

EVEN IN POLITICS, A PR PLAN IS ESSENTIAL, FINDS CITY PIO

Or maybe more so in this volatile field, to keep an organization proactive & on track. Since research shows **most practitioners still give only lip service to real planning**, a city govt's experience with a pr plan should carry special weight.

THE PLANNING PROCESS "I saw the need for a comprehensive public relations program for the city of Chesapeake (Va)," Mark Cox, of city's public information office, told pr. "We used what should be a standard process":

1. **Situation analysis.** Research -- including anecdotal, internal comms audit -- identified problems & resources. "We came up with a lengthy situation analysis that painted a picture of where we stand."
2. **Issue/problem statements** identifying the major issues that need to be focused on. "We then got consensus from our organization's key players."
3. **Goal statements** "that gave us some broad, overall direction that would address the issues we had identified and get consensus on them." Program's 2 overall goals were a) increasing citizen involvement in city activities, b) enhancing the regional image of Chesapeake.
4. **Quantifiable, specific objectives** "that would help us achieve our goal statements."
5. **Implementation strategy** emphasized using in-house cable tv production resources, communication thru the news media, speakers bureau, citizen newsletter, & a limited number of printed & advertising materials.
6. **"Built in an evaluation mechanism** that relies heavily on surveys of our citizens." Program's ability to achieve goals & objectives is evaluated using the surveys, plus regional surveys, news media surveys, content analysis of media coverage & other qualitative techniques. Data gleaned from these evaluation efforts has been used by the city council, city manager & individual dep'ts to evaluate & plan their activities as well.

This proactive, intentional approach **"significantly reduces the reliance on intuition,** column inches, anecdotal information & similar techniques to make public relations management decisions."

PLANNING TIMETABLE Program was created in '90; updated in '91. "That was the latest overhaul. It gets evaluated annually, but we haven't revised it since '91. Probably within the next year we'll do a new situation analysis & start from scratch."

STAYING ON TRACK Cox notes it can be difficult to keep the plan on track in a real-work environment -- "in our case the mayor resigned, there was a bid rigging scandal. These unanticipated events divert your energy from your plan. But your plan will include ways to handle crises. It provides a framework...a dynamic one, remaining adaptable to changes in the environment in which it functions."

LISTENING & THEN RESPONDING, i.e. NEGOTIATING, IS KEY TO NEW PR

And it prevents crises. Ohio EPA contacted BP America in '90 about complaints that people could smell gasoline in their well water. An EPA test found 13 of 150 wells contaminated; 6 above the safe drinking standard. "EPA contacted us because we operate a gasoline pipeline just south of the neighborhood. We did a pressure test of our pipeline & it came out clear; couldn't find any leaks," Tom Koch, mpr, told pr.

BP continued to investigate & discovered the previous pipeline was still underground, abandoned. "Checking public records, we found it had a history of leaks. It was built during World War II by the War Emergency Board, probably with inferior steel." BP subsequently took it over. After further checking, BP concluded the gasoline odor was coming from leaks that occurred during the 40s, 50s & 60s.

BP RESPONDS PROACTIVELY In late '92, BP proposed to EPA it would retest all the wells; put together a work plan "which included communicating with & listening to people in the neighborhood. To us, that was the most important thing." BP's program:

1. **Held a one-day training session on the art of listening** for its Pipelines group.
2. **Went door-to-door** to all the homes (150-200) in the neighborhood in Jan '93. Explained the problem & what BP proposed to do, "giving people an opportunity to talk to us about their concerns."
3. **Started testing** wells in Feb. Found 6 to be contaminated; 1 above the safe water drinking standard.
4. **Set up a neighborhood office** by using one of the houses with contaminated well water. "It continues to be staffed today by 2 engineers from BP. They're known by their first names by most of the homeowners. People can walk in anytime."
5. **Created a newsletter** that's mailed to people in the neighborhood.
6. **Responded to people's biggest concern: property values.** For anyone with a contaminated well (above or below the safe water drinking

"Don't assume you've got the answers. Make sure you use your listening skills. If you don't have them, develop them. Being able to sit down & listen is probably the most important thing we did"...& continue to do.



standard), BP agreed to buy their home (if they wanted to sell it) at the fair market standard and pay moving expenses. "While we offered to purchase homes, we weren't encouraging it. We wanted people to stay & work with us. We've bought 19 out of about 200 in the study area."

7. **Listened again & responded again.** "We began hearing from property owners whose wells weren't contaminated that they also bore the stigma attached to their property." BP responded with a "Home Value Protection Plan" -- available to all in the study area. It:

a) guarantees homeowners will receive 80% of their home's independently appraised fair market value if they sell in '93 or '94; 90% if they sell in '95 or '96; 100% if they sell in '97 or until 5 years after cleanup is completed ("we have no time schedule on that yet").

b) offers home improvement grants -- up to \$2000/yr for a period of 5 years. "The idea is to encourage people to invest in their property. We want the neighborhood to stay stable."

8. **Took remedial steps** by redrilling contaminated wells, making them double cased -- which prevents the washing in of contaminating petroleum products. "All the wells we've drilled have come out clean." (Petroleum products are in the 5'-6' of topsoil, held there by the clay found directly below.)

9. **Didn't seek media attention**, respecting homeowners' wishes to keep this quiet because of concern about property values. "We told neighbors we can't refuse to speak to the media if they come to us. A reporter for the local paper caught wind of this. We've kept her briefed. When we put out a newsletter in the neighborhood, we give her a copy too. She knows what's going on & knows the concerns of the people. Tho that's not as important now because of the Home Value Protection Plan. Now we can talk about it without it being to the detriment of the homeowners."

"IT'S WORKING" BP was also fighting law suits by one group in the neighborhood. At one point the attorney representing this group refused to allow BP to talk to his clients. That has since been resolved -- out of court.

"Neighbors have been living with this a number of years. They're glad to see someone take ownership & do something about it. **For us, the key is being able to listen & hear their concerns.** It has become a community process. We probably wouldn't have come up with the Home Value Protection Plan had we not been hearing their concerns."

While this phase "is working, we have lots more to do. Haven't even started the remediation phase (removing the gas from the topsoil). We haven't determined how we're going to do it. But anything we do is going

Program had **management support** from the beginning. A team was put together -- project engineers involved in the cleanup, public relations, public affairs, legal, environmental people, president of BP Pipelines. "It wasn't a case of us trying to force a decision. It's the consensus among the group that we need to do the right thing."

to be done after we consult with people in the neighborhood & Ohio EPA."

FAX-ON-DEMAND LETS STAFF CONCENTRATE ON OTHER TASKS

Boeing (Seattle) uses a fax-on-demand service not to establish a reputation (see prr 8/9) but to *offset the demands on public relations staff* -- requests from the public, suppliers, analysts, media, etc.

"In some cases, because of insufficient staffing, we were mailing responses to students writing term papers weeks after they had asked for them, and probably weeks after the paper was due. In other cases, callers became frustrated because of the (West Coast) time difference," Bill Curry, dpr, told prr.

Name "7fax7" comes from Boeing's products -- 737, 747, 757, 767 & the new 777 debuting in May, 1995.

Its 7fax7 information bank is available 24 hrs/day, year round. Callers need only a touch-tone phone & fax machine. A **voice-prompt menu** walks callers thru a selection of prepared materials:

- | | |
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| a) news releases, | d) company info including employment data, history, |
| b) order & delivery info -- monthly, quarterly, year-end, | e) corporate quarterly financials, |
| c) airplane [product] info, | f) exec bios. |

Caller chooses materials, enters receiving fax number. Result: "We are giving better service (& that's good pr) with less impact on staff (& that's good business). Win-win."

ITEMS OF IMPORTANCE TO PROFESSIONALS

"AMERICAN AIRLINES' POSITION RE SUING PR FIRM Abernathy & Mitchell (pr 12/6): "They were engaging in defamatory conduct that we found unconscionable -- questioning the safety of our airlines. This is the very essence of our company. We have spent almost 70 years building a reputation as one of the safest airlines in the world. The 96,000 men & women who work for American Airlines are proud of that reputation -- including our flight attendants. When someone questions it, that's stepping over the bounds of propriety," Al Becker, media rels mgr, told prr. Litigation is in abeyance pending arbitration to settle the strike.

"BEWARE THE 'CLASS REUNION' SYNDROME. Never assume you really know your customers, writes John Graham (Quincy, Mass). Too many organizations play the "class reunion" game: when you go back for the 15th or 20th reunion, you **still see everyone as they were when you were seniors.** Don't let time stop after the initial sale that gets you in the door -- after getting acquainted, identifying customers' needs & what makes them tick. Gather customer info continuously. What's happening to them? What changes are taking place? What problems are they facing? What difficulties are they encountering in the marketplace? What are their opportunities? If you don't have current, up-to-the-minute answers to these questions, you can't meet their needs. All you can do is react & put out fires.