



The 'Toxic Legacy' series in the Fontana Daily Bulletin blamed pesticides, air pollution and toxic dumps for death and illness.

Take action on local issues

A local issue has arisen that threatens your business or industry. The issue is primarily driven by emotion, not fact, and is gaining media attention. You have been asked to get involved. Here's what you do .

By PARRY KLASSEN

When a contentious issue arises in a community or

region, make personal contact with every potential ally familiar with the issue. Or-

ganize a meeting or conference call with all interested parties. This meeting should include persons or companies directly impacted by the issue, as well as those who could be impacted in the future. Benefits of a face-to-face meeting as opposed to a conference call:

- ▶ provides the opportunity to learn

where everyone stands on the issue;

- ▶ facilitates development of an action plan and gives moral support to those impacted by the issue. Other like-minded people find they are not alone in fighting an issue and that action is being taken.

Gather local articles written about the issue and related issues from other areas to distribute at the meeting. Gather published industry information to provide facts and background for letters, speeches and other correspondence.

Develop a plan

Begin developing a plan of action. This should contain several key points:

- ▶ Define your objective. An objective should briefly explain what the group aims to accomplish from a big-picture perspective. It should be a simple sentence or two that does not include specific tactics.

- ▶ Outline key audiences. Identify primary and secondary audiences to target for the most impact.

- ▶ Name allied organizations (current and potential), individuals, companies, institutions and government agencies that can provide support, ideas and make other contributions to the group's objective.

- ▶ Identify issue leaders. To the extent possible, identify one or two individuals (especially if you are not local) who will serve as local issue team leaders. These individuals will coordinate activities and organize meetings.

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Self-made obstacles: how industry defeats itself

Don't let this happen to you:

- 1) **Lack of willingness to be "out front"** Some people prefer not to lend their names or companies to an issue for fear of attracting negative publicity. There is always this possibility, but the result of doing nothing can be more damaging in the long run.
- 2) **No support from would-be allies** Often, it seem that obvious allies will not participate in coalition activities. Efforts must be made to overcome reluctance.
- 3) **Lack of momentum over time** The issue may "drag" over time, making it difficult to maintain high action interest by coalition members. Regular updates to the coalition will keep your members alert to the issue.

► Contact industry associations. Make sure all related trade associations are aware of the issue and its development. Include them in relevant correspondence

► Identify local experts who can provide information or support for the group's position on the issue. Experts could include county or state health officials, university extension agents and other third-party sources.

► Create messages. Use these in conversations, correspondence and to build support for the group's action.

Develop 'action items'

Media relations. If the issue is expected to have continued media coverage, organize a media visit to the local newspaper editorial staff (or local TV/radio stations if appropriate).

► meet with "editorial writers" if you want to have an opinion page editorial written about the issue.

► meet with the "editorial staff," i.e. reporters, managing editor, business editor, etc., if you expect future news coverage of the issue.

Editorial staff visits should be organized very soon after an issue breaks. Reporters need contacts, names of experts and sources who understand the group's position, to cover the issue fairly.

Send a thank you letter immediately after a media visit. If future coverage is balanced and/or favorable, commend the individual reporter for his/her fairness. If the contact is by letter, make sure to send a copy to the reporter's managing editor.

Letters to the editor. In the case of reaction to newspaper articles, organize a quick "letter to the editor" writing campaign. Ideally, these letters should come from local business people and/or concerned citizens. For the greatest impact, letters should be written immediately after an article runs. Everyone should write a letter.

Make sure to keep copies of published letters to use to build support. Follow up by phoning the newspaper if a letter is not printed. Ask for a reason why it was not printed.

Trade press contacts. Consider contacting the trade press to inform them of the

issue. Depending on the situation, the trade press can be a great ally in communicating to others in the industry about the issue and might help those in other regions of the country facing a similar issue.

Organize Community Relations. Many civic organizations (Kiwanis, Rotary, etc.) allow guest speakers to address meetings on specific issues. This can be an important way to reach community decision makers and business people. The "Ambassador Speakers Program" from ACPA and RISE offers assistance in giving presentations.

Set-up a timeline. After the group meeting, establish a timeline for completion of all assigned tasks. Set deadlines and assign people to complete the tasks.

On-going issue management. For a long-term issue, identify someone to be the key contact in the community.

This person can help coordinate correspondence, watch for developments in the issue, and serve as the go-to contact. This is ideally a local person with strong interest in the situation.

Exchange names/addresses. Develop a



The Green Industry needs to explain the benefits of healthy lawns, and give clear explanations of chemistry.

PHOTO BY LAWNSCAPES.

Case study: managing the offensive

An April 18 article in the Fontana, Calif. *Daily Bulletin* announced that the state would not study whether (alleged) health problems were caused by toxic substances (i.e. pesticides). This was in response to citizens' calls to investigate (through a request by Assemblyman Bill Leonard) whether the deaths of three young girls last summer were caused by exposure to "pesticides and other chemicals," as the paper says.

Officially, the deaths were blamed on Prolonged QT syndrome (which is of genetic origins, not a man-made illness—ed.)

Those three unfortunate deaths have been the focal point of organizing efforts in Fontana by several activist citizen groups, including "Pesticide Watch" and "Center For Community Action and Environmental Justice." Earlier this year, these groups held several public workshops on how to organize locally and influence changes in a community.

Days after one such meeting, there were organized pickets at a Fontana City Council meeting, where demands for an investigation into those deaths were made. This demonstration was also shortly after the *Daily Bulletin*—the local paper that is supportive of these groups—ran a series of critical articles entitled "Toxic Legacy", where everything from pesticides to air pollution and old shut-down toxic dumps was blamed for causing a long list of illnesses in the region.

The newspaper recently reprinted the series in a 16-page section, which appeared on the newsstands in early April.

Earlier this year, calls to Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE) by Carl Clifton of Landscape Systems of Montclair and Scott Bangel from the City of Fontana Parks Department prompted the formation of our own small group of concerned business people and local organizations. Our group, which we named "Citizens For Accuracy In Environmental Sciences," met several times to formulate a plan on how to respond to the *Daily Bulletin* and questions from concerned citizens/customers.

Get out and be heard

One action we organized was a visit to the editorial staff of the *Daily Bulletin*, which was held last week (April 15).

Attending the meeting were Carl Clifton, Landscape Systems; Karen Watts, Western Farm Service; Dr. Bob Krieger, toxicologist, UC Riverside; Pam Bennet, San Bernadino County Health Department; and me. From the paper, two managing editors, a city editor and senior editor were in attendance. Unfortunately, the reporter who wrote the most slanted articles did not sit in on the discussion. My impression was that the editors were a bit taken aback by how critical our comments were on their coverage of pesticides. Karen Watts and several others (all living in the circulation area of the paper) expressed disappointment in the one-sided coverage the paper had been providing in the recent past compared to its long standing reputation of balanced coverage. They seemed to be surprised at the reaction we've been getting from citizens and their concerned questions about pesticides.

They said their response on the "Toxics" series was running about 50/50 pro and con. The city editors' comment was that they wanted to give people the information to make their own decisions. They also denied "taking on" the pesticide industry. The main issue was one of notification of citizens before spraying in schools, public areas, etc., so people could, "make their own decisions."

The paper's editors thanked us for coming in to express our side of the story, and offered to publish an op-ed piece from us. They also promised to be more sensitive to our concerns of over-dramatizing pesticide subjects, although they thought their coverage had been pretty balanced to date. We left them a list of local pesticide industry contacts plus the RISE materials, "Commonly Asked Questions About Pesticides," the IPM brochure and the piece on cancer. We also left behind a paper slide show prepared by Carl Clifton and myself with a series of comments/quotes from their articles and our

sign-up list of all interested persons including phone, fax and e-mail addresses. Distribute the list to all attendees to facilitate rapid communication.

"It seems like there's always a need for proactive action," says Carl Clifton, Landscape Systems, Montclair, Calif.

"[Reporters] are all looking for tomorrow's story. If it's not on environmentalism, it's about drought, or another issue," says Clifton.

"There is always the need to respond to the latest news piece. You would think there would be more people speaking out on behalf of the industry, but they've got companies to run too. Reporters want to write about wasting water rather than benefits the landscape and lawn bring. Quality of life issues come into play, and industry has to mention what happens when you do away with those things."

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questions about the accuracy and/or source of facts. The editors were interested in getting from us a list of third-party sources (universities, institutes, organizations) who could be contacted for interviews. The group's plans now are to write the op-ed piece (with Carl Clifton of Landscape Systems as the author) and get it to the paper.

Our group will be surveyed about starting a speaker's program similar to the one sponsored by RISE, PLCAA and GCSAA. Some have said they are very busy with business so it's uncertain how many volunteers will step up. We'd like to think the last has been said about this issue, but I'm not holding my breath.

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