

by Richard MacLean

Richard MacLean is director of Richard MacLean & Associates, LLC, Flagstaff, AZ. E-mail: Richard@RMacLeanLLC.com. For electronic files of this and his other writings, visit his Web site at www.RMacLeanLLC.com.



‘It’s about relationships with the community, the broader public, the media, and so on. It’s about building trust, which takes energy and resources.’

GOING NUCLEAR

It’s All About Relationships, Not Public Relations

The Internet has revolutionized information access, marketing, and even politics. Entire industries such as the print media continue to struggle to redefine themselves in light of this tectonic shift. Senior management is acutely aware of how the Internet can be a powerful tool for environmental activists. For nearly two decades, companies have refined their own messages and uploaded them to their Web sites. Indeed, companies have grown quite proficient at using the Internet to describe their environmental and social responsibility programs ... just in time to be blindsided by the next wave in this continuing information revolution.

Social media tools and networks, such as blogs, YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and MySpace, are at the heart of this next wave. For example, Greenpeace used social media to wage a war against Nestlé over its purchase of palm oil for use in a few of its products, “catching the Swiss food giant off guard.”¹ Even though the controversy over clear-cutting forest in Indonesia for palm oil plantations has been around for many years and the company had already taken steps to reduce supplies from this source, Greenpeace skillfully used YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to create a stir (and fundraising opportunities for itself).

Once put on the defensive, press releases can do little to counter a direct attack via these relationship networks. Companies need to identify well in advance possible exposure areas and establish their own network of supporters. It’s all about relationships with the community, the broader public, respected scientists and academicians, the media, and so on. It’s about building trust, which takes energy and resources. While there always seems to be endless resources available to environmental departments in the wake of a crisis, they are tough to come by in advance.

In today’s tough economic climate you may not get the resources to pursue a proactive stance against

such attacks, but this does not mean that you cannot inform management about emerging dynamics and, specifically, what others are doing to properly position themselves. It is a message that cannot be delivered just once; it needs to be part of an ongoing education program for management. One of the best techniques for gathering useful information for this purpose is benchmarking. Management is rarely willing to spend limited resources for hypothetical issues and benefits. They want concrete examples.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is fairly common among environmental groups. Unfortunately, this networking is typically limited in scope, informal, and reciprocal within the mutual industry sector. After all, it is a lot easier to communicate within established, personal networks than to find new, willing contacts. Some business managers will also dismiss sources based on a broader reach because they believe that their industry is somehow unique. This opinion may be valid for very narrow technical areas, but for most programmatic areas, this just is not the case.

Management will often consider input from any source with universally recognized leadership in a particular area (e.g., safety programs at DuPont have been extensively benchmarked). Although



networking efforts such as these can yield useful information, they do not always yield the most current or best information. Sometimes companies that have received the most press and accolades are not necessarily those with either the best performance or innovative practices.

It takes real effort, not informal networking, to benchmark optimally. A classic source to gain insight into just how much effort is required is *Benchmarking: The Primer*, a free download from the Global Environmental Management Initiative.² As described in *The Primer*, a critical step is to systematically identify “best-in-class” companies, “Examine your selected set of benchmarking partners for *breadth*. Do the companies selected represent a *cross section of industry*?” [emphasis added].

Going Nuclear

In March, I attended the 2010 Waste Management Conference in Phoenix, AZ, organized by WM Symposia. The four-day trade show and technical sessions focused on the management of radioactive material. I can think of no area of greater sensitivity to the public than former and current nuclear power and weapons facilities. Walking

around the exhibit hall afforded a rich opportunity to meet industry experts who were willing to share their knowledge of the challenges in developing relationships with stakeholders.

For example, Bill Kennedy, executive vice president at Dade Moeller & Associates, described why efforts at building trust often fail, “Companies will often communicate from a parental view; that is, ‘believe me, I am a scientist/regulator,’ without public input or debate. Sometimes, this is referred to as the ‘decide, announce, and defend’ approach. Depending on the situation, newer and more effective approaches use either the ‘meet, understand, and modify’ or the ‘share, open, and negotiate’ approach, which foster real debate and informed stakeholder consensus.”

Kennedy continues, “There are many venues for building stakeholder consensus and each requires a different approach. Some more effective than others. For example, Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) weigh potential health impacts of identified alternatives against potential benefits (risk/benefit). This is in contrast to medical treatment decisions, which are often cast in terms of

benefit (saving lives) versus potential long-term cancer risks from the use of radiation (benefit/risk). In litigation, best science is often pitted against raw emotion.”

Keith Peecook, decommissioning program manager of NASA's Plum Brook Reactor Facility (PBRF), relayed to me an instance where building relationships within the community proved essential when the chemical element Cesium-137 (Cs-137) was found off-site in 2005. “The PBRF reactor in Sandusky, OH, was scheduled to be decommissioned in 2002. We knew that community understanding and support would be critical and brought in Dr. Susan Santos with Focus Group, a risk and strategic communications consultancy located in Medford, MA.”

Dr. Santos continued the story, “Through a series of interviews we discovered that most of the public had no idea what went on ‘behind the fence’ at NASA. And they were unaware of the existence of a moth-balled nuclear reactor. Stakeholder identification was used to define the needs and structure of the outreach program in 1998, prior to the start of the decommissioning. The results of the interviews were used to create a comprehensive Community Relations Plan, which detailed a mix of communications vehicles including fact sheets, a Web site, a telephone information line, community information sessions, and newsletters among other vehicles.

“The objective was to form a network of well-informed and respected neighbors and local leaders whom the community would trust when information was relayed about the decommissioning. While there was no regulatory requirement to do so, NASA decided to form a Community Workgroup (CWG).” This workgroup was similar to workgroups set up by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as part of hazardous waste cleanup efforts or the American Chemistry Council's Responsible Care Community Advisory Panels. Dr. Santos continued, “The CWG has been invaluable in providing a two-way communication vehicle to raise questions and concerns.”

NASA built a reputation for transparency at PBRF of being open and honest, of sharing all information

quickly, and of being concerned above all with public safety. When NASA released information through all its contact channels about Cs-137 off-site, the public had confidence that NASA was doing the right thing and accepted NASA's word that there was no impact to public health. Importantly, they also believed that NASA would do whatever turned out to be necessary to protect the public.

The Social Media Challenge

While highly proactive approaches—going nuclear, as it were—are becoming more common, most companies still take a passive role when interacting with stakeholders. For example, they prepare sustainability reports and post them on their Web sites. They may enter into partnerships with non-governmental organizations, conduct open houses, and engage in significant community philanthropy. They may aggressively react to specific concerns, but only after a flare-up. Few pull it all together into a cohesive strategy that proactively focuses on the most critical issues, especially if most external stakeholders are, at the moment, unaware or unconcerned. Let sleeping dogs lie might be the operative strategy.

Even using a well-coordinated strategy such as the preceding nuclear example may not be sufficient in the future to meet the challenge of the growing power of social media networks. Companies may have a Facebook account (Nestlé has one), but they have yet to figure out how to deal with the ramifications of these networks and visual media such as YouTube. And companies may delude themselves into believing that they will not be targeted for the practices of their supply chain or be exempt from criticism if they are below some magical threshold.

Now is the time to inform management of this changing Internet landscape. The key is to build “social trust networks” for your company that can immediately come to your aid. Just as NASA's PBRF recognized that well-informed and respected neighbors were their best allies, you should use this core principle of the power of relationships to develop strategies to deal with issues that can be created by, for example, a clever video that goes viral. Traditional public relations cannot meet the challenges ahead. **em**

References

- 1 Steel, E. Nestlé Takes a Beating on Social-Media Sites; *The Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2010; page B5.
- 2 *Benchmarking: The Primer—Benchmarking for Continuous Environmental Improvement*; Global Environmental Management Institute, 1994; available at www.gemi.org.

