

Hysteria

by Russ McKinney



THE WORD ITSELF goes back to ancient male notions about women. Behavior that men saw as excessive anxiety and emotional excitability were attributed to disturbances in the uterus.

Hysteria still means over-reaction, but it is, of course, not a feminine exclusive—nor is it confined to the public sector. Industries are just as capable of reacting hysterically—and so are news media and professional environmentalists. In fact, the whole development of environmental awareness over the past 20 years and the resulting, and still ongoing, regulatory changes have been dogged from the beginning by hysteria on all sides. No doubt the hysteria has made everyone's job more difficult.

In an age of unprecedented information, when we all have more facts about everything, why is hysteria still a problem? The short answer is because people's lives, their livelihoods, and their futures are at stake. That clouds and compromises everyone's judgment. It also means that most of us tend to approach the unknown, not with scientific curiosity or journalistic impartiality, both of which require extensive training and experience to develop, but with hardened hypotheses . . . guns at the ready.

The recent comments by Dale Miller, chief executive officer of Sandoz Agro, are based on a similar point. Speaking at a meeting of the National Association of County Agricultural Agents, Miller said, in effect, that pesticide producers should put their guns down and put their energy into cleaning up their act. Over-glowing reports about benefits and inadequate responses to the real problems created by the industry have destroyed its credibility with the public, according to Miller. The question is how to get it back.

I recommend facing "the facts." As a business reporter, I repeatedly found that the facts were a better guide through the forest than strongly held pre-conceptions—my own or anyone else's. In getting to know the field of turfgrass management, I have been impressed by the array of complexities involved and the multitude of fronts on which real progress is being made. Stick with the facts: if they aren't on your side, then you are going the wrong way.

Part of the promise of new knowledge, which represents liberation from hysteria and ignorance, is lost, because we abuse it—by using it to help rationalize our existing ideas, values, and work habits, instead of using it to improve them. This is true for environmentalists as well as industries, and journalists and academic researchers also have to maintain constant vigilance against this tendency.

Of course wonderful as our new knowledge is—many questions always will remain unanswered. There always will be plenty of room for prejudices, conjectures, and honest differences of opinion. So, we all need to respect our shared limitations and our fundamental right to have different opinions.

Ultimately, given the cloud of self-interest and the limitations of our objective knowledge, I think we always will need checks and balances—like the Constitution and the marketplace. Arguments for depending on self-imposed restraints sound much better than the reality of what they produce, which is frequently no real restraint, no real protection for the other sectors involved, and no real progress.

In his controversial remarks, Miller pointed out that "every time we do not speak out or act against the few bad actors in agriculture, we are responsible for the creation of more restrictive laws and regulations." His point is well-taken. If you feel your industry is hurt by over-regulation, you first need to look at what you yourselves are doing to help create a climate of public distrust.

How can the industry regain its lost credibility? First, stop trying to blur the distinction between impartial editorial content in the media and paid advertising. The media shouldn't be for or against anyone. They should be looking for the facts, and that is what you should give them. If you want to advertise your products or your views, pay for the space—and don't try to disguise it as something that it isn't.

Most importantly, if you create bad news, stick to the facts and deal with the consequences. I have dealt with people and companies involved in major industrial accidents, charges of conflict of interest, and a host of other tacky situations. From my experience, the most effective crisis managers weren't the ones who pretended there was no crisis.

On the other side of the coin, if you want to create good news, earn it the old fashioned way: do something newsworthy. ■

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