

Getting started with community relations:

Phase 1—The community relations assessment

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Pulp and paper companies need the consent and support of community stakeholders to achieve goals.

Operating a paper mill today poses more than technical challenges. During operation, a company may need to earn consent, support, and cooperation from many “stakeholders.” Effective community relations requires two-way communication. Rather than waiting until a crisis occurs, proactive companies view community relations as an integral part of their overall environmental management plan.

The four phases of a community relations program are similar in many respects to phases of an environmental cleanup program. Information gathered during the community relations assessment (Phase 1) is critical to success. Each community is different in terms of public opinion and issues that may have an impact on the operations and plans of the company. Both informal qualitative research methods, such as community interviews and focus group discussions, and formal quantitative research methods, such as telephone opinion polls and mail surveys, provide information to lay the foundation for future efforts.

What is community relations?

Community relations is the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various “publics” on whom its success or failure depends (1).

These publics or stakeholders can include but are not limited to employees, local residents and businesses, elected officials, state or federal regulatory agencies, academia, shareholders, local authorities, special interest groups, and customers.

Why is community relations so important?

1. A good ongoing relationship with your community will pay dividends in a crisis.
2. Maintaining open communication prevents costly rework and delays that may result from resistance and a lack of cooperation among the local community, authorities, and regulatory agencies.
3. Community relations is less expensive than litigation. Litigation may be inevitable, but “a lot of what happens before the bench depends on what has appeared on television and in the newspapers. To avoid being indicted early by the ‘public jury,’ you need to consider how the press can help, and hurt, your case,” says Ross Sandler, a partner with Jones, Day, Reavis & Pogue (2).
4. Community relations increases trust and credibility and reduces uncertainty and ambiguity. It enables a mill to inform the community of planned or ongoing activities and cleanup actions.
5. Environmental problems are not only technical issues, but they usually also have an impact or perceived impact on a variety of stakeholders.
6. Community relations enables your company to be a good neighbor and good corporate citizen. Notes Thad Epps of Union Carbide (3), “Being a good corporate citizen used to mean that a company provided jobs, volunteered time, and contributed to charities. But that definition has changed: inside your gates is not another world any more. What goes on in [a chemical plant] is of concern to a community . . . You are perceived as a neighbor who could cause the community a lot of trouble . . . You have to convince your neighbors that you are a responsible operator of your facility.”
7. In addition to providing information, community relations gives the public the opportunity to understand, comment on, and provide input to technical decisions that will have a long-term effect on their community—which is consistent with our democratic values.
8. An effective community relations effort channels conflict into a forum where it can serve a useful purpose. Community relations puts your company in the driver’s seat to respond effectively.
9. Creating open two-way communication with your stakeholders establishes effective channels for providing accurate information to the community.

When should you consider community relations?

The best time to build an honest relationship and get possible problems on the table is when the climate of opinion is positive, not when a crisis has made it hostile. If you don't have any objective baseline information about community concerns relative to your operations, consider conducting a community relations assessment. Specific circumstances that warrant community relations efforts include:

- If your company produces, treats, stores, disposes, or transports hazardous materials, petroleum, or solid waste (There is no such thing as an operation with no chance of an accident!)
- If you are involved in emergency response planning
- If there is direct or potential community contact with contamination
- If there are organized local groups with a high level of interest
- If your company begins an environmental cleanup, pollution prevention, or waste minimization program
- If your company is in a controversy or is receiving negative coverage in the media
- If you want to site a new industrial or solid waste facility
- If you are planning a plant expansion
- If there have been widely publicized crises in your industry.

What is involved in a community relations program?

A good community relations program reflects the same planning and attention to detail as a good environmental cleanup program. It should be integrated into the overall environmental management plan to prevent delays and costly rework. Table I illustrates the parallels between community relations and environmental cleanup programs.

Each environmental cleanup project requires a customized remediation plan based on site-specific characteristics. Similarly, a community relations plan must be based on community-specific characteristics. One would not carry out a cleanup project without sufficient data to characterize the problem; the same holds true for a community relations program. The community relations assessment is critical because each community is different and community concerns change over time.

Phase 1—The community relations assessment

The community relations assessment provides the basis for future community relations efforts. The information obtained is incorporated into the community relations plan (Phase 2). There are a variety of methods for collecting useful background information, including reviewing facility documents and records, reviewing regulatory files and newspaper articles,

I. Parallels between a community relations program and an environmental cleanup

<i>Community Relations</i>	<i>Environmental Clean-up</i>
Phase I: Community Relations Assessment: Research - Situation Analysis (community interviews, media content analysis, regulatory agency file review, etc.)	Site Assessment and/or Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study (RI/FS)
Phase II: Development of a Community Relations Plan (CRP)	Development of Remediation/Corrective Action Plan
Phase III: Execution of CRP; i.e., site tours, dissemination of fact sheets, community workshops/meetings, etc.	Remediation Efforts: i.e., pump-and-treat, bioremediation, etc.
Phase IV: Evaluation - measure the outcome of your community relations efforts and adjust efforts as necessary	Operations Maintenance and Monitoring: soil and groundwater sampling and analysis to evaluate the efficiency of your remediation system and make adjustments as necessary

interviewing mill managers and public affairs staff with a historical knowledge of the facility, and contacting the local planning commission, zoning commission, and chamber of commerce.

In addition, it is essential to obtain feedback directly from the community. During Phase 1, it is essential to:

- Identify interested citizens and community leaders
- Determine level of citizen concern
- Gain an understanding of the community's perception of the mill's history
- Gather and assess information on past citizen participation activities and the political climate
- Determine how citizens would like to be involved
- Determine the most suitable channels of communication (i.e., newsletter, TV, local newspaper, community advisory panel)
- Identify credible sources and disseminators of information
- Identify specific citizen concerns relative to threats to health and the environment, economic loss, company credibility, involvement of elected officials and regulatory agencies, perceived accuracy of media coverage, or number of citizens and local businesses affected.

- Not projectable data
- Need an effective moderator who is neutral
- Need a neutral location
- Limit number of veteran participants
- Select homogenous group
- More than one focus group recommended for each target group studied to increase data reliability
- Easy to miss good information; need to take good notes or audiotape

In order to select the most appropriate research method for obtaining this information, it is important to determine how the information will be used, the specific population (i.e., local residents, businesses, or both) being tested, what types of questions (open or closed-ended) are most appropriate to ask, how the data will be analyzed and reported, when you need the results, and what various research methods cost. To select the best research method to meet your needs, it is critical to understand the benefits and limitations of each method.

Informal or “exploratory” research methods

Community interviews

One method for obtaining information from the community is through informal face-to-face discussions with selected local residents, government officials, community groups, media representatives, and others interested in mill activities. The first step is to identify people to interview. Mill managers and employees can offer suggestions. It may also be useful to solicit suggestions from state or local environmental agencies. To prepare for the interviews, learn as much as possible about community concerns regarding your operations. Prepare a list of questions that can serve as a guide when speaking with residents and local officials. To arrange the interviews, telephone the contact people and arrange a convenient time and place to meet (ideally, a place that promotes candid discussions).

When meeting with residents and community groups, it is essential to be sensitive to their needs and remind them that the purpose of the interview is to gather preliminary information for planning an appropriate program for citizen participation. This should prevent unrealistic expectations. Remember that the primary purpose of community interviews is to collect, rather than disseminate, information. Assure interviewees that their statements will remain confidential and that no specific statements will be attributed to any individual without his or her permission. Ask interviewees if they would like their names, addresses, and phone numbers on the contact list, which is

appended to the community relations plan. Finally, during the discussions, ask for names and phone numbers of other people who could provide additional information (4).

Benefits. The views of citizens and elected officials are often not stated in the media. Community interviews are relatively inexpensive to conduct and useful for gathering qualitative information about community opinions, expectations, and concerns regarding your operations. These interviews also may lead to additional information sources and lay the groundwork for building an open, honest, and positive relationship between your company and the community.

Limitations. One typical problem with community interviews is the way respondents are selected. Those interviewed may not truly represent the diversity within the community. In addition, interviewer bias may influence the analysis of information gathered. Those responsible for conducting the interviews should be sensitive to various points of view and not dismiss one account as being less factual or accurate than another. It is risky and inadvisable to use the results of community interviews as the basis for community relations program planning on the assumption that they are representative of target publics. The results of the interviews may represent only the opinions of the vocal minority rather than the majority. Community interviews are viewed simply as explorations for developing program strategies or as pretests for developing formal research.

Focus groups

A focus group is a structured research approach that typically includes a carefully selected group of 6–12 representatives from a target public (i.e., employees or local residents or businesses) who are asked to discuss a specific issue in depth. Experts generally suggest the selection of a homogeneous group so that participants will be able to relate more easily to one another and talk more freely. It may be useful to develop a recruitment or screening questionnaire to identify which participants are most appropriate. Participants are usually offered some reimbursement for their effort.

The key to the success of a focus group discussion is an effective moderator who is an able interviewer and facilitator of group process. The moderator and sponsoring organization will prepare a discussion guide in advance to lead the focus group. Open-ended questions are asked to elicit qualitative data about important issues related to a project or investigation. Sessions are typically held at special research facilities that can be observed and videotaped through one-way mirrors. The moderator will transcribe and review the tape of the discussion and prepare a report summarizing the activities of the group, objectives of the study, and the results obtained (5).

A more informal alternative, such as a small group discussions, can be of great value. Group discussions simply involve making a presentation to a select group, having participants fill out a reaction form, having a group discussion, and listening carefully. Or they may involve discussing a list of issues and concerns and monitoring feedback. To maintain integrity in your findings, it is important to follow these guidelines:

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1. Prepare an agenda in advance.
2. Select a good interviewer who is interpersonally sensitive and perceived as neutral on the subject.
3. Select a group that does not include topic experts or will not bias the study.
4. Have someone take notes or record the discussion.
5. Don't assume that the results are representative of an entire target public.

The primary purpose of focus groups is to explore how and why people react to proposals, messages, or issues. Focus groups enable a company to gather information for more formal quantitative research methods. Focus groups are useful for pretesting ideas, messages, and proposals before launching a program.

Benefits. Focus groups can provide quick qualitative information. Discussions can lead to the discovery of important issues that were not anticipated at the outset. Focus groups are quite useful for revising communications materials, making them more effective for a target audience, and for anticipating possible reactions at public meetings.

Limitations. Even when participants are carefully selected, focus groups are not suited for estimating population characteristics. Focus groups are not as intimate and do not lay the groundwork for an ongoing relationship with the community as community interviews do. They are not a substitute for ongoing dialogue with people. Table II lists some of the limitations of focus groups.

Formal research methods

Public opinion polls

Formal research methods are designed to provide objective, systematic data gathered from scientifically representative samples. Formal methods, including mail surveys and telephone surveys (or public opinion polls), are useful for obtaining quantitative information about public opinion and attitudes representative of a large population (i.e., the United States or county residents). The steps involved include defining the target population to be studied, determining the population size, and selecting a sample that will provide representative data for the entire population. A questionnaire is then developed and pretested on a sample of respondents. After the survey is pretested, the study is conducted and data collection begins. The adequacy of both mail and interview surveys depends on the sampling procedures, the quality of questions asked, and how the questions are asked.

Benefits. Mail and telephone surveys can be useful for providing baseline data and as tracking studies to monitor shifts in public opinion over time. Formal research provides one of the most reliable ways to measure the results or outcomes of your community relations efforts. Advantages of mail surveys include considerable savings of time and money, flexibility (they may be completed at the respondents' convenience), greater assurance of anonymity, standardized wording,

no interviewer bias, access to respondents not readily reached by interviewers, and opportunity for respondents to take time to gather information needed to complete the survey. Advantages of interview surveys generally include increased response rate and control over the sample, greater flexibility in dealing with respondents, more control over conditions under which questions are asked, control over the order and completeness of questioning, and the opportunity to record responses not covered by the questionnaire.

Limitations. The biggest disadvantages of mailed surveys are that the researcher has no control over who responds, and low response rates are typical. Unless all respond, there is no assurance of an unbiased self-selecting sample. There is no assurance that the intended respondent completed the survey. If a respondent does not understand the question, he or she cannot ask for clarification, and the quality of the response is in question. It is also difficult to get and maintain current mailing lists. Some disadvantages of telephone surveys include the cost and potential influence of interviewers, inconvenience imposed on respondents, less anonymity for respondents, and difficulty contacting those selected in the sample (6).

Conclusions and recommendations

In addition to addressing technical challenges of operating a mill, pulp and paper companies will need to earn consent and support from a variety of stakeholders to achieve their goals. Community relations efforts enable companies to gain cooperation and support when open and honest relationships are cultivated with the community over time. The best time to build an open, honest relationship and discuss potential problems with your community is when the climate of opinion is positive—not when a crisis has made it hostile. If a company does not have objective baseline information on community concerns about its facility, it should conduct a community relations assessment. The information obtained through research methods such as community interviews, focus groups, and public opinion polls enables a company to identify and effectively respond to community concerns. 11

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