How Constituency Relations Programs Work . . .

In three decades of working with organizational and social issues, constituency relations is the most powerful public affairs vehicle I have found.

Constituency relations programs work like this:

1. Key opinion leaders are identified for each important external public, based on desired behaviors sought from them in order to achieve current objectives. Opponents as well as neutrals and supporters can be included. Officeholders and others seen by formal lobbyists are here assigned to "average employee."

2. Contacts are assigned to each opinion leader. Preferably they (a) cover all ranks and types of personnel; (b) get initial training; and (c) become an elite corps or support group to reinforce each other and continue training. Often the contacts will be friends of the opinion leader.

3. On a regular schedule, usually once or twice a year, contacts make extended calls on their targets with the objectives of (a) listening to their views, experiences, and what they hear from their networks; (b) delivering the organization's currently important messages and appeals; (c) getting reaction to potential plans, issues, and policies; and (d) building a mutually trusting and sharing relationship.

4. Specific findings of each visit are entered into a computer database.

5. A small facilitating staff supports contact personnel, keeps the program running, and analyzes and distributes data widely to operating departments and decision-makers. The CEO's cabinet, for instance, can have to-the-minute data available—replacing the anecdotal information on which they too often base decisions.

6. Formal research once a year or so is used to validate the constituency relations database among the entire publics. This and the visits themselves are also used to clean the opinion leader list—which is, of course, in continual flux.

Several typical public affairs programs are then integrated with the visits:

7. The speakers bureau starts seeking audiences that it needs to reach, or that will reinforce constituency relations contacts, rather than taking whatever audiences come along. The Q&A format is emphasized in presentations so that audience reactions, and comments overheard, can be entered into the database when a speaker returns.

8. Sponsored memberships are realigned to ensure that all vital groups are covered, rather than everyone joining Rotary or the Chamber of Commerce. From time to time the member is given topics to toss onto the table for reaction, instead of chatting about sports and then going back to the office. Relevant information from any aspect of a meeting—table talk, speaker comments, specific contacts—is put into the database upon return.

9. Community relations, open houses, tour programs, contributions and many other factors take on extra value by plugging into the database what is learned from the contacts. Indeed, they can be focused on the objectives of constituency relations. Even sales calls, mail, switchboard queries or informal contacts can be entered.

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. . . and Why They Are So Successful

10. Some form of face-to-face program for employees—or team tasking, work groups, or quality circles—ties constituency relations to internal publics.

The breadth of individuals and groups whose opinions, perceptions and behavior go into the database safeguards against skewing—and these are the very folks who influence the rest of your publics. They are, further, the persons who influence public policy.

Through constituency relations, their voices on issues and topics can be continuously compared to politicians' statements, media coverage and other less-and-less trustworthy "indicators" of public sentiment. The gatekeepers are at last out-maneuvered—because constituency relations talks directly to their constituents, too.

What are the advantages of constituency relations?

1. Each year an organization can hold thousands of personal conversations with the opinion leaders in its environment—listening *and* communicating via the same vehicle.

2. In today's thrust to create market-based organizations, this is about as close to one-on-one relationships with markets as you can get—yet constituency relations covers the environment-creating publics as well. By making the needs and values of all constituencies visible on an ongoing basis, it links public affairs and marketing for a closer look at the real bottom line—the dual one that links profit with public policy.

3. In periods of downsizing and/or tight budgets, this low-cost program can replace most other activities—and those are usually difficult to evaluate, whereas constituency relations automatically evaluates itself through the ongoing database.

4. Lobbying and media contacts can be wrapped into constituency relations, where they may have more credibility since they are two-way exchanges conducted without a specific immediate objective.

5. Constituency relations creates a One Clear Voice outreach involving managers, employees, senior executives, and even retirees if desirable. People who have gotten tunnel vision, or are becoming bureaucrats or have lost touch can be revitalized by participating.

6. Playback to internal publics from "contactors" (or liaisons) who share their real-world external experiences brings optimism or realism to the rank and file. This can be a springboard for morale and teamwork, as well as for enlisting them in the public affairs objectives.

7. During a crisis, the system provides a pre-existing network for seeking needed support, seeding the word-of-mouth information system, defusing opposition arguments, and even learning who principal opponents are. Special contacts can be made at such times—by telephone or mail if another personal visit seems too soon. The relationships are established, removing the unrealiability of contacts made in the eye of the storm.

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