

June 2000

**TO: Executive Addressed**  
**FR: James E. Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA Chairman**  
**RE: Contentious Public Meeting Survival Lessons**

Perception assessment of client performance through hundreds of confrontational public meetings reveals that without specific preparation, a pattern of predictable negative circumstances occurs. Here's a sample of the more powerful contrasts that can occur if you're not ready to manage your way through confrontational and contentious meetings.

### Perception About Them

(Opponents/Self-Anointed/Self Appointed)

1. They knew their stuff.
2. They were well rehearsed and emotional.
3. They were in tune with the audience and opposing constituencies.
4. They hammered at our *weakest* points:
  - o No need;
  - o Other alternatives;
  - o Why our back yard;
  - o Why now;
  - o Why disrupt our lives;
  - o It's just marketing;
  - o It will poison our children; and/or
  - o It's greed;
5. Public officials said totally different things publicly than they told us in private.
6. They beat us up with simplistic concepts:
  - o NOPE (Not on Planet Earth)
  - o GASP (Groups Against Systematic Pollution)
  - o PEACE (Protect Environment and Children Everywhere )
  - o BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything)
  - o HOPE (Home Owners Against Polluting the Environment)
  - o CATSUP (Citizens Against the Screw Up of our Planet)
  - o SLICK (Sick of Living in Chemicals)

### Perception About Us

(Aloof, Friendless, Clueless, Strangers)

1. We couldn't counter their emotionalism.
2. We were boring.
3. We said, "Give it to us because we obeyed all the rules and we spent a lot of money on this."
4. We never responded specifically to their issues:
  - o Facts don't seem persuasive.
  - o Some allegations are partially true.
5. Simple direct answers didn't work:
  - o We couldn't connect with the people.
  - o We don't want to give in to "them."
  - o We're not interested in innovative solutions or suggestions.
6. We used negative, defensive language and explosive words; we preached and threatened:
  - o We don't do that . . ."
  - o That's not true . . ."
  - o It's really a kind-of incinerator . . ."
  - o It's not really very toxic . . ."
  - o The community shouldn't be worrying about this . . ."
  - o Don't let a small group of activists with their own agenda stampede you."
  - o You don't want to get the reputation of being an "anti-business"

that Kill)

- community."
- You're just making too much out of this."
- They're exaggerating the dangers for their own reasons."

For more information, see the Lukaszewski Group monograph *Surviving Contentious Meetings: Seven Key Steps*.

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