
PRESSURE GROUPS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Public affairs requires an understanding of how public opinion is shaped, whether by pressure groups, by specific opinion leaders, through planned, focused campaigns, by special interest bodies or the media. Our legislators (and those who advise our legislators) are all influenced by the same process. The public relations adviser also needs to remember the importance of what is happening at the local level, at the international level....and the interaction between all these and the statutory bodies that exist to manage sectors of our public life.

Pressure groups whether environment groups, consumer activists, development critics or media, are becoming by far one of the most sensitive constituencies for companies today. They influence public opinion, pose new and tough questions affecting how organisations communicate. Hence, organisations need to demonstrate and communicate their strength to the public by emphasising research, innovation and technology.

Screaming headlines in our dailies each day only serve to remind us of the need to develop the organisation's personality through both verbal and non-verbal communications and revitalise alliances with the community.

Azadi Bachao group puts Shell in the dock. Question mark over Rs. 7,000 crore refinery in UP

Financial Express, Allahabad, May 1998

Azadi Bachao Andolan has stated that they are convinced and their conviction is confirmed by the misdeeds of Shell in African and Latin American countries, that this company is not coming to India for development but for destruction, displacement and acquisition of precious mineral wealth like silica sand. The group damaged the company offices and also launched a signature campaign terming these actions as "the beginning of the struggle against Shell."

This is after the BPCL-Shell joint venture had shifted the location of the site of the refinery from Kathua in Rae Bareilly, where it was originally supposed to have been located to Shankargarh near Allahabad. The shift is attributed to two reasons - one, the reduced savings resultant from not having to lay the

pipeline across the Ganga; and it is also alleged that it was to cull favours with politicians in the then constituency of the Petroleum Minister Janeshwar Misra and also the home constituency of the present Union minister of HRD Murli Manohar Joshi. Mr Joshi had promised the people of Shankergarh that he would ensure the relocation.

DUSU to sign Pepsi, Coke 'death verdict'

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Delhi University Students Union, led by the BJP's Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad has ensured that no canteen on the campus stocks Pepsi and Coke. The only soft drink one can get is Campa Cola. DUSU has issued warnings on loud speakers: "Any canteen found storing Coke or Pepsi will itself be responsible for the consequences."

Anil Jha, the DUSU President says, "They symbolise America, the country which is out to ruin our economy." He has also not allowed the sale of Thums Up, as it now belongs to Coca Cola India.

Seeds of Discontent

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The public outcry on the terminator seeds must pose a tremendous challenge for Monsanto, in face of the following published comments from opinion leaders like Dr. M. S. Swaminathan and Dr. Balram Jhakar.

Dr. M. S. Swaminathan, the father of green revolution in India, who warned that the technology could play havoc with the country's food security, says, "if this technology seeps in to what we call the non-targeted crops, i.e. the self pollinated crops, then we would have an enormous sterility." He elaborates, supposing this genes flow gets into a variety of rice, the resultant sterility is very dangerous. He has written to the Prime Minister urging him to examine these kinds of techniques because in science and medicine, there are ethical codes, what you want to do and what you should do. Therefore it is necessary that we must have our own ethical code."

"This technology may be good for American agriculturists because there are only one per cent people in this field. Here in India we have more than 75 per cent of our population who are into agriculture. So what is relevant to them may not be relevant to us. Since there are a large number of imponderables, we must be careful." says Dr. M. S. Swaminathan.

Dr. Balram Jakhar, one of the many vociferous critics of this technology, says, "We cannot allow the multinational seed companies to monopolise the international market. We cannot let anybody play with our future. We have to be careful and as responsible citizens of this country, we must do everything to safeguard the interests of our farmers"

Communicate with Friend and Foe Alike

As well as the various parliamentary and legislative audiences relevant to a broad public relations programme, there are likely to be other influential groups that will require special attention. These may include trade and professional bodies, educationists, pressure groups and local government. To communicate effectively with such groups it is very important to identify their own aims and appreciate how these might relate to the organisation's aims.

The public relations programme aimed at opinion leaders will only be successful if it can create an understanding between these special interest groups and the organisation. Wherever possible, it should also be an aim to create goodwill and support. However, where the special interest group is directly opposed to the interests of the organisation, this does not mean that no attempt should be made at communications...or that it is impossible to achieve understanding.

As an example, a medical research centre that uses animals in its testing programmes should still be communicating with animal welfare groups opposed to such practices. It is unlikely (and possibly unnecessary) that the organisation will succeed in changing the attitudes of the pressure group. But, it will ensure that the animal welfare group is arguing from a factual base. They will have less freedom to distort the argument and create public opinion which is directly opposed to the interests of the research group.

No such group would want to have its arguments defeated on factual grounds and will, therefore, tend to use any factual information which is made available. This will help to narrow the arguments into areas where the organisation can justify its stance-away from emotive sectors.

Pressure Groups can Create Helpful Change

Let us look in a little more detail at our hypothetical example. In the absence of any fact or information, it would be possible for an animal welfare group to mount an appealing campaign to get animal testing banned by law.

This emotional argument is less convincing when it is presented against a background of established fact. For example, suppose legislation on the introduction of new drugs or foods requires these to be tested on animals. Are such manufacturers to gamble with the safety of their customers, defy the law...or not introduce new products?

Suppose, all animal laboratories are subject to close official supervision and have to operate to strict standards relating to the discomfort that can be caused to the creatures. Emotive claims about uncontrolled or unscrupulous testing or wilful cruelty would then tend to be shifted into perspective. All such information will tend to ensure that the argument is conducted on a more factual basis.

It is even possible that the pressure brought by the animal welfare group could result in changes in legislation that could be to the advantage of the

testing organisations. As an example, such pressure may change the law to allow imported products that have passed approved tests in other countries to bypass the domestic testing procedure. Perhaps modifications of existing products may not need to go through the complete process. Or a public indemnity scheme might be proposed to help manufacturers marketing certain groups of products which might not be required to be tested on animals.

It is possible that public concern over animal testing may well influence the situation in the marketplace (as happened with the fur trade). The additional cost of replacing animal-tested products with new substitutes might become acceptable to the public. Certainly the producers of such products can only benefit from informed public debate of the topic. Secrecy leads to misunderstanding or misinterpretation by the public or the organisation's motives. The public relations adviser must have the courage to recommend that his company or client stimulates a vigorous public debate.

The Information Democracy Works

It is the responsibility of the public relations adviser to understand the position of all important external groups - particularly those trying to exert pressure for change, such as a campaigning consumer body, a group of dissident shareholders or the animal welfare organisation, exemplified above.

- What is their case?
- Is it factually based?
- Who are they trying to influence?
- How are they attempting this?
- Of course, if the public relations adviser feels there is validity in their claims then, equally, it becomes his responsibility to advise management and try to institute appropriate policy changes within the organisation.

Political democracy is intended to work in the best interests of most people. Similarly, the information democracy should ensure that all the arguments are presented and the opinion which emerges is in the best interests of most people.

Certainly, the organisation should think very carefully before refusing to communicate in sensitive areas. Any communications should be through the same media used by the pressure group and every critical comment or negative news story should be dealt with promptly with a properly counter-balanced company statement. Des Wilson, the driving force behind Shelter and, later, the Campaign for Lead Free Air has often stated that his lobbies have been more successful because of the inability of the opposition to handle their case properly. The same has been true for Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.

In some circumstances, the hostility of the pressure group can be turned to the advantage of the organisation, if their arguments can be exposed as being unreasonable. This is the judo technique - where the organisation rides with the argument rather than countering it. The opponent is pulled off

balance and thrown over the corporate shoulder, rather than directly resisted.

Take a case to illustrate the point. One rural bus company found itself in the difficult position of having to cut a number of routes. It found itself under very considerable pressure from one or two well-organised groups which produced petitions against the closure of certain of these country routes. However, this pressure was completely defused. The public spokesman in a television interview agreed that the bus company was reluctant to close bus routes. However, he countered that if the people who had signed the petition had shown as much interest in using the buses, it would not be necessary to take such action!

Know When To Act...And When Not

An important decision facing the public relations adviser is when to act, when to react and when to take no action. These decisions are a matter of balance and timing. Often, the decision whether to act or react can be decided on the amount of public attention that is likely to be focused on the issue in question.

An unfortunate accident at one of company's plants has resulted in an injury or death. One of the company's products has been shown not to perform to standard. A packaging design has to be modified to avoid confusing consumers. If these are issues that are likely to come to public attention, may be discussed and could have an effect upon the reputation of the company - then the decision must be to act, rather than to react. Indeed if there is a question of ethics or responsibility involved, then the company must act first.

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