimately successful, but ended up costing the project sponsor more than \$2 million in additional permitting costs due to unanticipated delays.

Playing catch-up is difficult and expensive. Plan ahead by factoring adequate community relations' costs into your project development budget. Risk capital is the toughest to come by, but a comprehensive community relation's plan could well be the key to getting you over the hump and into construction.

#### **5. Be Proactive**

The road to making a project operational is littered with the remains of developers who thought they could slip quietly through the permitting process and secure the necessary approvals before the public became aware of their plans. Opposition is unpleasant, tempting many developers to try to avoid public scrutiny by ignoring local citizens.

We live in a society that is increasingly active in community affairs. Increasingly, state and local regulators not only encourage public participation, they mandate it.

The residents of most communities are not radical, anti-development zealots. Most have genuine concerns about their community and your proposed facility's impact on their lives. It is your responsibility to demonstrate sensitivity to their concerns and a willingness to take actions to address them.

The best defense against NIMBY is a good offense. Face the music. Better yet, help to orchestrate it. Establish your "good neighbor" policy early on and repeat it often. Effectively communicate each of the project's benefits to the public. Encourage the belief among local citizens that this is an opportunity the community cannot afford to lose.

## **6. Package Your Project**

Your project is large and complex to the average observer. Present your facility so that local residents can easily understand it. Prepare communications materials that look professional but not overly slick.

Begin by explaining the need for your facility in the area. People are much more likely to support a project if they believe there is a genuine need for the service it can provide. Avoid focusing on the plant's technology and using confusing statistics. Scientific facts alone will not sway public opinion. Explain how your facility will protect the environment, but do not get bogged down on environmental issues.

A good tool to use with public officials and citizens is a project information packet. This kit can include a question and answer section, artist's rendering, material on the project development team and other information about the project. Above all, continuously emphasize the facility's benefits.

## **7. Handle The Politics**

Former Congressman and Speaker of the House "Tip" O'Neill once said, "All politics is local." That admonition is a good civics lesson for any project sponsor.

When developing your strategic community relations' plan, research and identify those officials who carry the real power in your host community. Determine whose ring should be kissed and then do it. Go out of your way to express your sincere interest in working with these officials to make your planned project a reality.

Show the politicians how your project will benefit them and their constituencies. Then, stay in touch and keep them updated every step of the way. In addition to helping you secure municipal permits, local citizen support for your facility can have a strong influence on state government leaders and permitting officials.

## **8. Identify Supporters**

The best way to develop political allies is to demonstrate that grassroots residents support your proposed facility. Every project brings with it a natural constituency of supporters, including labor unions concerned about jobs, senior citizens on fixed incomes worried about rising tax rates and others. Your challenge is to find them.

After identifying your citizen allies, mobilize them to demonstrate their support, particularly at public hearings. Work with your supporters to channel their enthusiasm. Local, third party citizen supporters are the best friends you could ever want. The success of your community relations program will depend largely on how effective you are in finding, cultivating and mobilizing them.

Four hundred opponents of a proposed waste-to-energy plant in the Northeast were surprised to arrive at a public hearing and find an equal number of project supporters already in the auditorium, sitting in the best seats and wearing prominent lapel buttons loudly proclaiming their support for the facility. Many made statements supporting the project. State permitting officials later commented privately to the developer that he "hit a home run" at the hearing by demonstrating

such a strong constituency of supporters.

## **9. Manage The Media**

The power of the press to influence public opinion is far-reaching. Your goal should be to achieve fair and accurate coverage of the proposed facility. Once again, your major emphasis is the benefits your project will bring to the community.

A project spokesperson should be professionally trained to communicate effectively with the media, local officials and the general public. It is not only what you say, but also how you say it, that will leave a lasting impression on the public.

Any information you give to reporters must be accurate. Sit down with the editors of local media outlets when you are prepared to "go public" with your project. Keep reporters informed of each project milestone that is achieved.

One developer of a landfill in the Southeast reported that he provided confidential information about his project to a news reporter with the understanding that the conversation was "off the record." Not surprisingly, the data was included in a newspaper story the next day. The developer indicated that he was handling the situation by cutting off all future contact with the reporter.

A cardinal rule of media relations is that nothing is off the record. Cutting off future contact with the reporter may feel good, but it is the wrong thing to do. Like it or not, that reporter will continue to write stories about the project. You will want to include your comments in any story that appears to prevent the spread of misinformation.

In a case like this one, it would have been better to point out the mistake to the reporter - and be careful of the information you give him in the future.

Members of the news media have a major impact on how your project will be viewed by local residents, opinion leaders and permitting officials. Every effort should be made to establish and maintain a professional working relationship with local reporters.

## **10. Manage Hearings**

The ultimate success of many projects hinges on the outcome of public hearings. Proper planning and management can help you win public hearings and facilitate your permitting efforts.

If feasible, negotiate the fewest number of hearings possible. Also, try to negotiate ground rules to ensure that your project receives a fair hearing. Concede that opponents should be given equal time to raise their concerns, but ensure that the hearing is fair and orderly. An unstructured hearing plays into the hands of project opponents.

Remember to turn out your local supporters for hearings. Secure commitments from them to speak in support of your facility. This visible display of support for your project helps to level the playing field and will make permitting authorities more

comfortable in supporting your facility.

Also, work the media at public hearings by providing them with the information they need to write their story. Most residents' only impression of the hearing will be what they read in the newspaper the next day.

As Americans become more actively involved in issues that affect their lives, developers of waste facilities will be required to focus more time and effort on building and maintaining good relationships in their host communities. The message is clear: put the same care into building community acceptance as you do in engineering your project.

The local relationships you develop during permitting will pay off during construction and operation and help you to market your capabilities on future projects in other prospective host communities.

In the waste business, everyday events can have surprising outcomes. Anything from a state inspector's report to a national health study can hurt a company's reputation and bottom line.

### **Crisis Management**

How do you know when outside events matter? How do you know if you are faced with a crisis?

Ask yourself:

- \* Are we getting negative or unwanted attention from outsiders such as the news media?
- \* Is this attention getting in the way of usual operations?
- \* Could our reputation or profitability be hurt by what is happening?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, you may be facing a crisis. To respond:

- \* Draft company crisis management policies on media relations;
- \* Train at least two company representatives in media relations;
- \* Develop a list of key telephone numbers, including government officials, media contacts, key customers, suppliers and employees. If there is bad news, they need to hear it from you first.

Perhaps the best strategy is everyday community involvement, before a crisis hits. Join the Kiwanis and the Chamber of Commerce. Donate needed funds to a local school. In a crisis, people give the benefit of the doubt to company management that they know well.

**ARMSTRONG and Associates**  
**Behavioral Public Relations**

David McDermitt, *Waste Age Magazine*, September 1, 1993