

Public consent is harder to win in 'activist age'

Public concern about the environment shows no signs of slowing down, making industrial and economic expansion no easy task.

By James Lukaszewski

Recently speaking to a group of industrial CEOs, walking them through some of the current strategies required to move projects forward, I was interrupted by one gentleman who said accusingly, "You consultants all sound alike with this scare talk about how powerful the public is. It's just a consultant's full employment strategy."

Then he surprised me by asking, "Just how long is this environmental fad going to continue?" The audience sat in stunned silence, looking at me.

I asked him how old he was. When he told me, I said, "Well, we're about the same age and I think I'm as environmentally concerned as anyone in our generation. But, our children are far more concerned about environmentalism and environmental issues than we are."

In fact, "My grandchildren are even more concerned about these issues than their parents."

In short, to his dismay, the answer to his question is that public concern about environmental threats is rising, and obtaining public permission in the future for industrial, economic, or other kinds of expansions in communities, neighborhoods, cities, and towns is going to become increasingly difficult.

Just look around, how many times has Ikea, Wal-Mart, or Target--not to mention your local utility, pipeline company, or manufacturing company--succeeded in siting new projects?

Here are the realities:

- More constituents are asking more questions, making decisions take longer.
- Small groups of people, even individuals, can stop big projects and ideas.
- People without credentials have enormous credibility.
- Companies, organizations, and products have to prove their worth everyday.
- Public debate is often focused more on embarrassment, humiliation, blame, and emotionalized silly science, rather than on progress, solid science, or future need.
- Public involvement is necessary, ongoing, and often government mandated.
- Public consent is required, now almost continuously, even after major projects or facilities have been approved.

Extensive public involvement can also kill projects. But the fact is most public officials, those responsible for giving permission, expect businesses and organizations to win and maintain the public's support or neutrality so that they don't have to.

The media can be expected to focus primarily on conflict, controversy, and opposition. The reality is if you are communicating with those affected, directly or indirectly, what the media does is less important.

Complex and scientific information about risk and probability, even openly and clearly communicated to broad audiences, can and often does cause enormous public concern. Personal fear is always a factor.

When I evaluate and strategize about projects like these, I ask powerful questions:

1. Do you have a Plan B as well as a Plan A? (Plan B may be all you will get.)
2. Do you understand just how long the process could take? Do you have the fortitude and focus to stay in the game?
3. Can you afford to play? These projects are enormous time, cash, executive energy, and reputation drains.

You can win without everyone being happy, without all the politicians cheering, with substantial negative media visibility. Winning requires focused, helpful, and confident engagement. You can build a base for almost anything, provided you start with the right frame of reference and understand the powerful incremental nature of the communication required.

Here's how you build a foundation for gaining and maintaining public consent:

1. Focus on what's truly important.
2. Bear down on your positive objectives. Respond consistently and clearly to the negatives.
3. Conscientiously reduce the media's influence. Use direct communication techniques and strategies (such as websites, door-to-door processes, and public meetings and information processes you stage and sponsor).
4. Correct and clarify--continuously--literature, statements, and information provided by critics, commentators, and

antagonistic forces. Correct every news article mistake.

Wage peace from the beginning. Enemies and critics accumulate. They, along with victims, will work against you 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Be prepared to provide that level of energy and commitment in support of your objectives.

Community trust is the issue. To build trust you must:

- Provide advance information.
- Ask for community input.
- Really listen to what's being said and demonstrate what you've heard by changing your plans.
- Stay in touch.
- Speak the language of the community itself and, wherever possible, bring them into the decision-making process.
- Overcome the patterns these events will generate. Every group, organization, and issue has a predictable, forecastable life span or sequence of actions.

There are several patterns:

- Emotional communication replaces reason.
- Activism overtakes scientific investigation.
- Exaggeration overwhelms precision.
- Grassroots manipulation is the new realism.

Answer the questions, anticipate and pre-empt criticisms and competitive points-of-view, and constantly address the core value concerns of the community (health and safety; property values; quality of life issues like freedom from fear, absence of conflict, peace of mind, and pride in community).

If you think I'm talking only about the United States, keep in mind that the patterns discussed here are occurring everyday, in every developed and underdeveloped part of the world. Whether we're talking about aboriginal tribes in South America, First Nations in Canada, or a community of nuclear scientists in Ohio, Central European cities, or Asia. Whatever the language, whatever the culture, and whatever the history, the public permission-getting pattern is virtually identical.

If you ever plan to sponsor or be involved in issues with environmental threats, you'll need to address the issues talked about here . . . or lose. ■

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