

Community relations *will enhance your image*

It's what people don't know that scares them. So make your community outreach a way of letting people know about your responsible pesticide use, and any projects that might otherwise cause an uproar.

by STEVE & SUZ TRUSTY

People have a hard time coping with the unknown.

Stress rises as we wait for the results of a medical test. The "downsizing" trend is a certain cause of worry among many. And when it comes to suspected groundwater or food contamination by pesticides, the unknown is especially close to home.

So, how do you move from the unknown to the known, and into your community's comfort zone?

First, get your act together. Whether your company is in the spotlight by choice or involuntarily,

you must be able to prove you're one of the "good guys" for you to have any chance of surviving public scrutiny during a crisis or perceived crisis.

Examine all aspects of your operation, to insure your services are based on sound agronomic principles geared to the precise needs of individual properties. Review the effectiveness of your IPM program. Make sure you are using the appropriate products in the safest form, and that company personnel are applying product properly. Document training and safety programs. Keep good product use records.

Visually check the course's building and property, all equipment and vehicles and company personnel. Does the image you project match your desired level of professionalism?

When all internal systems are in order, you're ready to reach out.

Reach out to community

Use prepared resources provided by associations with your own advertising and direct mail as a starting point for your course's community outreach. To become a "known" and thus non-threatening entity, you need to become a visible, reliable information resource.

Make the message easy to hear;

High profile sites are frequent, easy-to-hit targets of anti-pesticide commentaries in print and broadcast media. Be prepared to explain the benefits of your course to the community and environment.



Tips on lobbying

A big facet to public relations these days is telling your story to legislators, the people who sometimes pass laws before they know all the facts relative to certain issues. Here's some suggestions on what to do to get your story before your senator or congressman. -ed.

1) Develop a relationship with your lawmaker before it is needed.

Attend a fundraiser, if you like. Essential, after you meet a congressman or senator, send a letter of thanks. Try to cross paths with legislators, and send a follow-up letter after each meeting. Get to know the staff in the capitol and district offices, since they read your letters first.

2) Know the issues. Write a clear, concise message, make points quickly. Know the status of important bills, sponsors and other key information.

3) Know who you face on the opposite side of an issue. Know who shares your opinion and use that information wisely.

4) Respect their time. Legislators' days are not always very glamorous, and they are always busy.

5) Tell the truth. Be frank regarding the whole situation, including the opposition.

6) Know how the issue relates to and will affect the lawmaker's district, and make certain they know you are a constituent.

7) What do you want them to do? Tell them, and pay attention to what eventually happens. Acknowledge the outcome in a letter.

8) Never mention issues and fundraising together. Don't refer to your campaign contribution



or how you voted.

9) Make your communications effective. Use short promotional pieces and save the longer analysis for staff. Don't use videos unless you view them together at your meeting. Phone calls, fax and e-mail are okay. No postcards.

Condensed from remarks by Bev Hansen, Californians for Compensation Reform, speaking at the 1997 Green Industry Legislative Conference. Source: GCSAA's "Green and Grassroots."

Residential communities often border golf courses. Turf maintenance programs thus affect players and residents. Plan to communicate pertinent information to both groups about your total turf care program and procedures.

be available. Offer to speak at community groups, neighborhood associations or garden club events. Deliver a message tailored to the needs of the group and gives them information they can use, rather than a "sales pitch."

Use facts and figures you can back up, but don't get too technical. Allow sufficient time for questions and answers. Leave them with worthwhile handout material that lists your company's contact information. Tell reporters you welcome follow up phone calls for additional information.

Work the media

Many people rely on the print and broadcast media to "distill, condense and dispense" informa-

tion for them. With no way to analyze news stories, the public often believes everything they read, whether or not the report is accurate.

It's therefore important for superintendents to become an information resource for their local newspapers and radio/TV stations.

Begin by introducing yourself to the appropriate people and provide worthwhile input on pesticide issues.

Anticipate issues, track legislation

After you break the ice, keep the lines of communication open. Supply accurate, timely, pertinent information. Respond immediately to any requests for information, and respect reporters' deadlines.



You can use public areas to explain the benefits of turf, from on-site demonstrations or a seminar on turf maintenance.

Be an information provider

Communication with the public and media is equally important if you "sell" recreational opportunities made possible by your services rather than your direct services.

This applies to golf courses, schools, parks and recreation facilities and sport turf sites.

Because of the high level of maintenance required for the most visible turf areas around these facilities, and the need to fit certain maintenance procedures into limited blocks of time, the actions of crew members may be observed and those actions may be questioned.

In addition, these high profile facilities are most likely to fall under scrutiny at the community, regional and national level. Every spring brings an onslaught of commentary—passed off as news—in the print and broadcast media about the dangers of pesticides and the overuse and abuse of pesticide products, especially on golf courses and public-use areas.

Communication with the community and media is both easier and harder for turf managers at these facilities.

Happenings at your facility are of interest to many within the community and thus will be deemed worthy of coverage by the media.

General turf care information can be included in

Certain "hot topics" earn national attention, while others become vital concerns at the regional, state or local level.

Track pending legislation through your national and regional golf course association. Monitor the discussions and actions of your community's elected officials, boards and councils and appointed advisory groups. Anticipate issues by learning who is concerned about what, how intense the concern is and what actions could be expected if controversy arises.

Then, if a problem or crisis develops, you're in a position to tell your story first, accurately and honestly. And, you have a chance that your story will be heard. □

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the facility's newsletter or posted on a bulletin board.

Pre-season or off-season seminars on turf maintenance can be conducted at the facility. It's easier to establish "how to do it" plots on site because you have control of their placement and can manipulate user traffic patterns to insure the plots are seen.

You can alert facility users and those living near the facility of scheduled maintenance, explain why it's needed and what it entails.

But since all your facility users are your "bosses," whatever you do or intend to do can become a point of discussion. The scrutiny becomes even greater when the facility is supported by tax assessments.

If your average facility user aerates once a year, fertilizes twice, averages one weed control and one insect control application per year, and mows once a week, no matter what the turf growth rate, expect your maintenance program to appear excessive without adequate explanation.

Use informal sessions, print materials, charts, graphs and, if possible, demonstration plots to illustrate the effects of stress, wear and compaction on turf and to show how your management program works to overcome those negative effects.

S.T.