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WATER

Consensus at last

Vox Populi

As communities become more aware of their powers, industry is developing new methods of communicating with them. Enter the CAP.

BY RUSSELL ALLEN

When Rhône-Poulenc Rorer Inc. (RPR) announced plans a few years back to site an infectious-waste incinerator in Upper Providence Township, PA, management knew it would be a difficult issue for the local community. When the company realized just how difficult, it quickly formed a community advisory panel (CAP). CAPs—made up of a cross-section of local residents—allow neighborhoods to voice environmental concerns to, and negotiate solutions with, companies planning to build facilities in their towns.

Today, RPR is building that Upper Providence plant—right where they wanted it, and with the understanding of the community.

“We weren’t required to have the [CAP], but we now believe that, without it, we would not have gotten the permit,” says Beth Leahy, RPR’s director of corporate relations. “We don’t just *have* to tackle community concerns head on, we *want* to. After all, we live in this community too.”

Leahy’s was not always the prevailing industry attitude. Not long ago, most corporations addressed their environmental communications solely to regulators and shareholders and, sometimes, environmental groups. The towns and

neighborhoods in which plants functioned were often left out of the equation.

No longer. Local communications programs have become a basic tool for establishing a reputation as a good corporate citizen. They are part of any good company’s environmental communication program.

The impetus for this change is no mystery. Huge, highly publicized industrial accidents—Bhopal and the running aground of the Exxon Valdez, to name just two—raised public awareness of environmental issues and demands that corporations hold themselves publicly accountable for pollution problems. Plus, a number of state and federal regulations—for instance, the Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) requirements under the Federal Superfund Amendments Reauthorization Act (SARA)—now require companies to bare all about their chemical emissions.

Faced with these realities, “we realized it was imperative to change the way we do business,” says Portia Krebs, manager of the Chemical Manufacturers Association’s (CMA) Responsible Care® program. Responsible Care, recognized around the world as the leading voluntary industry initiative involving community outreach on environ-

mental issues, consists of a set of six voluntary management codes to which companies are urged to adhere. Responsible Care asks companies to work for continuous improvement by implementing the health, safety and environmental protection practices suggested in the codes.

For CMA members, embracing the program is a requirement of membership. "That means," says Krebs, "that our members must follow management codes that include goals for community awareness and emergency response." CMA encourages members to explain to the public the EPA's TRI reports. The trade association has member task forces helping to develop, among other communication techniques, approaches to translating the terminology and data of the TRI.

Responsible Care is not the only voluntary effort being made by industry to communicate with the public (see *Resources*, April 1993, page 6). For instance, one of the 16 principles contained in the International Chamber of Commerce's Business Charter for Sustainable Development calls for "openness to concerns" and asks that companies "foster openness and dialogue with employees and the public and anticipate and respond to their concerns about potential hazards, impacts, products, wastes or services, including those of a transboundary or global significance."

Another example is the CERES principles—the second generation of the Valdez principles, a set of environmental policies, goals and procedures developed in the aftermath of the Valdez oil spill in Alaska. CERES contains guidelines for public reporting.

Companies are signing on to them all, or creating their own. The Sun Company recently became the first Fortune 500 company to endorse a version of the CERES principles. Sun's guidelines, like the CERES principles, emphasize public reporting. "Our efforts to accept these principles began with a proposal to do so from shareholders," says Bud Davis, Sun's director of media and public relations. "We agreed with the spirit of CERES, but were concerned that part of the wording left little room for petroleum companies to do business," he explains.

Sun wrote its own CERES-style guidelines, but only after negotiating with a coalition of environmental groups to fine-tune the wording in certain parts of the document. "We evidenced our credibility in this area by working with an outside group, and we shaped the process by joining in as an early participant," says Davis.

By articulating such general environmental policies to the public and

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employees, companies lay the groundwork for the type of ongoing and often specific communications required for positive local relationships, notes Ray Germann, a program director in public and community relations with ERM in Exton, PA, who helped RPR work out its CAP plan for Upper Providence. "That project resulted in clearly measurable cost benefits," says Germann. "The company would otherwise have had to pay to take its waste off-site and would have lost control of it, with all the risks

inherent in such an arrangement."

An additional benefit of continued information flow to the immediate public about environmental matters, says Germann, is that community relations programs set up a framework for communicating about more acute issues, something that too many companies still do after the fact. "In terms of disseminating information, most corporations still organize their emergency responses after the crisis, rather than preparing them as a contingency of a total community-communications program," he says.

In emergencies or on a day-to-day basis, local residents and groups often get most upset if they feel shut out of the information process. The sense of confronting a closed-door position can create wariness and induce specific, unwarranted concerns.

"As we improve at the plant, we also need to knock down its gates, so to speak, to get information flowing in both directions," says Kate Manning, manager of community relations for CMA member Rhône-Poulenc, Inc. "It's less menacing when you eliminate the unknown." As part of its environmental communications program, which includes open houses, plant tours, science project sponsorship and other community activities, Rhône-Poulenc, Inc., is considering a detailed study of community-relations efforts at a sampling of its 56 plants.

"After site-specific projects," says Germann, "this is the other major area of community communications planning—finding out what works where and bringing a certain amount of uniformity across a company."

CAPs and other steps work best when integrated carefully with local customs and culture. No one method is appropriate for every situation, notes Gerald Davis, public relations manager for ARCO Chemical Company. "One thing that is consistent, however," he says, "is that industry must listen. We at ARCO try very hard to do that."

Most important is dedicated, proactive, ongoing effort, says RPR's Leahy. "Using information only in a defensive reactive way is a lost opportunity. We want the community to evaluate us based on all our continuing environmental efforts." □