

Talking Points

Industry must be a good neighbour

Beth Ruscant

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'My washing's ruined thanks to you...'. 'Our dog's sick—it's your fault...'. 'Are my children safe?' 'Who can I complain to?' These kinds of complaints and questions are a fact of life for every industrial site manager, but especially for those in the chemical industry, where the public's ignorance and fear are so much greater. It is no good a plant being the safest and cleanest—let alone the most efficient and profitable—if it is not seen to be a good neighbour. That means talking frankly and taking an active part in the community, not hiding behind razor wire and issuing patronising statements. For like it or not, that is the image of the industry in many cases.

The Chemical Industries Association (CIA) is well aware of the problem, and the latest offensive in its Responsible Care programme centres upon being 'Responsible Neighbours'. The CIA's regular public opinion surveys (*Chem. Br.*, 1991, 27, 485) have made gloomy reading for the industry. The public is unfamiliar with what the chemical industry does; even if it accepts the industry's contribution to prosperity and well-being this is not considered to mitigate the perceived evils of pollution.

The CIA's Responsible Care Advisory Group is about to publish a code of practice to help member companies with their local community relations activities. Jim Whiston, ICI group safety, health and environment manager, who chairs the CIA group, says that 'Responsible Care is a collection of good safety, health and environmental practices, but more import-

antly it is about talking to the community—both the local community near our operations and the broader community including the activists. It is a listening mode'. Being a good neighbour, he feels, is about not being arrogant—'we don't know all the answers'.

He also stresses that Responsible Neighbours is not a 'big company' programme. 'The guidelines are tailored for every member company, large, medium and small. They have been written by practitioners. The purpose is to stop member companies wasting time. Everything in the booklet has been tried and tested—it is "real reality".'

Familiarity breeds favourability

The CIA's stated objectives are:

- To increase community familiarity with chemical industry operations, thus paving the way for increased favourability and acceptance.
- To build trust between chemical industry sites and their communities by encouraging and supporting the involvement of employees in community activities.
- To comply with the public's right to know. The last concept may be alien to some chemical industry managers—they may even feel threatened by it—but it is in line with the thinking behind John Major's Citizen's Charter and Giles Radice's and Mark Fisher's right to know bills. Environmental monitoring in particular will become more open, and firms that have begun to publish their performance records (eg Hydro UK, BP Chemicals, ICI and Ciba in the UK) have started a trend that EC eco-audit proposals will accelerate.

Outreach programmes

The CIA says that every member company site should have a community outreach programme to complement its programme for continuous improvement of its health, safety and environmental protection performance. The outreach programme should have eight components:

- Regular assessment of community concerns.
- Dialogue with the community.
- Openness of information and promotion of familiarity with the site.
- Regular assessment of employee concerns.
- Dialogue with employees.
- Employee participation in community activities.
- Training in communications.
- Regular evaluation of effectiveness.

Community outreach programmes are probably more familiar to site managers. Many companies' in-house magazines chronicle the links that their sites have with local schools and groups such as Rotary Clubs or Women's Institutes. The CIA provides a formidable checklist of such local organisations, from birdwatchers to chambers of commerce, not forgetting local politicians, churches, trade union branches, suppliers and contractors. It recommends carrying out surveys to find out what actually concerns these groups and then setting up dialogues with them.

A formal mechanism for dialogue might be to institute a community liaison panel, with representatives from many of these local groups. These panels can be briefed on matters that trouble them, or the company's plans, and act as a focus for local concerns to be made known to the company. Community Advisory Panels (CAPs) are now familiar in the US chemical industry—with varying degrees of success, it has to be admitted. The CIA stresses that the site manager should not expect to chair the liaison group; ideally it should be self-governing, with the company simply providing secretarial assistance. Whiston says that the task force that drew up the guidelines tried to avoid being prescriptive: 'local liaison

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groups have to be geared to local needs. It is no good the parent company forcing a model on them. ICI sites without exception have some kind of liaison group, but all on different models'. Tamar Posner, an executive director of the CIA, says that the association will be producing a video later this year to assist companies in setting up community liaison groups.

Less formally, the CIA advocates local sponsorship, sport and charity activities, provided that these are not seen as advertising gimmicks. It reminds managers that employees at all levels can act as ambassadors for the company in these activities.

Good days ...

The third element of the CIA's booklet will be a self-assessment questionnaire to help companies work out how well they are performing, as well as checklists of things to remember when running community liaison panels, site visits *etc.* The booklet reminds managers that simply showing people static chemical plant is not interesting. As anyone who does a lot of such visits can tell you, it is the packing lines, where things move, that stick in the memory. The CIA's suggestions for an open day include a demonstration by the fire team, computer-aided molecular modelling, simple chemistry experiments (preferably with coloured reagents) and displays of how the factory products go into everyday items. And 'remember that the workforce ... are the finest ambassadors that the factory can have'.

...and bad days

The CIA also has sound advice on how to deal with community and media communications when there is an emergency. 'Your company will survive an emergency better if

Established links

Ciba organises its outreach activities at site level. Its Grimsby plant has had a programme of site visits for many years, which is proving its value now that the plant is being expanded and local people need to be reassured. Both the Macclesfield site and the Trafford Park site (the latter now owned by FMC) have sponsored primary school football and netball for the past 25 years, while Trafford Park provided one of the country's two schools of football excellence for schoolboys aged 11-14. Scientists from Ciba's dyestuffs and chemicals R & D operation in Manchester get involved in British Association Young Scientists events ('BAYS days') at the Catalyst museum of the chemical industry and Ciba supports school and college events run by the RSC's Manchester and District Section.

In comparison with Mossmorran, most of the Ciba sites are long established, Clayton Aniline in Manchester (founded 1876) being a good example. This site predates the community, so there is less chance of a 'not in my backyard' response, and its community relations activities are well established. It even runs a community newspaper. The sites in NW England get less call to provide speakers for schools and local groups because there are so

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Ciba's Bicycle Pack, a package of teaching materials for primary school teachers having to teach science under the national curriculum, was pioneered by the Trafford Park site and later went national. Other than the bicycle pack, which Ciba retained, FMC has continued all the existing community relations programmes at Trafford Park.

Ciba's community relations manager, Sally Seed, says that the company's sites are already involved with Responsible Care local networks and expect to be taking the new Responsible Neighbour guidelines on board. John Fraser, chairman of Ciba's UK operations, was one of those who successfully campaigned for commitment to the Responsible Care principles to be made mandatory for CIA members.

Ciba's decision to make public its data on emissions has given it the opportunity for dialogue with local communities, Seed says, but so far it has not gone to the extent of setting up CAPs. This contrasts with the US and Ciba's home town of Basle in Switzerland, where community relations are still dominated by the Sandoz spill into the Rhine in 1986.

it has established a 'good-will' bank to draw upon, if it has a reputation for openness and if its statements are believed'. It recommends that the local community should be engaged in discussions about emergency planning. It also advises preplanning for the communications overload—dealing with the media, community, and next-of-kin—if an emergency occurs.

And when it is over, remember to debrief the local liaison groups and explain the results of the enquiry.

What the Responsible Neighbours code is not about is public relations campaigns—the booklet points out that 'even good communications cannot compensate for a poor environmental or health and safety performance'. Any programme should be within the Responsible Care context of continuous environmental and safety improvements, and dealings with the public have to be open and honest.

David Wright of Exxon, who is a member of the CIA community awareness task force, warns that 'you have to remember that the majority of decisions are made on emotional grounds—facts are not persuasive. When people ask to be shown the data, what they really mean is "please show me that I can trust you"'. He feels that you have to open up the dialogue *before* there is an issue to deal with. 'Without that, there is no trust, and without trust the facts will not be persuasive'. He agrees that this could be seen as manipulative, 'but to get the data across you need to know the folk—that is why the chemical industry is receiving demands for more and more data, as the contacts begin to be made'.

Wright believes that there are three interlocked concepts at work: awareness, outreach, and involvement. 'If you catch somebody's eye at a cocktail party, that is awareness—you have seen and acknowledged each other. If you walk across and introduce yourselves, that is outreach. If as a result you come to some sort of agreement, that is involvement'. Whiston says that 'Responsible Care is part of Total Quality', and the guidelines agree: 'Being a responsible neighbour is ... not just good practice: it is also good business'.

Richard Stevenson

Clean slate

David Wright is head of public affairs at the Fife Ethylene Plant (FEP) at Mossmorran, which Exxon Chemicals operates on behalf of a Shell/Exxon joint venture. When FEP was built on a greenfield site in the early 1980s there were both advantages and disadvantages for community relations. On the one hand the local people had no experience of the petrochemical industry and were apprehensive about safety and pollution. The community did not know what ethylene was and saw risk without benefit. But the lack of familiarity was also an advantage, because there was no history of bad practices to live down. The company could start with a clean slate.

Wright's job is complicated by the fact that Fife has two distinct communities. Inland in the former mining villages, unemployment is high and jobs are the prime concern. Along the coast, the former fishing villages have been colonised by young professionals from Edinburgh, who are concerned with the environment.

Wright got together with about 20 site employees whom he had identified as being active in the community, from

local football clubs to scout groups. They generated a whole raft of ideas like visiting local schools, providing speakers at local events, organising incoming visits to the site. There was such a diversity of ideas and offers of help that a number of separate community outreach groups (COGs) emerged. Their function is not to do Wright's job for him, but to support the employees who have volunteered. They provide school governors, organise work secondment for schools, collect and donate old computers *etc.*

Wright's favourite event was a concert party involving 45 people on stage and 25 backstage (from a workforce of 380). It ended up with people giving up their lunch hours to practise tap dancing. The show was entitled *Christmas cracker* (an in joke for an ethylene plant) and was put on in a local theatre for OAPs. Wright says that not only was it good for community relations, it also helped with team building and got people involved who might not otherwise have participated.

Importantly, Wright feels, the COGs provide a grassroots community relations programme, involving employees rather than management.