

COMMUNITY SUPPORT - PUBLIC RELATIONS

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The topic assigned gives me greater freedom for thought and discussion than any other topic on this program. If the public relations program is not the most important activity of any voluntary or public agency, certainly it is one of the most important. We have all had the experience of hiring technically or professionally qualified individuals who were failures in their assigned duties because of a lack of understanding of public relations. Many of us have also observed the same shortcoming of an entire agency. Any environmental health program is doomed to failure unless good public relations are a constant consideration and adjunct. We must remember that we are primarily dealing with people, not things. We do not actually deal with water supplies, food establishments, dairies, slaughterhouses, etc., but we do deal with the operators and owners of these facilities or establishments.

There have been many erroneous concepts and definitions of public relations. Some feel that public relations is some sort of scheme to get the best of someone and gain an advantage for one's self. They see it as high pressuring methods or the ability to smooth-talk people into something they don't want. Others have confused public relations with publicity, but publicity is only one aspect of public relations. Another misconception of public relations is that they are forms of soft-soaping or buttering-up.

What is the true meaning of "public relations?" The simplest definition is also the broadest, for public relations as applied to government is nothing less than the sum total of all the conditions, attitudes, impressions, and opinions that constitute the relationships between the public and its government. Public relations is a reflection of everything an agency does - - the manner in which a visitor is greeted, the way the telephone is answered, the appearance of the office, behavior within the office, the cleanliness and maintenance of automobiles, the manner in which employees dress, the knowledge and competence of staff members, the efficiency and effectiveness of personnel, the type and quantity of news

releases, the content and appearance of educational material, the quality of the letters staff members write in the line of duty, the ability to talk clearly and interestingly about their work and their agency, their skill in answering criticism, their facility for spotting news in the daily activities of the agency and passing it along to the people responsible for doing something with it, and their general attitude about building a partnership with the public.

The extent to which any organization is permitted to serve the community depends directly on (1) how much people understand and how they feel about the needs it is attempting to meet, (2) the methods used to meet them and, (3) the quality of its performance. A sound public relations program is directed to these three points, to the end that people may be better served. Viewed in this light, a good public relations program is not a "frill" to be indulged in when and if you have spare time. If your agency succeeds in building a sturdy partnership with the public, it has performed a service to the community as well as to itself. Your public relations program enables you to put your skills, your professional knowledge, your facilities at the disposal of people who can use them. It advances the movement you work with and believe in.

While one person must be assigned the key responsibility of ensuring the public relations program, it must be understood that public relations is a job for the entire department. It cannot be effectively handled by one or more public relations specialists or health educators. The public relations program will not be successful unless all employees understand its importance and freely participate.

A recent survey of 158 cities of the American Municipal Association indicated that many municipalities reported they had no public relations programs. If we were to take this statement literally, it might mean that many had no effective government. The statement probably meant that many cities had no organized public relations programs, but this is still a sad commentary on American cities. This A.M.A. survey did indicate that the foremost public relations needs are (1) employee training in public relations techniques, (2) more effective communication of the municipal story, (3) trained staff and, (4) better press relations.

A full program of public relations includes publicity, but it also includes consideration of every contact an organization has with its various publics and the taxpayers. It includes careful examination of the service itself, and whether it is meeting the true needs of the community. It includes careful analysis of public opinion, including public demands and expectations. It takes into account the ways in which the people of the community can and do participate in the service. It is only through such a program that considers the total relationship of an organization with the people of its community, that a solid two-way partnership with the public can be built.

Other aspects of the service which must be examined include the policies pertaining to environmental health as expressed in ordinances, laws, regulations, resolutions and the competence and efficiency of administration. The public cannot be expected to react favorably to environmental health services that are not carried out in an efficient and economical manner. This factor of competence, of course, must be broken down into such components as quality of employees, adequacy of organization, effectiveness of methods, etc. Both of the foregoing factors (policy and competence) need to be supplemented by public knowledge and understanding of environmental health activities. Even the wisest policy and most efficient administration will fail to produce good public relations if the citizens do not know about them. Public reporting and publicity are, therefore, essential elements in the public relations program. Although they are not sufficient in themselves to produce an enlightened public opinion; they are important steps toward that objective.

It is worth reiterating and re-emphasizing that the other "little things" such as quality, personal dress and appearance, and convenience, are important factors in any public relations program. Personal contacts between citizens and public servants are a factor of prime importance in public relations. The importance of physical appearance including the appearance of public buildings, property, and equipment, is also basic.

Finally, procedures may be listed as a factor affecting public relations. I am specifically referring to procedures that directly involve the citizen such as those affecting the place, time, and manner of fee collection, and the application for granting of permits.

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

It is only natural that any agency wants everyone in the community to be its friend, to understand its program, and to use and support its services; but regrettably, public relations and community support is not quite that simple. The goal is not one that can be reached quickly or easily. Before any effort is made, it is wise to know your audience and have your efforts specifically aimed toward that audience. Wise identification of the groups and types of people to whom you need to carry your message and with whom you are going to build a solid two-way relationship built on mutual knowledge and respect is a basic factor in the public relations plan. This may determine what you do in the actual conduct of your public relations program and you will save energy, time, and money as well as focusing your efforts. If architects have priority on the list of groups that are particularly important, you will plan to appropriately contact these architects or work through their association, to prepare material aimed at them and designed for them, rather than to scatter your efforts in the hope of accidentally hitting your target.

Listing groups or types of people to be reached is only the beginning, however. We must learn everything we can about them, about their characteristics as a group and also about their relationship, present and potential, to environmental health services. You will need to know why they should or could be interested in environmental health. The more facts you know about a group you are planning to approach the better. The too prevalent custom of giving the same speech to all groups regardless of their knowledge, interest and background, should be abandoned. Each group should be considered a separate target and material should be appropriately designed for their tastes and needs. In making presentations before citizen groups, much greater use might be made of subordinate personnel. Not only will this supply a wider range of talent, but such opportunities will do much to improve the morale of personnel in the lower echelons.

PUBLIC INFORMATION METHODS

The following, not listed in order of importance, are some methods available: television, films, displays and exhibits, meetings and conferences sponsored by your organization, participation in meetings and conferences sponsored by others, formal contact by both staff and volunteers, letters (both formal and individual), bulletins and house organs of other groups, booklets, pamphlets, folders, leaflets, magazines, newspaper supplements, feature articles, citizen certificates, open houses, annual reports, student government day.

For any successful effort, we must utilize a combination of several of the foregoing. There is seldom a single method that will accomplish the purpose by itself. The best methods may vary by community program as well as time.

Due to the nature of my own experiences, I am going to devote more attention to communication through the media than with the other methods I have listed. A friendly and favorable press is important to all of us. It is a vital and basic factor in creating public interest and good will, and in establishing a climate in which an agency or institution can carry on its work most effectively. Because good publicity can be so rewarding, proper press relations are especially important. Nearly everyone reads some part of a newspaper every day, or listens to radio or television newscasts. The press reaches into every corner of the community, serving a wide and varied public whose interest can be captured and support enlisted by a continuous, consistent well-planned program of publicity. Such a program can help build awareness of an agency's purpose and the needs that it meets; it helps maintain and strengthen public interest and support. It lends prestige not only to the agency but to all who work for it, volunteers and professionals alike; it can help widen the agency's scope by informing those who need its services; and, finally, it can provide a bedrock of public understanding which may come in mighty handy at some future time. If the public knows you and believes that your work is good, it is inclined to be generous with its support as well as with its money.

Getting and staying in the news is not the easiest part of public relations program, but it is well worth the effort for the effect is cumulative. A single "break" in the newspaper will not bring the public to your doors. Remember, too, that one unfavorable story or unhappy event will not ruin an agency's reputation. Public impressions are built over a long period of time. Each news or feature story, each picture or letter to the editor, each incidental reference to your agency or to the field in which you operate, adds a little bit more to what the public knows about you. Gradually, a concept begins to take form and an attitude of acceptance becomes habitual. This concept of the public may not be technically accurate in all details, but don't worry about that. The purpose of a publicity program is to create a good impression of the agency, not to instruct the public in the minute details of our activities. Experts who have publicized such highly technical matters as atomic energy agree that what they have tried to get over is a correct general impression on the public mind -- not to offer an intensive course in nuclear fission. Agencies that have gained public acceptance have done so as the result of years of informing the public what the agency stands for.

Many health department officials have been suspicious of newspapers and afraid to work with them. This usually results in a negative type of publicity program, the newspaper may not gather any news about the agency unless it is bad news, or the newspaper only gets news in response to direct questioning of department personnel. Not too long ago, I had the privilege of attending a meeting of a large national group of environmental health administrators. One of the topics in a question-and-answer session had to do with publicity. It was amazing to note that the entire tenor of this session was to the effect that newspapers should be prevented from obtaining all the information they need and desire. To me, this is a sure-fire way of making certain that you have an antagonistic press. It is true that every article will not be entirely accurate; there will be some misquotes and there may occasionally be some harmful publicity. However, it is still desirable that health department personnel should have a free exchange with the press and everything should be open to the news media.

A few other suggestions:

- 1) All personnel should be encouraged to give appropriate stories to reporters. However, personnel should be so trained as to know the difference between discussing interesting news stories and policy matters. Allowing many personnel the privilege of being involved in the publicity program leads to more interesting articles, more stories, more human interest, and better public relations.**

- 2) Try to build and promote the department instead of an individual. Prestige of all personnel will automatically be enhanced with that of the department.**

- 3) An occasional cup of coffee or lunch with a reporter is more valuable than scores of telephone conversations or press releases.**

- 4) Editors of the various papers should be included on the department's mailing list of key community leaders.**

- 5) Attempt to stress the positive in terms of gains, improvements, and recommendations instead of the negative in terms of conditions and closures. This is admittedly a difficult task as reporters often feel the latter are more newsworthy.**

- 6) Most reporters like to write their own stories and would prefer receiving information direct instead of through a canned news release. They frequently desire to re-write such releases so that they will be in their own styles.**

- 7) Environmental Health personnel would find a calendar of annual announcements useful. There are certain timely, interesting seasonal announcements that can be slightly altered and used year after year.**

- 8) If your community has more than one daily newspaper, it is desirable to attempt to give a fair share of your information to each newspaper. This will mean altering the time of day for key announcements. The newspapers will generally understand and respect you for this policy.**

WHO DOES THE JOB

The public information program is inseparable from any aspect of the environmental health program, and every member of the organization must be a good public relations officer.

Every employee who has any contact with the public must make a beneficial contribution to the total public relations program. To attempt to delegate to any one person or division the task of improving public relations is, therefore, to ignore the nature of public relations and the factors that affect them. The individual who ensuring the entire public relations program should be the administrative head of the agency involved. To see that the agency has a good public relations program is more important for the top administrator than to know every technical detail in environmental health or become intimately involved in the work process.

Many responsibilities can be and should be properly delegated, but not so with responsibility for public relations.