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PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES - BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

In this era of controversial issues being decided in the public arena, the old, standard public relations approaches usually don't work. Decisions based on using the old standby, public meetings, as the sole public relations strategy often lead to project delays, legal challenges, and project denial.

New public relations strategies, on the part of both industry and government, can avoid some of the old problems. A public relations strategy based on open, honest communications, and a willingness to work together, will result in building relationships with people. This, in our experience, is the key.

INTRODUCTION

We, as taxpayers, are the PUBLIC. At various times, we the PUBLIC want the government to take a specific action or make a specific decision. We the PUBLIC have issues, thoughts, ideas, and emotions that we speak, think, vote, and feel. All of us are part of the PUBLIC (even those of us who work for a governmental entity). And, as we all know, the PUBLIC is a large, heterogeneous confederation of people, corporations, and institutions each with different histories, personalities, and goals.

So what happens when a part of the government is faced with an issue that we care about? Since the co-authors of this paper work for the federal government, let's take federal land as an example.

The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are two agencies of the U. S. Government which are charged with managing a quarter of the land and resources of the United States. The agencies' charge is not only to manage, but to manage for the good of the PUBLIC. Therefore, the decisions made about the land and its resources should reflect what the PUBLIC wants. Do they? Are YOU happy with those decisions with which you care about?

If you are, you are to be congratulated, because you're effectively communicating with government. You have a good relationship with government. If, however, you're not happy with those decisions, and you want to be, then stick around. Because what I would like to talk about today is how we, the PUBLIC, can improve our relationships with the government, by learning to communicate more openly and honestly, by getting beyond our biases and listening to one another, and by building a trust with one another that will carry us beyond "safe" topics.

First I will profile the PUBLIC, the people, of today. And I include in this not only public land users, but the public at large, and you and I, when we find ourselves facing public decisions we don't like. Then I'll discuss some of the approaches to meeting the PUBLIC we, the Forest Service, use that I feel don't work. And I'll tell you why I feel that way. Finally, I'll offer a few suggestions for what I think can work.

A PROFILE OF WHO WE THE PUBLIC ARE

To set the stage for what does and does not work, it is important to look first at ourselves.

WE demand an EFFECTIVE voice in decisions. Token public involvement efforts are transparent to us, and many of the earlier Forest Service approaches to public involvement are perceived to be token efforts. In other words, "why bother, they have their minds made up."

WE have a limited amount of time to commit to a limited number of issues that are of interest to us. If someone wants a piece of that time from us, they have to compete for it. And what are they competing against? People today have less leisure time than even ten years ago (remember that old myth about more leisure time?)

WE are over communicated with today. About 1,500 messages are received by an individual in a day and only about 15 stick.

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We want information presented to us in a way we can grasp quickly, and relate it to how it may affect us personally. Thick documents will just sit on all of our desks.

Because of our limited time, our natural tendency is to involve ourselves only when we are personally threatened, such as when a sewage treatment plant has been proposed next door.

Our tendency is to wait until a crisis to get involved. Why? Probably because that is when the cry for help is called, whether that cry comes from a user group, a professional organization, or the editor of the local paper.

We expect to be treated, DEMAND to be treated with respect, with opinions that mean something, to be listened to and see actions change. Now some of us have done this enough to be cynical about these efforts, and have no expectations at all, but I believe people today are demanding more and higher quality performance from public servants. We want good SERVICE.

We are much more inclined to get involved if we can see that our involvement will pay off.

In summary, we have less time and are more selective about how we use that time. And when we choose to get involved, we expect results.

### WHAT DOESN'T WORK

With that as a basis, it is somewhat easier to see how traditional approaches to public involvement can fail.

What do we, the Forest Service, usually do with a project proposal to review and make a decision on, and public involvement requirements to meet? What is the activity we think of first? THE PUBLIC MEETING.

I believe that this is probably the least effective, sometimes most destructive approach, at least taken alone, that we have for public outreach. I maintain that if there is even a hint of controversy, a public meeting may be the worst way to initiate a public involvement program. A public meeting, or series of meetings, may meet the letter of the law, and even the intent of the law, but in all likelihood it won't build support for a project. It won't develop the public trust in the proponent or the agency promoting or permitting it. And it may very well ring the death knell for a project. Why?

A public meeting doesn't allow for effective education. By the time a meeting is called, people's minds are often already made and they are not ready to HEAR from us. They are

only want to TELL us what they think, often without all of the facts. The meetings usually come too late in the public involvement process.

Many public meetings are poorly managed and facilitated. The agency that calls them are often doing it out of an obligation, and tend to convey the sense that the decision is already made anyway, that input isn't really going to make all that much difference. The words may not say this, but the public perception is that this is the case. This results from unclear objectives, unfocused discussion, and poor direction and leadership.

Public meetings are overused. People have been to hundreds of these meetings, many of them unproductive. It shouldn't be too surprising that people don't come to lots of meetings, unless they are angry and want to vent their anger. Just because people don't come doesn't mean there is no opposition to a project. Project opponents may well have elected to give their input in the form of protests, appeals, calls to their congressmen, or marches on the governor's office.

Public meetings are impersonal. Information is passed in one direction only, and no effective dialogue is developed. No personal relationships form, no trust is encouraged. Differences are made more dramatic, as opposed to the seeking of common ground. Barrier are enlarged, not diminished.

Public meetings often conveniently set the stage for opponents of a project to rally the support to kill it, right then and there. Armed with inaccurate information and intense emotions, a project opponent can do more to stop a project in a single emotional speech (especially with a ready audience and the press on hand) than a proponent, armed with the best data and rationale, can possibly hope to combat. Is it fair to do this to a legitimate project? I maintain we do it all the time.

What else doesn't work? publication of an action in the "notices" section of the newspaper doesn't work. Responding to someone's concern with a flurry of letters doesn't work. Not directly responding to a comment, but stating, "we are incorporating the comment in the final document" doesn't work. None of these approaches is inherently bad, they simply need to be put in a different context and repackaged with more sensitivity to who people are and what people need. Frankly, we're out of touch with people. The old, standard public involvement tools usually don't work because:

- They don't allow the public an effective voice.

- They don't treat the public as individuals with important things to say.
- They don't give the public good feedback.
- They waste our valuable time, frustrate us, give us too little valuable information to late--which may be the same thing as giving us too much information.
- They don't demonstrate to us that our ideas will make a difference.

#### WHAT CAN WORK?

So what can work? This is the hard part. What works is paying attention to people. The success of any public involvement program is tied to this. We need to build relationships with PEOPLE. These relationships must be long-term, continuous, based upon honesty, openness, and a willingness to work together, even on the tough issues.

To build these relationships, our public involvement activities must facilitate an effective dialogue, not one-way communication. We need to create a climate wherein all participants in the process feel free to state their opinions and know they will be heard. We need a successful public relations strategy, and I don't mean by that glossy brochures and ad campaigns. Frankly, we have all got to be more sensitive to the times in which we live and more creative in our approaches.

#### How do we do this?

First we need to be very clear about what we want from people. Is our objective to tell something, or to get feedback on an idea; to get a consensus or to "educate"; to get help in making a decision or to announce a decision. We need to approach each objective with a different strategy.

Second, any strategy used needs to treat people as the intelligent, sensitive, and aware beings that we are. If we feel in our hearts that people are uninformed, unable to "catch on", focused only on themselves and not on the broader interests, uninterested in learning the facts, I'll guarantee they will respond accordingly. We have to face the fact that we don't have all of the answers and that different perspectives are healthy and result in better decisions. On a regular basis, someone in the office suggests that we shouldn't release some information to the public, even though they have asked for it, because it might confuse them, mislead them to false conclusions, unnecessarily rile them. It is our obligation to present information in a clear, objective way to avoid confusion. But screening the information we give says a whole lot about how we view people.

We need to learn to hear what people are saying, and to find out what their interests are. We need to be able to understand not just what they want, but why they want it. To do this, we need to learn to master the art of asking questions, to actively listen, and confirm with people what we've heard.

Any strategy has to be personalized. We need to treat people as individuals with individual, valuable ideas. How can we do this when we have so many people to deal with, and how can we do this and maintain our objectivity? I suggest that we can do this and do so equitably, but it does take time...time that in the long run will save us time.

What this means is much more one-on-one discussion, more work with small groups, more phone calls, more personal letters. This poses a number of dilemmas, which I'll present and try to answer.

1. Who do you chose to meet with, since you'll be limited to a smaller number of people?
2. How can you do this and still maintain an open public process?
3. How do you approach people to work with us?
4. What format do the discussions take?
5. How do you give feedback?
6. How can you do this and not "burn us and everyone else out"?

There are lots of different answers to these questions, the answers largely dependent on the scope and issues associated with a project, the degree of controversy, personalities involved, and the kind of community you live in. What will work in Bend, Oregon will not necessarily work in Atlanta, Georgia.

First I'll give some general answers to these questions, and then I'll briefly describe one process I've seen work well in Central Oregon.

Who do you chose to meet with? I suggest two groups. First, the opinion leaders in the community, those who are influential by who they are, not necessarily by their position. You probably know some of these people.. Bend, with a population of 50,000, has about 30-50 of these people. They tend to be active, interested, concerned citizens. People in the community turn to them for advice. Second, the people most affected or concerned about a project. We've simply got to get these folks involved, sometimes when it is least tasteful for them to get involved. It is just too easy for people who keep a distance from a proposal and take pot shots at it without the best information available to them. Getting them involved, and involved early in an effective way.

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allows you to understand their point of view, understand the risks you face in moving forward with an action (will they appeal or won't they and on what basis), and requires that they take an active role in the outcome. This gives them ownership, a sense of being heard, and an effective voice. The hard part is getting them involved.

How do you get them involved? I suggest that we invite them personally to meet with us, not just to come to a public meeting. The two groups I mentioned generally won't come to public meetings. You'll be much more likely to get their attention and time with a personal phone call.

When do you involve them? As soon as you know enough facts to know if they may be affected and can be sure enough about the proposal to share openly what the up and down sides are. This needs to be done, at a minimum, before the public meeting. These people should not be surprised by what is presented publicly.

What format should that meeting take? It depends. If the objective is to establish a new, long-term relationship with a facet of the public, then a private, one-on-one meeting works well. If the objective is to share information to a group, and the group has worked together before, a group meeting with as many as thirty might work well. If the objective is to get agreement or advice on a course of action, a smaller group, or series of small group discussions, works best.

What kind of feedback works? A letter or a phone call thanking them for participating, letting them know how their input will be used (even if you told them at the meeting), and summarizing for them what the next steps are. I can't stress enough the importance of this follow-up. It is essential to maintaining their interest, to building long-term working relationships, for this and for future proposals.

How can we do this and maintain an open, public process? For me this approach fits well with early scoping as outlined in NEPA. This approach doesn't do away with the public meeting, necessarily, or with some kind of public process. It just goes along a parallel track, starting before any formal public action is taken.

How do you keep from burning people out, including yourself. This does take time, and intense interactions with people is easier for some than for others. We have to be careful not to ask too much of people. I view our community opinion leaders as a scarce resource that the Forest Service must plan to use carefully. We also need to expect, as a result of this, that these

community leaders will want to involve US in THEIR public outreach strategies, which is the ultimate outcome of strong, trusting relationships. But it takes that much more time.

Before I conclude, I'd like to present an example of a process that incorporates many of these elements, a process that the Forest Service participated in over the past two and one-half years.

During this time, we have worked with a group of citizens who are proposing a national monument in Central Oregon. I present this because I see that this approach could serve as a model for working with people who have diverse, sometimes diametrically opposed viewpoints about how we should manage public lands.

Since January 1988, a group of citizens in Central Oregon has developed an agreement between an incredibly diverse array of interest groups that will may result in the designation of Newberry Volcano as a National Monument. This proposal has won the support of the timber and geothermal industries, local and state environmental groups, and wildlife, recreation, and tourism interests, despite the fact that within the monument: timber will no longer be available for commercial harvest; thousands of acres of geothermal leases will be nullified and geothermal development precluded within the areas of highest geothermal potential; and provisions for environmental evaluation wanted by conservationists are not included. The group violated all the standard "rules" for proposing this kind of designation. They made compromises together and agreements with each other, as opposed to each presenting a position on the far side of what they could live with and allowing politics to forge the solution.

How was this accomplished and why did they do this?

The group used a process that emphasizes "interest satisfaction" over issue resolution. It encompasses the belief that the interests of one party will not be satisfied unless the interests of all other disputants are also satisfied, at least to some degree. The basic feature of this type of negotiation is not that a decision has been agreed to by all members, but that all members have complete understanding of the reasons leading to the decision, and that each member is willing to support the decision at varying levels of commitment. The Central Oregon citizens group feels so strongly about their agreement that they would pull back, as a group, their support of the legislation should major changes adversely affecting one party be proposed.

Why did they chose this approach? The reason they did this was twofold. First, the proposal would not have gone anywhere without all interests at the table. There simply was too much opposition locally to the proposal, too much support locally for geothermal development, too much sympathy for the timber industry, and not enough concern over the area's current management. But equally important, the 30 members of this group, the group that now calls themselves Newberry Volcanoes National Monument committee, are 30 of those opinion leaders I discussed earlier. These individuals work and live together and have to maintain community good will. They are in this for the long run and want what is best for the community.

#### The Results

Those of us involved in this effort to reach an agreement have marveled at the resiliency of this process and of the proposal. Both have repeatedly met internal and external assaults, albeit with difficulty, and both have continually resurfaced mostly intact. In the long run, the decisions developed by a process like this will be more durable and result in stronger, more enduring relationships than will agreements achieved in other ways.

#### The Downsides

This process takes a tremendous amount of time, and people can get frustrated easily if the process is not managed well. Frankly, some individuals just can't operate in this fashion. Corporate mentality, whether the corporation is public or private, is to operate with the cards held close to the chest. A few individuals never did catch on that games weren't being played. Most participates were good listeners and most people were caught by the spirit of the consensus process.

#### What made it work

The focus stayed on satisfying interests, and in the end most parties stood to gain more by supporting the proposal than by not supporting it, to varying degrees.

Most participants knew they would be working together in the future and wanted to maintain the relationships they built over the two-year period. As time wore on, some personal bonds, even friendships, some very unlikely, developed.

The success of the monument designation remains to be seen. Legislation was introduced in both houses of congress last November. What was a success was the effort on the part of this local group to develop a hard fought boundary, to forge language for a piece of legislation, and to endure the political challenges the proposal has taken

in the last few months. If the legislation fails to pass, at least recognizing the basic agreements made by this group, what signal will this send to this group of citizens? And what does this say about solving natural resources issues at home, rather than in Congress?

#### CONCLUSIONS

There are always more problems than solutions, it seems, probably because problems are easier to see. But I also think that working effectively with people is a particularly difficult issue for the Forest Service today and therefore solutions are more challenging to find. For years we had the public's trust. People believed in what we stood for and trusted us to care for the nation's forests. That has changed for lots of reasons, not the least of which is a change in values in this country.

I think our hesitancy to work with people stems in part from the feeling of the betrayal of that trust, and resentment over the insinuation that we can't manage the way we should. It is this camp of employees that feel we kowtow too much to the public, that we have obligations to "do what is right" for the resources.

At the same time, I think we are all groping for ways to be more sensitive to public concerns, to be able to affect the outcome of a major decision locally, meeting the interests of all parties who will be living directly with the results. This is not something we can abdicate to our public affairs staff or our management teams. And while we need to be sensitive to national concerns, this is not something we can continue to abdicate to congress. Because of the times in which we live and the people with whom we work, it is something that each one of us has to take on.

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