



# Communicating With Your Members About Environmental Issues

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This advice from Dr. Rossi appeared in Volume 4, No. 1, 1995 issue of *THE 19th HOLE*, publication of *AgrEvo USA Company*. B.J. Bilas, *AgrEvo* manager of communications, gave permission to share it with *GRASS ROOTS'* readers, as did Dr. Rossi.

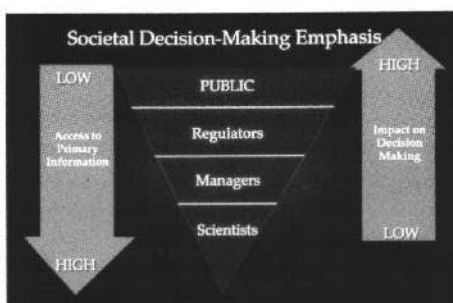
The recent political campaign provided an interesting insight into the current state of environmental advocacy in the United States. Few, if any, regional or national campaigns embraced any particular environmental issue, as was common in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Does this suggest that support for environmental advocacy is waning? Not likely.

The golf turf industry is an easy target of environmental interest groups for economic and sociological reasons. Economically, an estimated \$2.5 billion per year is spent on golf turf maintenance. Sociologically, golf courses are located largely where most of the people are — in urban areas. In addition, golf course management is a service industry, providing a quality golf course for people. As a result, people in the turf industry are a direct link between agriculture, the environment and the urban populations. People look to you for answers!

Studies show that public perception of environmental issues is significantly influenced by global environmental catastrophes, such as the nuclear accident at Chernobyl or the Valdez oil spill in Alaska. Interestingly, in September, 1994 an oil spill 8 to 10 times that of the Valdez occurred in Siberia, yet very little attention was given this event. Most Americans believe they have little power to influence issues on a global scale, so they act locally. The turf industry is not only in their backyard — they maintain it!

The public directly impacts the decision-making process for regulatory issues. Considering the primary information the public uses, the instability of this system becomes apparent, as

indicated by the inverted triangle in Figure 1. Therefore, golf course superintendents have a responsibility to care for the environment and to effectively communicate their management to an emotional public.



**FIGURE 1.** The general public has a high impact on the regulatory process, yet has low access to primary information.

## Understanding Public Concern

Perception is defined as “a mental image”. Understanding public environmental concern requires understanding how turf management is perceived. Recently, radio commentator Paul Harvey has decided that being on a golf course or being a golf course superintendent is risky. He has stated that golf courses no longer have birds because of pesticide use. Mr. Harvey is expressing his perception of risk.

Risk could be defined as the potential for injury to occur. Risk is minimized by recognizing the hazard (the component that could cause injury, such as a pesticide) and taking safeguards (protective clothing, mixing/ loading facilities) to reduce the potential for injury to occur. The primary components when considering risk are assessment, perception and communication.

Risk assessment involves the determination of actual amount of injury that occurs related to the hazard. For example, when assessing the risk of pesticides to cause disease it is common to use biochemistry to evaluate the effect on living organisms, pathology to determine what disease

may be caused by the hazard, toxicology to determine the actual dose needed to control the disease (LD50), and epidemiology to study the spread of a particular disease. Assessment is a scientific and unemotional process — strictly the facts.

Earlier I introduced the concept of risk perception as a primary factor to consider when understanding environmental advocacy. Golf course superintendents must consider risk perception when communicating with their members.

The final component of risk incorporates an understanding of the facts and the perception to effectively communicate the risk — communication. The goal of risk communication is to provide information that moves the environmental discussion towards a better understanding of golf turf management.

## The Real Concerns

During the confirmation hearings of EPA Administrator Carol Browner, she said, “In a period when people view all sorts of activities as health hazards, a more realistic assessment of pesticide risks could go a long way toward easing public paranoia.” Simply, the public is afraid and when people are afraid (or overly emotional) they do not act in a predictable and rational way.

Sociologists say that people are very emotional about pesticides because detection levels are so low (parts per quintillion). People believe that if a chemical is harmful at any level, it is harmful at every level. New technology like pesticides are generally considered unfamiliar. But the most important reason people are emotional about this debate is that they are urged to do so many things to take care of themselves (seatbelts, exercise diets) that when something they perceive as risky is imposed on them without their consent they become outraged. Don't try to ignore someone's honest concern!

### Effective Communication

When dealing with people who are uncertain about a risk, like pesticide use, it is vital to first acknowledge their concern. Second, it is always best to discuss your values and concerns. More likely than not they are similar to the person with whom you may be speaking (no one wants to contaminate the environment). Finally, as much as is reasonably possible, give the people the power to choose.

Remember the golf turf industry is a service industry. Ask the people about their goals for the golf course. Do they want 100% weed-free turf, fast greens, or a "natural" setting? Next provide them with a management plan to reach their goals, recognizing that under high intensity golf course maintenance, pesticides are required. Finally, based on the primary information you provide, give them some

power to decide and become part of the process. This could easily extend into the community at large with some proper planning and public relations.

Always remember when communicating that it is more than what you say. Appearance, body language, inflection of your voice and other non-verbal issues also determine the effectiveness of your communication. Be innovative to enhance your credibility. For example, you could:

*Use newsletters:* Communicate your maintenance practices with your members, particularly if you are using a new technique or material on the course.

*Institute a management hot-line:* People call a certain number to find out about golf turf management and express their concerns.

*Be accessible:* Don't avoid talking to golfers and the public about your management program.

*Have Maintenance Shop Days:* Use these opportunities to open up the shop for the members and public to visit.

*Use your imagination!* Think of other ways to communicate with your members about maintaining their golf course.

One thing is for sure, environmental sensitivity will continue to rise. But with open communication, it will become more balanced as the public becomes increasingly more scientifically literate. As a turfgrass scientist and educator, I ask: Will we change our behavior through education and research or will regulations and laws be the motivation to change behavior? It's up to our industry to answer the question. I urge you to get the facts, understand them, recognize public perception and communicate effectively about the real concerns. ♣

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