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Case 4-4 Nuclear Waste Goes Down the Drain

Every day people all across the country choose to do things that have a certain degree of risk—crossing the street, driving a car, flying in an airplane, bungee jumping, or eating foods they know do not constitute good nutrition.

What happens, though, when someone else controls the risks we face? Do we ask our friend to pull the car over so we can get out? Never fly unless we pilot the plane? What happens if an organization wants to take a risk in a community, such as dumping low-level nuclear waste, even if it may be smaller than the risks we take in everyday life?

More and more, organizations are facing strident opposition to their plans from groups and coalitions opposed to taking on more risk. Grassroots environmental concerns have fostered attitudes such as Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) and Not On Planet Earth (NOPE) to limit any sort of activities viewed as at all risky. Yet, in many cases, organizations need to assume some risk in order to run their business, produce products, adhere to government standards, or make a profit.

Risk management deals with explaining and persuading a risk-averse public to allow the execution of necessary actions that may carry some risk (see Figure 4-7). But risk communication is more than explanation or persuasion. It must be process-oriented to allow interaction between the opposing groups—the public, proponents, experts, and regulatory officials—and allow each to identify the true issues at stake from its perspective. Only then can the average citizen form an intelligent judgment.

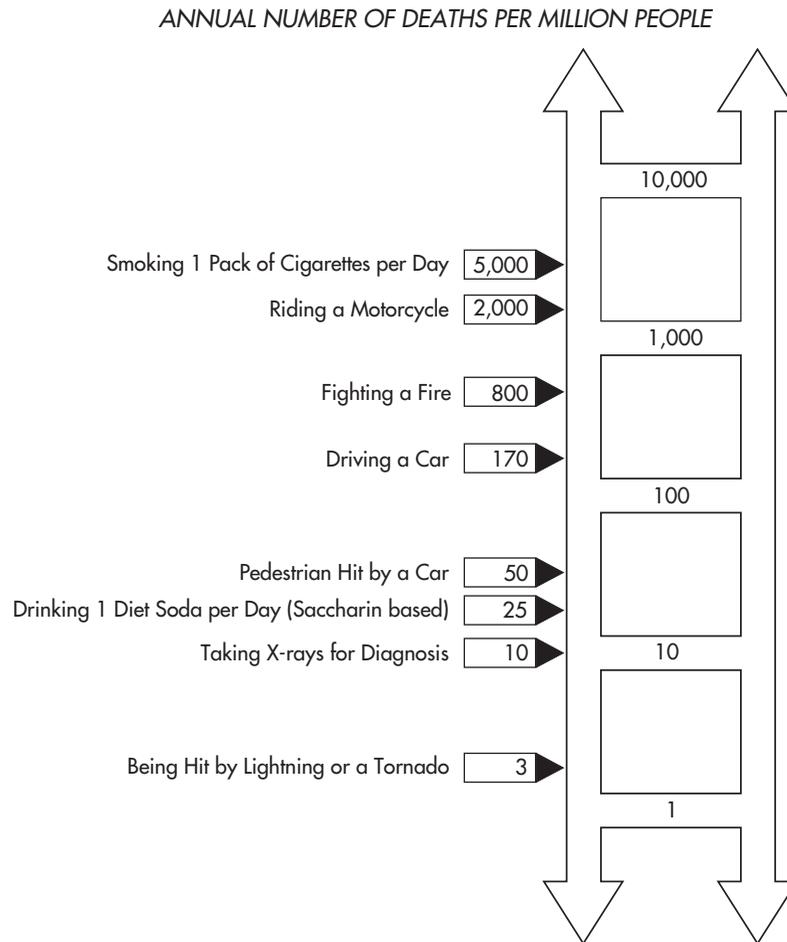
Is Risk Communication a Different Ball Game?

As technology has changed, so have the type and amount of risks we face. Public reaction to risk can be varied, depending on each individual's mind-set and experiences. Each person perceives risk in his or her own personal context and with his or her own established biases for or against that risk.

In 1983, the National Research Council (NRC) completed a study on managing risk, leading to a report entitled *Risk Assessment in the Federal Government: Managing the Process*. Raised in this study was the realization that with risk management comes a new kind of communication, risk communication. The NRC chartered a committee, the Risk Perception and Communication Committee, to research how to communicate risks effectively to the public. The committee found that explaining risks in a logical manner was not effective for convincing a risk-averse public that the risks were nothing to worry about. People evaluate risks contextually, and their *perception* of that risk motivates their behavior.

One Example

For many years, the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, had an ordinance forbidding anyone—except hospitals and radiation treatment clinics—from disposing of low-level radioactive wastes in the city's sewer system. Low-level radioactive waste covers anything that may have been contaminated by radioactive materials, such as equipment, clothing, tools, and so on.



Source: Adapted from Schultz, W., G. McClelland, B. Hurd, and J. Smith (1986), *Improving Accuracy and Reducing Costs of Environmental Benefits Assessment*. Vol. IV. Boulder: University of Colorado, Center for Economic Analysis.

WARNING! USE OF DATA IN THIS FIGURE FOR RISK COMPARISON PURPOSES CAN SEVERELY DAMAGE YOUR CREDIBILITY (SEE TEXT).

FIGURE 4-7 One tactic used by risk communicators has been to make risk comparisons in order to communicate the extent of the risk. But making quantitative risk comparisons with voluntary risk has proved illogical and damaging to the organizations who employ this tactic. Demonstrating it visually is more effective

Source: (Courtesy of the Chemical Manufacturers Association. From Vincent T. Covello, Peter M. Sandman, and Paul Slovic, *Risk Communication, Risk Statistics and Risk Comparisons: A Manual for Plant Managers* [Washington, D.C.: CMA, 1988].)

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In 1991, Sandia National Laboratories (a facility of the Department of Energy, DOE) and Inhalation Toxicology Research Institute (ITRI) petitioned the city to dispose of its waste in the city sewer systems, as the hospitals were already allowed to do. Sandia initially made the proposal because it wanted to dump 50,000 gallons of low-level radioactive water (used to shield nuclear reactor fuel rods) into the sewer system. Radiation experts assured Albuquerque residents that the risk was minimal and their tap water had more natural or “background” radiation in it than the wastewater did.¹

An amendment to change the city’s sewer-use ordinance was put before the city council. The change would have allowed anyone licensed to use radioactive material to dump low-level radioactive waste into the sewers. Though more organizations would be allowed to dump, more stringent limits would be set on how radioactive the waste could be. They would be able to dump waste at only one-tenth the radioactivity standards established by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

After investigating, the city council found that its ordinance or any amendment to an ordinance regarding discharging radioactive wastewater does not fall under its jurisdiction. These regulations are set by the federal government through the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and DOE. Thus Sandia as a federal laboratory could ignore the city ordinance and dump anyway—that is, if its managers thought this was acceptable public relations policy. They did not, however, so the issue went to public debate.

A Vocal Opposition

Citizen opposition was immediate and outspoken. A group named People’s Emergency Response Committee (PERC) began to organize. PERC was formed a year before the

emergence of this issue, when those involved first became aware of Mayor Louis Saavedra’s attempt to change the city’s sewer-use ordinance. It is an ad hoc coalition of citizens’ organizations made up of Hospital and Healthcare Workers Union 1199, Citizens for Alternatives to Radioactive Dumping, the South West Organizing Project, New Mexico Public Interest Research Group, the Albuquerque Center for Peace and Justice, Sierra Club, and the Labor Committee for Peace and Justice.

PERC immediately established its position with four fundamental statements:

- No other industries including Sandia National Laboratories should be allowed to dump radioactive wastes in the sewers.
- The existing Albuquerque sewer ordinance should be strengthened to control and monitor the radioactive wastes being dumped by hospitals and other medical treatment facilities.
- The DOE and private industries must develop long-range plans for dealing with their radioactive waste. These plans should not include dumping in the sewers as an option.
- All plans must include strategies on how these companies and the DOE will reduce the *generation* of radioactive waste in the first place.

Representatives of the group were at the first hearing regarding the change. They were concerned that the issue was more than obtaining permission to dump 50,000 gallons of waste. They saw it as a ploy to allow any business in the future to rid itself of radioactive waste. Concerns were raised about the water’s path. Would it enter the Rio Grande and then affect towns downstream from Albuquerque? This was not a risk that the citizens of Albuquerque and the surrounding towns were prepared to take, PERC felt.

¹Background radiation is naturally occurring radiation that accounts for more than half of the radiation we are exposed to. It is generated from cosmic rays, naturally occurring elements such as uranium, and radioactive chemicals in the body.

PERC's Tactics

One communication tactic that PERC utilized was to publish a newsletter entitled Radioactive Pipeline to establish its position. Its focus was on the risks that residents perceived: that this could contaminate Albuquerque and that there was no telling if Sandia and the others could be trusted. This newsletter helped PERC get its message out to make people aware of the situation. The newsletters and flyers PERC distributed urged the citizens of Albuquerque and surrounding areas to take action and voice their concerns at community and city council meetings. Postcard campaigns were mounted by distributing preprinted cards so that citizens could easily send them to local city councilors expressing opposition to this ordinance. A petition drive was started, gathering more than 7,000 signatures.

Obstacles for Sandia

Media coverage was not helpful for Sandia, either. While officials were explaining how safe the water was in one article, other articles in the newspaper reported some of Sandia's sewer violations and mismanagement of radioactive materials by DOE.

City council meetings were packed with citizens who came to voice their outrage. Sandia arranged for two radiation experts to speak in an attempt to reassure people of their physical safety, but this expertise did not address the underlying issues that made up a major part of this controversy.

- Many Americans have a **lack of trust** for the federal government and those organizations that are a part of it. When, or if, stories concerning federal mismanagement and secret nuclear tests are uncovered, the public will remember them later.
- The effects of radioactive wastes are not completely understood. Some effects will not be apparent for a very

long time, and this **uncertainty** is difficult for anyone to deal with.

- Many people already have **biases** against anything nuclear, especially if it is near where they live.
- Albuquerque residents were concerned with what this initial dumping would mean for the **future**. They were asking themselves: What else would be dumped, and how often would it happen?

The Sandia Side of It

Sandia's public affairs department did make an attempt to educate the public about this risk to try and allay public fears about radiation and radioactive materials. Some of their activities included:

- Organizing some of the public meetings to create the opportunity for citizens to voice their concerns and get questions answered.
- Reaching out to public officials and leaders who showed opposition to the proposal to give them the facts of the issue.
- Making public affairs people available for any and all questions that the public had about the issue.
- Arranging for television interviews with radiation experts to disseminate to the public the facts of radiation.

Can There Ever Be Agreement?

On November 5, 1991, the Albuquerque City Council voted against the proposal to change the city ordinance. The Council then formed a study committee to review important questions about radioactive dumping and offer recommendations in six months. Two years and two research studies later, the city council finally consented to the disposal of the wastewater in the sewer system.

For Sandia National Laboratories, the task of disposing of its waste became an ordeal. A simple task of applying for a permit had become an extended three-year controversy.

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For all affected organizations, the question remains: What will we do with our low-level radioactive waste? What is often overlooked is the benefits that nuclear science offers. Do we abolish nuclear science altogether? NIMBYists demand that disposal not be done where they live. Where else, then? Will there ever be an acceptable alternative? For public relations practitioners, the challenge of communicated risk will only become greater as technology advances.

Yucca Mountain—An Unresolved Risk Management Problem

While Sandia National Laboratories was eventually successful in obtaining permission to dispose of its wastewater in the city sewer system, another Department of Energy (DOE) proposal for the disposal of radioactive materials continues to remain unresolved. The Yucca Mountain case is further complicated by issues of alleged environmental racism and the right to protect culturally sacred sites.

In 1982, Congress passed the Nuclear Waste Policy Act that set an objective framework for government officials to study and evaluate multiple potential repository sites for nuclear waste in the United States. The DOE faces the task of finding a geologic repository to permanently store 77,000 metric tons of high-level radioactive waste that is temporarily being stored at various

locations around the country. About 90 percent of this waste is from commercial nuclear power plants; the remainder is from government defense programs.

The Nuclear Waste Policy Act Amendment of 1987—nicknamed “Screw Nevada Act” by residents there—(1) eliminated all but one of the potential repository sites, Yucca Mountain in Nevada, and (2) directed the DOE to study only that location for site suitability. The Amendment stressed that if, at any time, the Yucca Mountain site is found unsuitable, studies of the site will be stopped immediately. If the studies are discontinued, the site will be restored and the DOE will seek new direction from Congress.

Yucca Mountain is located 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas and sits on the western edge of the DOE’s former nuclear-weapons test site. The proposed repository would sit 1,000 feet below the top of the mountain and 1,000 feet above the ground water.

In 1992, Congress passed the Energy Policy Act, which required the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to develop site-specific radiation protection standards for Yucca Mountain to protect public health and the environment from harmful exposure to the radioactive waste that would be stored there. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is responsible for implementing the standards set by the EPA. Ultimately, the NRC would be responsible for establishing the process for deciding whether Yucca Mountain meets the EPA’s standards.

CAN KIDS IMPACT YUCCA’S OUTCOME?

Billed as an educational program only, the DOE has a kid-friendly area as part of its Yucca Mountain Web site. It has taken a mascot—“Yucca Mountain Johnny”—into the Nevada schools as an educational tool. DOE spokesman Craig Stevens says, “Yucca Johnny teaches hydrology, geology,

and earth science.” Opponents compare Yucca Johnny with another, now maligned, symbol. Says Shelly Berkeley, a U.S. Representative from Nevada, “Yucca Mountain Johnny is the Department of Energy’s Joe Camel. And the product he’s peddling is just as toxic.”

From the beginning, the State of Nevada has firmly opposed the plan and is prepared to file lawsuits through all steps of the process if Yucca Mountain is recommended as the permanent repository site.

The state is supported in its opposition by more than 200 environmental groups.

Primary concerns with the plan to make Yucca Mountain the permanent resting grounds for the country's nuclear waste are:

PR MESSAGES SET RISK PERCEPTIONS, AND RISK IS EVERYWHERE

All communications have become risk communications. Therefore, the rules for dealing with hazardous waste and cancer fears should be applied to every communication—to employees, shareholders, stakeholders, and customers, and surely to regulators, government entities, and the body politic.

Why? Because today publics are interested in two things: What can you do *for* me? And what, if I'm not careful, might you do *to* me? That second query—people's natural skepticism raised to new levels by today's troubled economy and quality-of-life—adds a risk perspective to every message or appeal.

INFLUENCING PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION OF RISK

Risk communication is proactive. Its goal is to improve knowledge and change perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the target public, write Leandro Batista and Dulcie Straughan, of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.¹ They note, however, that changing risk perception—a necessary step for behavior change—is complicated. It can be:

1. *Objective*: product of research, statistics, experimental studies, surveys, probabilistic risk analysis, or
2. *Subjective*: how those without expert or inside knowledge interpret the research

or the situation—which is based on their values and particular levels of experience and knowledge.

Thus, experts and lay people build different mental models that lead them to interpret risk activities differently. One does it objectively, the other subjectively.

FORMAT OF THE MESSAGE

The format of the risk message forms the risk perception. For example, radon and asbestos have a 25-fold difference in *actual* risk to the population, but generate only a slight difference in *perceived* threat. The inaccuracy of people's perceptions of the relative risks of radon and asbestos can be explained by the similarity of the format of messages conveying the risks involved. Regardless of the actual content of the message, the idea that is usually conveyed is that "this is a technical area that you probably won't understand, but there is a *danger here*." In other words, people will have similar responses to messages that are expressed in similar formats, even though the information may be different. Public relations teams can apply their knowledge of this aspect of human nature to formulate effective messages in a systematic way.

1. Each risk has its own identity (or risk perception), which is a specific combination of subjective risk factors (see box),

(continued)

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(continued)

or, as Neil Weinstein and Peter Sandman call them. “Outrage Factors.”²

2. Some combination of these outrage factors leads people to be more upset about hazard X than hazard Y.
3. Not all factors are relevant for all risks and there is no trade-off among factors—scoring high on one factor will not compensate for a low score on another (the noncompensatory model).

Factors are either on or off in the overall perception of that risk.

4. Therefore, it’s important to understand the underlying dimensions that affect the perception of a particular risk—how the outrage factors combine to form a risk perception.
5. Messages should not be formulated until these underlying dimensions are understood.

SUBJECTIVE RISK FACTORS

Less Risky

voluntary
familiar
controllable
controlled by self
fair
not memorable
not dreaded
chronic
diffused in time and space
natural

More Risky

involuntary
unfamiliar
uncontrollable
controlled by others
unfair
memorable
dreaded
acute
focused in time and space
artificial

A final concept to keep in mind is the one that governs the decision-making process: With health or environmental risks, people will modify their behavior if a highly threatening situation exists (or is perceived to exist). Thus a minimum standard, or threshold, is set for risk acceptability. If a risk is greater than the threshold, action occurs; otherwise the status quo is preferred. In all probability, this concept is as true for risks of being overcharged, getting fired, or losing on investments as it is for nuclear discharges.

Peter Sandman’s formula for identifying risk has become widely used by public relations practitioners: **HAZARD + OUTRAGE = RISK PERCEPTION.**³

¹“Dimensions Influencing Risk Perception: The Case of Lung Diseases.” Unpublished paper, n.d.

²Neil D. Weinstein and Peter M. Sandman, “Predicting Homeowner Mitigation Responses to Radon Test Data,” *Journal of Social Issues* 48, 1992.

³Peter Sandman, *Responding to Community Outrage: Strategies for Effective Risk Communication*, Fairfax, VA: American Industrial Hygiene Association, 1993.

(1) The threat of earthquakes in the proposed area which could cause leakage. Since 1976, more than 600 earthquakes of 2.5 or more on the Richter scale have occurred within a 50-mile radius of Yucca Mountain. In 1992, a 5.6 earthquake occurred on a previously unknown fault at Yucca Mountain. (2) There is evidence, uncovered by the Los Alamos Department of Energy Project in

1998, that Yucca Mountain would not comply with guidelines regarding ground water flow. Data regarding rainwater infiltration of Yucca Mountain would have called for the immediate disqualification under set guidelines. However, Yucca Mountain was not disqualified. When the nuclear industry found that two of the DOE requirements were going to be violated,

they lobbied Congress to change the suitability guidelines.

In November 1998, the opposition held a news conference. Many political representatives and members of consumer organizations and environmental groups introduced a petition from more than 200 groups opposed to the plan. They urged the DOE to “follow the law, disqualify the site because it could not meet the environmental guidelines under the current law.” Despite the opposition, the evaluation of Yucca Mountain continues. In August 1999, the EPA released draft radiation protection standards for Yucca Mountain. It gave a preliminary approval of Yucca Mountain as a safe disposal site. After issuing its report, the EPA accepted written comments and held public hearings around the country “to ensure public involvement in the decision-making process.”

In December 1999, a policy revision proposal for Yucca Mountain was released by the Federal government. The proposal eliminated safeguards regarding water flow on the mountain. Nevada Senator Henry Reid said the change contradicted Energy Secretary Bill Richardson’s original goal that science, not politics, would drive the decisions regarding the disposal of nuclear waste.

In April 2006, the DOE sent proposed Yucca Mountain legislation to Congress that would “fix Yucca” once and for all. The DOE announced in an April 4, 2006, news release that the new legislation included a comprehensive set of provisions that “will facilitate licensing and construction of the geologic repository and will lead to the safe, permanent disposal of spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste deep within the mountain.” It also stated that it would eliminate the current 70,000 metric ton cap on disposal capacity and streamline NRC licensing process.

However, the legislation was halted despite, as the *Las Vegas Sun* reported, a “near-perfect alignment of powerful interests. The

Bush administration is the most pro-nuclear administration in decades. Republicans control both houses of Congress and the nuclear industry is pushing hard to get the project moving again.”

Activists have continued to control this issue, although the industry has been working hard. The *Sun* reported that Charles Pray, co-chairman of the U.S. Transport Council’s Yucca Mountain Task Force, increased his travel budget by \$10,000 in 2006 to rally nuclear power generating states to the cause.

Environmental Racism Is Involved

Opposition also comes from Native American rights groups and, more specifically, the Western Shoshone Nation, because Yucca Mountain is a place of spiritual significance to the Shoshone and Paiute peoples. The Western Shoshone Nation contends that the government has no right to use the land since it was guaranteed to them by an 1863 treaty (18 Statutes at Large 689). Corbin Harney, a Western Shoshone spiritual leader, says “Even the mere study of the site is a violation of the treaty. The Shoshone people want the DOE off their land and their mountain restored to them.”

Based on the history of the interaction of the United States government with Indian tribes, mistrust of the government is deeply instilled in most Native Americans. In their view, another treaty violation and further dismissal of native participation in the process simply validates and exacerbates this mistrust. Many Native American and environmental groups believe that Native American lands are specifically targeted for nuclear waste disposal by the federal government and that these actions can be defined as environmental racism. According to Grace Thorpe of the National Environmental Coalition of Native Americans, the

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following factors make native lands an easy selection for governmental agencies:

- The lands are some of the most isolated in North America.
- The lands and the populations are extremely impoverished.
- The tribes are politically vulnerable.
- Their tribal sovereignty can be used to bypass state environmental laws.

A review of the government's Yucca Mountain Project Web site (www.ymp.gov) indicates that the spiritual concerns and land rights issues of the Western Shoshone Nation are given little, if any, consideration. Under a section entitled "Preservation through Conservation," the site states "the U.S. Department of Energy works to protect important cultural resources at the site . . . through the Yucca Mountain Project's Cultural Resources Program. As part of the Cultural Resources Program, delegates from the Project have met with tribal leaders . . . to gather cultural data for the Program." Although this Program professes to endeavor to protect the "archaeological, botanical, and cultural resources," there is no mention of the spiritual nature of the land or acknowledgement

of the 1863 treaty and, therefore, the alleged illegality of the presence of the Project in the Yucca Mountain area. In fact, the Web site states "Nearly all of the land surrounding Yucca Mountain is federally owned."

Although the Yucca Mountain repository was originally scheduled to open by 1998, numerous technical and political delays have advanced that date. Spencer Abraham, Secretary of Energy, was expected to decide in 2001 whether to recommend to President Bush that Yucca Mountain be established as a nuclear waste repository site, but that decision was further postponed by the September 11 terrorist attacks. The attacks put the safety of transporting nuclear waste from one location to another under further scrutiny. However, in January 2002, Secretary Abraham announced that he would recommend to the president that Yucca Mountain be used as a nuclear waste storage site. The president will then decide whether to recommend the site to Congress for approval. If approved, the DOE must apply for licensing from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The license would then permit the DOE to construct the facility and begin waste disposal in 2010. ■

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If you were a public relations practitioner working at a local hospital that was dumping low-level radioactive waste into the sewers, what would you have counseled management to do during the Sandia attempt to gain authorization to dump its waste? Why would you recommend that?
2. Would it have been possible to convince the citizens of Albuquerque to allow the dumping of radioactive waste in the sewers? Why do you believe this? What tactics could Sandia have used to allay the fears of the public?
3. Why was PERC successful in gathering so much public support? What did it do differently than Sandia?
4. If you were the EPA's public relations director, what would you do to reach the opposition and communicate about the risks involved at Yucca Mountain? Do you think it's possible to reach a win-win solution? If so, how? Or must the government strong-arm its plan into place? If it pushes through its plan, what do you think will be the consequences?

Case 4-5 Grassroots Efforts Save a Historic Piece of Land

In the summer of 1995, a for-sale sign was placed on a small parcel of open but developable land in the heart of historic downtown Exeter, New Hampshire. Almost immediately, a small group of concerned citizens began a grassroots effort to purchase the land and keep it as open space for everyone to enjoy. It was on this land that the original Town House of Exeter stood. And it was there, on January 5, 1776, that New Hampshire declared its independence from Great Britain—the first of the colonies to do so.

A total of \$150,000 was needed to purchase this last parcel of open space in historic downtown Exeter. The grassroots effort had three phases:

1. Gathering over 50 signatures on a citizens' petition to place a warrant article before town meeting for \$70,000 toward the land's purchase price.
2. Gaining a yes vote for the article at town meeting. This was a real challenge because the taxpayers union had won two-thirds support for changes in town government that it felt would restrain expenditures.
3. Raising, in three months, matching funds from private donations. This effort was a public-private partnership.

Public Relations Tactics

This grassroots effort successfully used the following tactics:

- **The information campaign began early to give those most likely to be interested a heads-up without alerting the opposition.** Soon after the for-sale sign appeared, the historic Perry-Dudley

House, located next to the open space, participated in a townwide open house tour. This provided an opportunity to talk with visitors about the importance of the adjoining open space. A flier handed out to over 250 visitors outlined the issue and suggested action steps, such as calling their selectman to express support for saving the open space.

- **A broad spectrum of well-respected opinion leaders in the community were chosen to be members of the organizing committee.** Their connections and credibility helped to support the cause.
- **The committee concentrated on those most likely to offer support**—especially helpful when there are limited resources. They did not waste time trying to convert others. To gain support for the upcoming vote at town meeting, a mailing was sent to organizations most likely to be supportive: Exeter Historical Society, Conservation Commission, an area land trust, a local museum, and friends of the organizing committee—including a local walking club (of which one of the steering committee was a member) and a senior citizens community known to have strong environmentally aware residents.

Brief talks were given to local organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary. Personal visits were made to the chief of police and to the fire department—both situated opposite the open space.

- **The organizing committee was open and upfront with likely objections. This weakened the force of the opposition.** Through one-on-one research, the committee anticipated opposition from the

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newly formed taxpayers association, especially its concern that creating a park on the open space would remove the land from the tax rolls. The tax implications were explained in a flier sent to selected town residents and made available at the town meeting where the issue was discussed.

The leader of the taxpayers association opposed taking the land off the tax roll. On another project, however, he expressed support for the concept of the public-private partnership. Park proponents used the communication strategy of asking that his group remain at least neutral in discussion of the warrant article, since opposition was discourteous to fellow citizens willing to make the effort to raise private matching funds for this public-private partnership.

This soft tactic worked. The leaflet produced by the taxpayers association advised its members to oppose almost every warrant article up for vote at the town meeting, but omitted the park issue—even though it required the largest amount of money.

- **Despite negative predictions, the committee did not give up**—hoping that events over which they had no control might tilt the balance in their favor. Organizers had hoped for a small turnout with their supporters carrying the day. But due to special items on the agenda, the meeting was larger than anticipated. Many of the supporters for the open space were in their 60s, 70s, and 80s. Organizers had relied on the advice from town officials that the meeting would probably be a short one, over by lunch.

However, the contentiousness of the taxpayers association prolonged the discussion of the early items on the agenda, which made a lunch break necessary. Would the supporters for open space return after lunch? They did. Some of the taxpayers association supporters melted away because the two items on

which they felt most strongly (and lost) were dealt with early in the agenda. The order of the agenda (which unexpectedly was changed) was extremely helpful to the open space cause. Without this change, the taxpayers association would have stayed to the bitter end.

All the articles adding to the town budget passed. The open space article was the last money article on the agenda. It came up at about 4 P.M. Shortly before the opening speech, the organizers decided to amend the article. This was a risk but it served them well in presenting a case for a downward cap on the amount of money requested. Rather than asking for \$70,000, it was amended to ask for half the negotiated purchase price, not to exceed \$70,000.

As expected, selectmen and the speakers from the floor raised the negative aspects of taking property off the tax roll. The committee's three speakers were brief and avoided going into the kind of detail, especially financial, that usually confuses and leads to disaster in town meeting situations. Feeling that the meeting was ready to vote, the "cleanup" speaker decided not to speak, knowing well that many good causes have talked themselves to death. The initial voice vote was indecisive. A hand vote showed the motion carried by a safe majority of 106 to 78. Given the inauspicious environment of the voters and the opposition of the selectmen, the committee was pleasantly surprised.

- **The committee avoided the media because organizers were uncertain of the media's stand on the open space issue.** During the period of town elections, an initial visit was paid to the editor of the local paper. His support seemed uncertain, especially since he gave editorial support to the successful bid for office by the leader of the taxpayers association. No news releases or media interviews were given until

after town meeting. This avoided giving the opposition a target.

During the fund-raising period, the committee also worked “under the media radar” until one-third of the money was raised. Then, members of the media were given an informational kit and two members of the committee were designated to act as spokespersons for the fund-raising committee.

- **Fund-raising audiences were carefully targeted.** Forty potential donors able to give \$5,000 or more were targeted for personal calls by members of the committee who knew them. Letters were sent to 2,100 taxpayers with property valued over \$100,000. Others were invited to participate through a sign posted on the open space and an advertisement in the local newspaper. Gifts from more than 400 individual donors, businesses, and foundations raised more

than \$163,000—this did not include the \$70,000 from the town of Exeter.

Money remaining after the sale of the land was used for beautification of the park and the establishment of a maintenance fund.

- **Fund-raising materials were carefully matched with the values of the community.** They were simple, no pictures, one-color ink on white or colored paper, no gloss, and designed to use one first-class postage stamp.

The half-acre public park was purchased, completed, and dedicated 18 months after the plan to create the park began. It is simply landscaped with low-maintenance perennial flowers, trees, and bushes that bear spring flowers and offer shade in the summer and rich color in the fall. Brick walkways, benches, and a picnic table make it an inviting green space for people to enjoy (see Figure 4-8). ■

FIGURE 4-8 Fully landscaped, the park offers a quiet respite for local citizens



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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider the efficacy of a “stealth” campaign. What conditions must be present for a stealth campaign to be the best option?
2. Was the inclusion of “opinion leaders” on the steering committee beneficial? Why? How?
3. Evaluate the tactic of not attempting to convert those opposed to the park. Is this a risky move? Why? What can be done to reduce any risk this strategy carries?
4. Evaluate the role “small-town America” played in this campaign. Would these same tactics succeed in New York? Los Angeles? Your hometown? Why?
5. What could proponents have done if the opposition and media took a vocal, opposing stance to the park?

Case 4-6 One Company's Battle Resurrected in a Hollywood Movie: What Is the Best Defense?

Having your company name featured—or even mentioned—in a Hollywood movie starring top-name actors is a public relations practitioner's dream, if the focus is positive. But what happens when your company is portrayed negatively?

W. R. Grace faced this challenge when *A Civil Action*, a movie starring John Travolta and Robert Duval, opened on Christmas Day 1998. You may remember the case. It was the subject of a book also titled *A Civil Action* published in 1995 based on a lawsuit involving W. R. Grace. In the suit, Grace was accused of contaminating drinking water in the Boston suburb of Woburn. The case gained national attention after the book became a bestseller. Unfortunately for W. R. Grace, that attention was resurrected with the release of the film three years later. How W. R. Grace handled the situation is the focus of this case.

A Company with Deep Roots

W. R. Grace is a \$1.6 billion global supplier of specialty chemical, construction, and container products. The company was founded in 1854 in Peru by William Russell Grace, and relocated in 1865 to New York City. In 1880, Grace was elected mayor of New York City for two terms, and in 1885, he accepted the Statue of Liberty from the people of France.

Over the years, the company expanded, and the Grace name became well known around the globe. In 1914, the Grace National Bank was established, later to become Marine Midland Bank. That same

year, Grace sent the first commercial vessel through the Panama Canal. Later that decade, Grace Line passenger ships were drafted into war service to ferry troops.

The Stage Is Set

From 1960 to 1988, Grace operated a machine manufacturing plant in Woburn. In the early 1980s, a leukemia cluster was discovered in the town. The families of those who died of the disease filed a lawsuit accusing W. R. Grace and a second firm, Beatrice Foods, of polluting the town's water supply with industrial solvents. They believed the chemicals contaminated their drinking water and caused the deaths of many innocent people.

W. R. Grace admitted to dumping some chemicals, including trichloroethylene (TCE), in an area of Woburn but adamantly denied that the chemicals entered the families' water systems. The legal case created a controversy in the community and heartache for the families involved for many years. In the end, the families received an \$8 million settlement, although W. R. Grace claimed no responsibility for the deaths. The companies are today engaged in a 50-year, \$70 million clean up.

A Valuable—But Costly—Lesson

Grace received much criticism from professionals for its public relations strategy during the Woburn case. It strongly

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asserted its innocence throughout the trial and refused to talk about the case publicly. It chose instead to focus efforts on cleaning up the polluted sites and building relationships with the community. Unfortunately, the company's efforts didn't include some key publics. "We did a bad job of communicating with employees, and paid a heavy price for it," explained Mark Stoler, former director of environmental safety and health at W. R. Grace. "We also made mistakes in not addressing the concerns of community and government agencies."

According to Stoler, Grace was determined to use the lessons learned from the Woburn trial to build relationships with employees and government agencies. The company set up social responsibility programs with local schools and provided training and equipment to help the fire department better respond to hazardous materials handling. In the years following the Woburn case, the Environmental Protection Agency praised W. R. Grace's efforts as setting "a new standard for accelerating the pace of Superfund cleanup."

The Case That Wouldn't Die

But the case was not closed in the eyes of the media. In 1998, 12 years after the Woburn trial ended, Disney announced the upcoming release of *A Civil Action*. The film would be based on a book of the same name about the Woburn trial. The book, written by a previously unknown author, Jonathan Harr, became a bestseller.

When W. R. Grace executives found out about the planned movie, they tried to contact Disney producers to give them their side of the story—to point out what they perceived as untruths in the book, and to promote their progress in making amends with the Woburn community. Grace representatives said they received no response from Disney representatives.

A Media Campaign Is Born

Grace public relations executives felt they had no choice but to launch an offensive against the movie, especially in light of their previous mistakes. "We didn't talk for 10 years," explained Stoler. "Under these circumstances, we felt we had to stand up and say something."

Grace employed several tactics to prevent or counteract potential negative publicity the movie might generate:

- CEO Paul Norris sent a letter to the press giving his opinion of the movie—but he did this before he even saw the movie.
- The company developed a Web site titled "Beyond A Civil Action: Woburn Issues and Answers."
- Press kits were distributed at the movie's opening in Los Angeles and New York.
- Grace representatives appeared on talk shows and in newsrooms to tell the public about the company's efforts to clean up the environment.
- A glossy, 30-page press kit was mailed to newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV stations around the country.

Grace attempted to "get ahead" of the issue and provide the media with information on its activities since the case was settled, hoping to generate attention on the positives rather than the negatives. Unfortunately, it neglected an important public relations tenant: *Understand the opposition's strategy before making a move.*

Subsidiaries of the other company in the suit, Beatrice Foods (which disbanded after the trial), chose to sit back and wait it out. Interestingly, Beatrice Foods was barely mentioned in the media coverage. Boston Herald reporter Dan Kennedy, who covered the trial for years, said Grace overreacted to the film. "They're really almost an afterthought in the film," he said in a *Boston Globe* article following its release.

A More Effective Approach

Perhaps Grace would have been well served to more thoroughly determine exactly what it was up against. The company focused little attention on two of its key publics: Woburn residents and its own employees. Through pre- and post-focus groups, could the company have assessed its publics' opinions on the film and developed a more targeted path of action? Its hands-off approach motivated key players to retry the case in the media, who, thanks to the information provided in Grace's press kits, were more than willing to listen.

In a similar case, Dow Corning was deep in the silicone breast implant controversy (see Case 10-4) when the company learned of a made-for-television movie about it. After determining the film contained inaccuracies, they decided to take a stand. Dow communicated with all of its publics, and focused particular attention on the hometown community. It organized a town meeting at the local high school where the

company's CEO, president, and bankruptcy counsel commented on the situation, and then opened the floor to questions. The executives stayed until every question was answered.

Another Chapter

Just six months after the release of the movie, W. R. Grace found itself involved in yet another confrontation with citizens in one of its operating communities. Residents in a Cambridge, Massachusetts, neighborhood felt the company's measures to contain the release of asbestos during the construction of a hotel, two office buildings, and a retail space were inadequate. For years they had been trying to persuade W. R. Grace to investigate and clean up the contamination and abandon its plan to develop the area. "The problem is," said City Councilor Kathleen Born at a meeting on the issue, "W. R. Grace does not have a trust relationship with this community." ■

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Environmental issues like those addressed in the Woburn and Cambridge incidents have become hot topics. What are some of the behaviors driving the key players on both sides of these situations?
2. Your public relations firm was hired by W. R. Grace to handle the company's strategy around the release of *A Civil Action*. What are some of the situational factors that would have been important to evaluate before developing a plan?
3. Keeping those issues in mind, what would be the main objectives of your plan, and what tactics would you use to achieve them?
4. List the positive steps, then the negative ones, W. R. Grace took in this case, and be prepared to defend your decisions.

PROBLEM 4-A HELPING ISN'T ALWAYS EASY

You are a member of a civic organization that has 300 members locally and is the local chapter of a national organization. Most of the membership is well educated and falls into the middle- and upper-income brackets. The local organization has a reputation of civic involvement—working for better schools, increased voter registration, and equal rights for minorities and women.

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About 18 months ago, the executive committee made a presentation to the organization on illiteracy in your city. Studies show that 25 percent of the adult population is “functionally illiterate.” By the year 2001, the number of functional illiterates is projected to reach more than one-third of the population. Although the problem is spread throughout the population, the percentage of minorities in this group is high.

Soon after the executive committee’s presentation, the organization votes to establish a literacy council for adults in the city. The primary function of the council is to solicit and train volunteers to act as tutors and match these persons with individuals wanting to learn to read and write. The organization is able to generate heavy news coverage of the council and public service announcements about the need for tutors and students. Despite the coverage, very few persons have volunteered to tutor, even fewer persons have requested the service.

Because of your expertise as a communicator, the organization has asked you to become involved in this program. Your review of the program indicates there is general agreement among individuals that something has to be done, but no one is quite sure what. Your organization sets an objective of obtaining and training 50 volunteer tutors and matching these with 50 students in the next six months.

As a well-trained public relations professional, you recognize that your organization has fallen into the trap of believing that widespread and positive publicity will influence behavior. You agree to help the cause but stipulate that research is essential to discover why the program hasn’t taken off.

Describe how you will design and budget (in time and money) a research program to give you the information necessary to implement a successful recruiting program for students and tutors.

PROBLEM 4-B ADJUSTING TO A CHANGE IN COMMAND

For 10 years, George Loyal has been a one-person public relations department at Siwash, a college of 3,500 students in Ohio. They have been 10 good years in terms of George’s working conditions. There has been plenty of publicity material to pump out, and there has been cooperation on the part of news media.

A main factor assisting George has been the attitude of the Siwash College president. He takes an open stance publicly. He is articulate, handsome, and personable. He has been effective in attracting quality faculty, activating alumni support, and adding notable trustees who have been important in raising funds and making sure that Siwash is favorably regarded by legislators in the state capital.

But all these good things seem to have come to an end. The president was struck down by a massive heart attack and suddenly passed away. The trustees moved quickly to name a successor, who turned out to be a senior member of the Siwash faculty. He is a professor of anthropology, a scholar who is well published, quiet, and nonpublic.

The new president, in the month since his selection, has not informed George that he is not going to be active in alumni affairs, visible at sports events, or available to talk with news media whenever they want him to. He spends most of his time closeted with a few of the older faculty members. His secretary seems to feel that her job is to protect him from intrusions or outside visitors. He has not sent for George or sent him a memo about any specific job to do or any change in his responsibilities.

George's work has almost come to a standstill except for routine news releases. He frankly is not sure where he stands. The cooperative relationship he has had with news media seems to be threatened. The director of alumni relations is as baffled as he is. Two trustees have quietly indicated that they are stepping aside rather than stand for reelection when the time comes. The local sports editor has tipped George off that the newspaper's managing editor plans to ask for a meeting with the new president soon if he doesn't "come out of his shell."

The question before George is, What options does he have in trying to preserve the gains in public relations attained during the past 10 years?

1. What would be the most effective way of establishing a proactive relationship with the new president?
2. What would be your overall strategy for maintaining the college's relationships with its important stakeholders?
3. Given the personality of the new president, what role would you allot to him in maintaining the college's reputation?
4. How would you gain support for this strategy?

PROBLEM 4-C BRINGING THE COMMUNITY TO CONSENSUS

You are an employee of a public relations firm that focuses on raising money for the fine arts. A large client of the firm wants to find funding in order to relocate the city's largest Center for the Arts within a yet-to-be-built state-of-the-art facility. You meet with your peers and discuss taking on this large assignment.

There are several key factors to consider; most important is how the community will react to such a change. The Center's current home is legendary, dating back to when the city was first built. It has held many memorable performances. Parents love to bring their children to the plays and musicals that are performed there; many enjoy its opera and classical music performances. Film festivals and dance performances have also been presented there.

However, the Center is old and in need of repair. Estimates for the needed repairs and for long-term upkeep are high. This client feels it would be more financially sound to build a new facility than to pour more money into the old building. The advantages for building a new Center—state-of-the-art acoustics, up-to-date technology, expanded and more comfortable seating, etc.—weigh greatly against the community's desire to keep the old building and find funding to repair it in future years. There is also the matter of convincing the board of directors. Some of the members are in favor of keeping the old building and feel that, historically, it is too valuable to abandon.

Knowing that you need to sway opinion within the community as well as the board of directors, how would you begin? What information do you need and how would you get it? What specific audiences would you target? Which audience must you reach first? How do you propose to reach all the various audiences? How would you use two-way communication in your plan? Would opinion leaders work here? If so, how would you find them? Consider also the future use of the current building. How can that become part of your plan?