

PUBLIC RELATIONS JOURNAL

February 1994 Vol. 50 No. 2

BRIEFINGS

How to win the battle with activists

Corporations are coming under more frequent attacks from environmental BANANAs (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anybody), public officials suffering from NIMTO (Not In My Term of Office), and neighbors who have gone LULU (Locally Undesirable Land Use). Everywhere you look, companies of all sizes are fending off vocal activists who want to make life miserable for them for one reason or another.

To counteract anti-corporate activism, companies need to build coalitions and long-term relationships with their archenemies, crisis experts say. "Cooperation is always cheaper than confrontation," said Laurie Wilson, Ph.D., APR, associate professor at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT. "You have to join together with organizations on the other side. You only get points if you bring in their unnatural allies."

Wilson said companies must develop early-warning systems, mostly in the form of research, to identify potential problems before they blow up. "This stage is where the cry in the wilderness is first heard," Wilson said at a workshop during the PRSA National Conference in November.

There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to coalition-building,

DO'S & DON'TS FOR DEALING WITH ACTIVISTS

DO

Take account of these
"Community trust factors":

1. Provide advance information.
2. Ask for community input.
3. Really listen and respond to community concerns.
4. Demonstrate that you have heard.
5. Stay in touch.
6. Speak their language.
7. Bring them into the decision-making process.

DON'T:

1. Underrate the community's negative emotion.
2. Overrate your preparation.
3. Minimize the perceived danger.
4. Trivialize the risks.
5. Procrastinate.
6. Ignore issues and questions.
7. Disparage your opposition.

Copyright © 1993, The Lukaszewski Group Inc., White Plains, NY. All rights reserved.

according to Wilson. On the plus side, joining forces with other interested parties allows parties to share responsibilities and costs, speak in a collective voice, and earn credibility from activists. It also puts a company in a position where it can take credit but, if necessary, dilute blame.

The disadvantage of coalition-building is that it takes longer to resolve an issue. The process requires compromise, an honest commitment to solutions, not just appearances, and trust rather than control, Wilson said. "You can agree to disagree but not be enemies."

The key to dealing with activist groups is to accept the fact that you "can't convince the unconvinced," added James E. Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA, chairman and president, The Lukaszewski Group Inc., in White Plains, NY. "You must deal with activists because they control the outcome," he said, referring to the need to build bridges with the very people who are attacking an organization. "You start with the people you hate. You will lose if you refuse to put yourself in your neighbor's shoes."—A.S.