

Alliance
Communication

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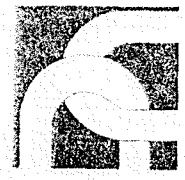

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ALLIANCE COMMUNICATION INC.

Success today means going beyond technical solutions to winning public approval of ongoing operations and individual projects.

Alliance Communication Inc. helps clients earn public acceptance and strengthen employee support by proactively using communication as a strategic management tool.

Alliance Communication Inc. specializes in public involvement programs, strategic community relations, Community Advisory Panels, and risk communication. The company helps clients effectively identify important audiences and deliver messages that create and preserve positive public perceptions.

Clients benefit from our understanding of public definitions of risk and the ability to manage perceptions in the same way other elements of business success are managed.

Alliance Communication's unique approach enables clients to win public approval and minimize risk. Company services are especially valuable when project success and ongoing production depends on accurate attitude assessment and building public trust.

Services range from strategic communication plans and facilitating Community Advisory Panels to media training workshops and long-term public involvement programs.

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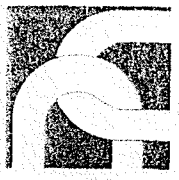

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Client List

The Doe Run Company

Mallinckrodt Chemical Inc.

Clark Refining & Marketing

Borden Decorative Products

Monsanto Company

Masterchem Industries

Solutia Incorporated

Continental Cement Company

Hercules Incorporated

MEMC Electronic Materials

Cement Kiln Recycling Coalition

McDonnell Douglas Corporation

Novus International

Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District

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THE RISK COMMUNICATION PROCESS

- What is risk?
- How to effectively communicate risk to the public
- Your community's perception of risk
- Your company's perception of risk
- Your company/site's risk communicator
- Agreeing to disagree
- Building mutual respect
- Communicating risk without negatives
- Monitoring progress/measuring success

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Worst-Case Scenario: Preparing for New Dislosures

by Nancy Pollock

Hundreds of area companies—perhaps yours—are required by a new amendment to the federal Clean Air Act to disclose unprecedented levels of information about their operations.

Companies that store certain quantities of specified materials must develop a worst-case scenario telling their neighbors what will happen if everything on-site is released at once.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says the reason behind the new rule called Section 112(r)(7) of the Clean Air Act is to encourage companies to reduce the possibility of accidents and to stimulate a dialogue between industry and the public. However when communities view the required circle of influence that must be mapped out to show how wide an area will be affected by a worst-case scenario, a healthy dialogue might be the last thing on their agenda.

The first step is to find out if your company must comply with this new rule. Company size does not determine eligibility. Companies that fall within these requirements are defined by the amount of certain materials kept on-site.

The EPA cites fertilizer and pesticide makers, paint and pharmaceutical producers, water treatment facilities, propane retailers, electronics manufacturers, chemical plants, refineries, electric and gas utilities, and military installations among those likely to fall under the regulation.

Firms don't have to manufacture the materials to be eligible for compliance. Because the rule deals with stationary sources, even warehouses and retailers could be included.

Copies of the EPA's final risk management rule can be downloaded from the agency's computer bulletin board or from the federal register. (When making those requests, refer to 40 CFR Part 68, the regulation's official designation.)

Once a business has determined it is eligible for compliance, the next step is technical data collection and air modeling to determine the area of influence and communication planning. Some companies will do the technical work themselves; many will contract with engineering firms who specialize in this type of work.

Required public disclosure makes the rule, commonly called the Risk Management Plan, for the document that must be written as part of compliance, much more sensitive than other environmental regulations. Although much of this information already is available to curious neighbors or interested news reporters, in this case, companies must make the data directly available through the Local Emergency Planning Commission or other sources.

In addition to reporting quantities of materials that include ammonia, propane, chlorine and dozens more, companies eligible under this rule must make public a list of accidents reported during the last five years. Again, pages of incidents that were reportable but caused no injury or environmental harm evoke little cause for alarm at a company. But for a community unaccustomed to such data, it could feed already growing concern.

What are companies to do? Most importantly they need to understand that:

- The Risk Management Plan rule is different from other regulations because of its potential to spark the kind of community concern that can interfere with a site's ability to operate independently.
- The need to communicate effectively and formally manage a company's image becomes increasingly important.

The deadline for compliance is June 1999. Companies need to begin now to define their areas of influence, assure technical compliance and plan for effective communication.

The key to success is building credibility; credibility grows from solid relationships. Building those relationships takes time, which is why communication should begin early. Information released through the Risk Management Plan also will attract public attention to other aspects of a business, from training to overall emissions and from how materials are transported to how they're stored. Developing an ongoing communication strategy is the best protection possible.

The right way to communicate will vary from company to company, depending on the nature of the audience, the industry the company represents and status of relationships with neighbors.

Relying on the numbers to speak for themselves or on neighbors to view statistics through the same unemotional perspective as business managers is asking for trouble.

Businesses have the opportunity to begin now working toward a successful conclusion to their Risk Management Plans.

Nancy Pollock is president of Alliance Communication, Inc., a company specializing in strategic community relations and risk communication.

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RISKY BUSINESS

The dos and don'ts of communicating risk.

Picture this: you're jarred awake by the jangling of the telephone. A voice at the other end shouts bits of information about a chemical spill at the manufacturing plant. You get dressed and head to the scene, prepared to handle a minor incident that poses no health risk. But when you get there, you're greeted by a throng of reporters shouting questions. What do you do?

Or consider this: after decades of quietly doing business in the community, the people who live nearby show up at a routine permit hearing accusing your company of poisoning the health of its neighbors. You try to explain that everything's legally permitted and risk is minimal, but they won't listen. Now, the permit you need to continue operating is in jeopardy.

The business of communicating risk is tricky. How well it's done can determine the reputation of your business or government agency. And that reputation can determine how much freedom you have to manage the way you see fit.

In the past, companies and government agencies believed playing by the rules was enough. Companies filled out all the required environmental reports, received all the necessary operating permits, and made quality products the marketplace wanted to buy. Government agencies saw their role as making sure companies did all of the above.

In the last decade, those rules have been rewritten. In fact, it might seem sometimes that there are no rules at all. The reference points you used to count on to guide you through the process don't apply any more. What happened?

Society changed. Neighborhoods that hardly noticed the manufacturing plant down the street now assume the steam coming out of the stacks is pollution. Communities that a few years ago would have welcomed any new jobs now have lots of questions about their perceived cost of economic development.

Bhopal. Chernobyl. The Exxon Valdez. These events eroded public confidence in business and added to the broad disillusionment begun by Vietnam, political assassinations and Watergate.

If public perception can have such an impact on an organization's future, shouldn't it be managed? Or course. But what to do?



Barlow Photography

This article was written by Nancy Pollock, president of Alliance Communication, which specializes in image management and risk communication.

There are many dos and don'ts when it comes to communicating risk. Some of them are listed below.

Be proactive. Imagine your public image as a blank slate. Getting to the board first with your message makes much more sense than trying to change misperceptions created by others. Don't make the mistake of believing that keeping a quiet profile will protect you. It's difficult to hide an industrial site, highway project, or regulatory agency.

Be consistent. Holding one meeting with neighbors or hosting the occasional open house isn't enough. People need to know that you're consistently there for them. This isn't a quick-fix, short-term program; it's about building real relationships with the groups who can influence your organization's future.

Build teams. The residential neighbors, local politicians, regulators and others with an interest in your business or agency are members of your team. Let them play. Give them the ball now and then. Listen to their concerns. Building a consensus is good management.

Don't focus only on the facts. Most opinions about risk are based on emotions not facts. Don't make the mistake of arguing about whether an emission is at 2 parts per million or 3 when the real concern is about credibility.

Keep an open mind. There is more than one perspective about risk. One chance in a million of health problems might sound reasonable to a company or government agency; to the parents of young children living nearby, it might sound like too high a price to pay. Don't make value judgements; everyone has a right to a personal opinion. Agree to disagree and keep the dialogue going.

Respect your clients. Remember, the people who show up at a public hearing to oppose your permit application have a right to their opinion. If someone was trying to site an incinerator in your backyard, you'd be in the front row at the rally carrying placards, too. By respecting that right, you have a better chance of building your company's credibility with that audience.

Be sincere. Building meaningful relationships takes real commitment. Taking the steps outlined above takes time and consistency.

Most of all, be positive. While it might seem that no one in the world understands and your business or agency has no friends, all is not lost. With patience, a sincere commitment, and the right kind of professional guidance, image management works and everyone wins. ■

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