Top Tips to Community Relations

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Why practice good community relations?

- All companies have community relations. Good community relations is a planned and responsive process. Much of community relations, however, is unintentional: inadequate communication which fails to see the importance of local people and results in the local community forming an impression of the company based on incomplete or inaccurate information.

- Companies increasingly realise that they cannot isolate themselves from the wider environment – both the effects that the organisation has on those living close to the premises and impact that local people have on its output. There is increasing pressure on both public and private companies to operate in a transparent manner, to address all stakeholders and to be wholly accountable.

- Community relations is no longer simply empty, one-sided philanthropy and has become integral to a strategic communications campaign.

- Simply establishing goodwill, however, it can benefit crisis management – the better connected a company is to its external environment, the better prepared it is to face a crisis. An early investment in community relations invariably requires less time and money than a knee-jerk reaction to a crisis situation.

- Stakeholders are becoming increasingly sceptical as contentious issues feature on the public agenda. Furthermore, as methods of communication – specifically the internet – become readily available, opponents have become more eloquent.

- The emergence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) provides companies with a framework for structuring external relationships, enabling activities to be recorded and evaluated. It also raises awareness of the company's community involvement practices among influential stakeholders such as funders and shareholders.

What is the local community?

- Employees and their families who live locally – aim to make them proud of the company that they are associated with.

- Local politicians – MPs and councillors – aim to raise their opinion of the company as they may be required to represent its needs and work effectively with it.

- Those affected in any way by the work of the company, including those working in the vicinity. This is particularly relevant in the construction industry, which is frequently blamed for causing disruption and bringing about unwelcome changes.

Background research

- As with any planned campaign, background research is an important starting point. In the initial stages, it is likely to take the form of secondary or desk research.

- Research objectives should be established, based upon the focus of the campaign, but the main aim should be to gain and understanding of the views and potential power of the relevant stakeholders. Research should be thorough, ensuring that no sections of the community or issues are overlooked.

- A stakeholder analysis process should be used to identify and classify relevant people and groups, and local issues. Each group may be categorised in terms of potential power, in order to ascertain their importance.

Planning a strategic campaign

- A successful ongoing community relations campaign is formed following research and analysis, ensuring that contact with the community feeds back into a strategic model.

- The campaign should be planned, timed and evaluated.

- The plan must be flexible to allow for changes to the external environment, and yet it should be firm enough to ensure that the company sets the agenda. This is particularly important where groups of activists oppose the company in a way that is persuasive and organised, with the possible outcome being that they force the company into a reactive position.

Principles of effective consultation

- Consultation is a desirable beginning to any ongoing campaign, and an ongoing priority. It should aim to address the entire community and if this is not possible, those consulted should be representative of the community at large.

- Throughout the process, it is vital that communication enables feedback, and that feedback is used constructively. If the campaign lacks genuine discussion, a company will rightly be accused of engaging in public consultation simply to be seen to be consulting.

- Consultations should be easy to respond to – more than one means of response should be provided and sufficient time allowed.

- Avoid one-way communication which comes across as an attempt to persuade and influence – this can be more detrimental than failing to consult.

- Research may be qualitative or quantitative, formal or informal – preferably a mixture of all four.

- Responses from the local community will be invaluable to you as research and, as such, should feed into your overall communications strategy.

Tactics for community relations

- Methods of quantitative research may be focus groups and individual group briefings.

- Methods of qualitative research include questionnaires and surveys. The results, when complete, may be published in a local newspaper, which is an excellent means of feeding comment back to the community.

- Methods for imparting information include exhibitions, surveys, newsletters and public meetings. However, as methods of communication desired to impart knowledge to the greatest number of people rarely lend themselves to two-way communication, they should ideally be combined with a tactic which ensures feedback, such as a questionnaire or comment box.

- Exhibitions including literature, photography and samples are a popular tactic. Demonstrations can be staged and models displayed.

- For example, are there functions on your website for people with disabilities or do you provide written materials in large print for readers with visual impairments?

- A wide range of media is available, but should be selected carefully as face-to-face interaction is paramount.

> Text, whether for a newsletter or exhibition, should be succinct. Images are often more immediate and effective in demonstrating a point and can come in a range of forms - drawings, photographs, computer-generated images. Text should avoid jargon and be written in everyday English, with helpful headings. It is advisable to provide translations in communities where there is a high proportion of a certain ethnic minority. If a leaflet is translated, it is always helpful to have it translated back into English to check that there are no mistakes.

> Websites are an increasingly popular means of communicating with a local community and many companies have pages specifically to report on activity in the local community and encourage comment from local people.

Getting the tone right

> Community relations should aim to strike a balance between echoing the corporate style of the company and sitting comfortably with the wider community.

> It is important to maintain the appropriate degree of professionalism, and any leaflets or posters should remain consistent with the company's corporate identity.

> Priority should be given to clarity, or the 'Chinese Whispers' effect may result in the message being distorted become difficult to correct.

Community relations for specific projects

> Community relations is often required, sometimes by law, for specific projects such a housebuilder applying for planning permission.

> Independent advisory groups have proved successful in the past, in providing a liaison with the local community over specific issues. Such groups are composed of a cross-section of the community, including minority and special interest groups. Meetings are attended by a representative from the company so that views expressed can be taken on board immediately.

> Even in the event of strong opposition, communication should never be reactive, crisis-driven or aimed at silencing the outspoken.

> In the case of a planning application, it is inevitable that local people have a strong emotional attachment to their home. This is not to say that they will oppose change, but it is their neighbourhood and they want to have a share in the vision for its future. Local people will want to feel that their views matter and if they gain a sense of ownership in the changes, their support can shift from being negative or indifferent, to supportive and enthusiastic. Furthermore, local knowledge can be of huge benefit to a potential developer.

> With specific projects, timing is vital. It is unwise, for example, to consult during the summer break when people are likely to be away.

Dealing with activists

- A key benefit of research and consultation is that it allows potential activists to be identified, listened to and their assumptions corrected where necessary, in advance of pressure groups being formed.

- The power of detractors, however small, to destroy a company's reputation should not be underestimated. Campaigners, be they organised activists such as Friends of the Earth or a group of angry residents, are becoming increasingly eloquent due to a number of factors, particularly the use of the internet for communicating information. At the very least, communicating with the opposition can ensure that they receive the accurate facts. Furthermore, in providing a means for the opposition's concerns to be heard, a company lessens the chances of opinions being voiced in the media.

- In planning a community relations consultation, it may be appropriate to approach less hostile groups first, thus gaining their confidence and paving the way for acceptance among more difficult audiences.

Giving a voice to supporters

- There will also be those who remain silent because they are content, yet given a voice can add invaluable support to a specific issue.

- Means for using this latent support might include organising a positive letter-writing campaign or compiling positive comment for documents such as planning appeals or use in the media.

Increasing company involvement in the local community

- There is usually a substantial cross-over between a company's internal communication and its community relations. It is worth fostering links between the two.

- Opportunities to involve staff in the community are plentiful. For example, staff may join specific local groups and support local charities. Donations may be made to local causes. In addition to monetary donations, gifts in kind (such as making company facilities available to the community) or secondments to good causes are welcomed.

- Similarly, the community should be involved in the functions of the company. Local figures may be invited to AGMs, open days and formal drinks receptions, for example. Anniversaries of company's involvement with the community are an opportunity to celebrate. Visits for local people to see the company at work and witness new developments are often popular.

- Sponsorship has grown significantly as a marketing tool and can have substantial mutual benefits, but should be treated with caution. It can be used to create opportunities for name exposure (for increasing the visibility, awareness and familiarity of the organisation/brand's name), image association (seeking to achieve benefits from the 'halo effect' of linking your organisation/brand with the values of the

sponsored item), generating goodwill, and providing an opportunity for hospitality with the key audiences. Possible sponsorship may concern that of animals, architecture/heritage, artistic/cultural events, children's activities and education (both funds to cover educational benefits and open days and joint endeavours with local schools).

Good local media relations

> Good local media relations is vital in establishing good ongoing relations with the community at large.

> Make it a priority to get to know journalists as soon as possible. During a specific project or at times of change, find out how and what the journalist requires and ensure that they are updated regularly.

> There is a necessity to create positive stories, rather than simply avoid negative publicity. This is an uphill struggle, as the local newspaper may have a tendency to focus on negatives, but it can be achieved through working with the local media to create a relationship based on trust. Where possible, provide key local journalists with privileged information and picture stories.

> Local journalists should also be involved where possible with company activities, particularly open days, site visits or award ceremonies.

A continual process

> Finally, possibly the most important feature of community relations is to keep at it.

> Ideally community relations should start as early as is possible and should be on-going. The longer the process lasts, the greater the opportunity to form a constructive relationship with the local community. The effort invested in good community relations should then benefit the popularity and ultimate success of the company.

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