

Keeping on Track: Strategies for Dealing with Controversial Public Policy

The Public Relations of Public Policy

Part four of six



Discussion of public relations is an important part of public communication associated with controversial local policy. The application of public relations principles in the context of policy debate is for the purpose of creating an environment where decisions can be made and issues are resolved amicably rather than allowing acrimony and debate to drag on. Public relations principles, techniques, and tips are discussed in the context of public policy making.

What is Public Relations?

Public relations generally refers to efforts to communicate information to the general public in order to win interest or support. Traditionally, it has been a tool used by private corporations to enhance their image, frequently through the mass media. Many federal and state government agencies also have realized the benefit of a strong public relations program.

For many, public relations has a negative meaning. In truth, it is often used to minimize negative perceptions and accentuate a positive interpretation of events. Public relations, however, also can be used as a tool for positive change. It can help focus attention on a community issue and create an environment of constructive collaboration.

Given the busy lifestyle many people lead, there is no shortage of events and messages to compete for attention. In this environment, even important public business can get lost in the jumble. Taking a public relations perspective, the task is first to package the message in a way that communicates how the issue is relevant to the public.

The second task to which public relations can be applied is the creation of an environment where stakeholders with competing interests can communicate and forge an agreement amicably. How a message is communicated is often as important as what is said.

About this Series

Public issues are matters of widespread concern in the community. They are resolved by group decision processes that create local public policy. We often assume the responsibility for resolving public issues is in the domain of government. But as society becomes more complex, and we acknowledge the limits of what government can achieve, we recognize the need for public and private interests to work together. Involving diverse interests in public issues, however, can often heighten local conflict and make the resolution of community issues more difficult.

Keeping on Track, a series of publications for local officials and community leaders, deals with managing controversial public policy. The issues vary, but all too often the problem is the same. Whether it's corporate farming, school bond issues, or new development proposals, communities often get bogged down in controversy, and nothing seems to get done. This series of publications presents strategies local leaders can use to navigate the minefield of controversial public policy so the community can resolve the issue and keep moving forward.

A Public Relations Perspective

Public relations is the act of conveying information in an attempt to influence perceptions. While many equate such efforts with the desire to deceive or "spin" negative news, there is nothing inherently wrong with attempting to influence perceptions.

As applied here, the notion is one of the application of a clear and consistent message in public and private settings in an effort to create an environment where progress can be made and solutions found. Sometimes this



will consist of a firm attitude that change is inevitable or a positive view that compromise can be reached. Such attitudes can be quite influential in making a desired outcome a reality. Further, there is nothing wrong with admitting the effort. The skilled use of these ideas are what constitutes effective public leadership.

Thus, public relations efforts are used in all settings to influence an outcome. It certainly applies to media relations and major community events. It applies equally to the “tone” of a meeting and warmth of a professional relationship. The important point is to be cognizant of the use and utility of a public relations perspective in helping to achieve positive outcomes.

Public Relations Strategies

When a controversial issue creates a volatile atmosphere in the community, an astute and well-coordinated communications strategy can make a difference in diffusing tensions. When controversy can be anticipated, it is helpful to devise a strategy in advance. The strategy begins with a clear statement of what the message needs to be. The message should be clear, simply stated, and consistently applied. Closely tied to this is an explicit recognition of what it is hoped a public relations program will accomplish. Is the goal to inform, to influence, or both?

With the goal and message clear, the task becomes one of identifying who can accomplish what aspect of the program. Public educators schedule presentations to generate awareness of the issue; elected officials formulate plans and a time line for deliberation and decision making; community planners begin structuring public participation opportunities. In some cases it may be best to seek an impartial mediator to provide leadership.

The target audience(s) and their interest in the issue need to be identified. The nature of the message to be delivered must be made relevant to the audience.

Resources will be needed to implement the program. When using public funds, it becomes important to be sensitive to perceptions about the appropriate use of tax dollars. In some cases, a partnership with a private group may be needed. Such a group can solicit private donations to pay for such things as paid advertising to influence an upcoming referendum.

Finally, the public relations campaign needs to be coordinated with the public education and citizen participation elements of an overall communications strategy. Again, the difference in intent and function between the three types of communication should be clear and separate. However, the potential interaction and overall effect

of the judicious and targeted application of all three elements should be considered.

When Controversy Erupts

When an issue reaches the point of active controversy, public officials need to take action. In general, it is best to respond quickly and repeatedly. Too much communication about an issue is not nearly the problem that too little information can be.

The message needs to be clear, succinct, and compassionate, as appropriate. Reasonable opposing views should not be dismissed without expressing empathy or indicating the legitimacy of an opposing view. If a mistake has been made and the consequences of acknowledging it are acceptable, it is usually better to admit it openly rather than stall or deflect.

In explaining the reasons for a given position on an issue, it is sometimes helpful to draw on concepts associated with the alternatives and consequences model used in public education. This is to minimize the values-based reasoning and focusing on the likely consequences of one alternative versus another. Usually, a reasonable explanation based on a rationale of maximizing the positive and minimizing the negative consequences will suffice.

Building a Positive Relationship with the Media

Much of local government’s public relations strategy is tied to local media relations. A positive relationship with the media can result in a powerful ally in creating a positive community environment. To be sure, the media focus on news, and controversy and conflict make interesting news. The first step in maintaining positive media relations is to not disapprove of local media for occasionally publishing or broadcasting news that may be perceived as negative. The longer-term objective is to foster a positive and cooperative relationship.

Perhaps the most powerful inducement local officials can offer media is information. By making information available and being honest and accessible, the local official can encourage more comprehensive coverage. The extremes of an issue are easily identified. Sometimes it requires more effort to recognize the existence of areas of agreement and common ground. With a positive relationship, local officials can encourage the media to present a more detailed picture of events and will be in a position to recruit the media as an ally in educating the public about complex or technical issues.

Common Public Relations Techniques

Most of what has been written about public relations deals primarily with media relations. This view is somewhat constricting insofar as effective leadership requires the application of these ideas in many settings involving public and interpersonal relations. With that caveat, some of the more common media relations techniques are discussed.

Press Releases

A press release is a written summary of the key points to a story or event, usually used to persuade the press that the story or event is worth publicizing. It must be well written, with no grammatical or spelling errors, factually accurate, and exhibit a sense of what news organizations can use. It should be written on official letterhead and marked “press release” at the top. The date, name, phone numbers, and title of a contact person should be easy to find.

Provide sufficient details about the story or event — who, what, where, how, why, when — so a story can be written directly from the release. The most significant information should always come first, followed by less important details.

Put -30- at the end of the release to signify the end. The Associated Press Style Book can be helpful in answering questions about writing press releases well.

Broadcast News

Electronic media differ from print media in placing a greater emphasis on immediacy and quick sound bites. Few stories are more than 30 to 60 seconds long, so the approach is more direct than a newspaper article. A person being interviewed needs to hone the presentation to fit this format if the interview is to be used.

Broadcast media (television or radio) news is managed by news directors. Local officials should strive to build a positive relationship with this person. A reporter may be sent to do a live story, or tape one for editing and later use.

A good interview technique is to use directed language when being interviewed to avoid having only partial information used. For example, a person can begin a response by saying “... the three things we did tonight were ...” This helps keep thought focused and makes partial information unlikely.

Alert broadcast media to potential story ideas with media alerts — brief one-page outlines of significant upcoming events. A media advisory would use a similar

format, but is usually faxed or e-mailed to notify the media of serious, late-breaking news such as a major disaster or resignation.

Press Conferences

Used to make an important announcement and answer questions, a press conference should be called only for something truly noteworthy.

Be aware of media deadlines when setting a time for a press conference. Make sure the setting has ample light, electrical outlets, and seating. Check microphones ahead of time. Be aware of the backdrop for television and photographers.

The local spokesperson should have all the relevant information. After the formal remarks have concluded, reporters are typically allowed questions. At the beginning of the questions, state any ground rules, such as time or topic limits. It is often helpful to provide reporters with a packet of background information to help fill out a story or dress it up with photos or illustrations.

Direct Mail

While often viewed as “junk mail,” direct mail can be an effective public relations tool if a few basic principles are followed. First, the purpose of the mailing should be clear. The mailing should have a clear and explicit message, whether it is to convey information, call for action, or do something else.

Second, the appearance of the mailing is important. Image is critical because it helps make the initial impression. The impression is what will prevent the item from being treated like trash. It takes only a few seconds for the impression to be formulated.

To save money, consider mailing alternatives. A flyer can be inserted into a utility billing at little additional cost. There are also volume reductions for bulk mail. An accurate mailing list also is essential.

A mailing makes a statement about the sender as well as the issue. A mailer that appears sloppy or contains errors does not help the message or the sender’s image. If public funds cover the cost of the mailing, it must appear to be important and an appropriate use of tax dollars.

Advertising

Many of the principles that make direct mail effective also apply to advertising.

There are also many choices for alternative advertising outlets. Newspaper, radio, and television are common. Yet billboards, flyers, or local magazines also may provide an effective means of reaching a target audience.

Unless the staff needed to create graphics and write copy are available in-house, advertising can be quite costly. An issue will need to be of significance to justify the cost of media advertising. It may be possible, however, to secure private funding to support paid advertising.

Advertising can be effective when correctly located relative to the target audience. Newspaper ads tend to reach more highly educated members of the public, while radio and television audiences are more diffuse. Advertising in the newsletter of a particular interest group can be highly effective if that is the target audience.

Public Service Announcements

Public service announcements can be a cost-effective method of using television and radio to inform the public about an issue or event.

In meeting requirements to provide public service, many broadcast stations will air PSAs. However, the type, timing, and frequency is up to the station's Public Service Director. Once again, having a positive relationship with this individual may be helpful.

Each station usually has a preferred format for PSAs. Using that format will increase the likelihood the PSA will be used. Some stations want written copy, while others prefer a taped message with a simple written introduction.

Written information should be on official letterhead and include a contact person and telephone number, the start and stop dates, the length of the PSA in seconds, and a copy of the PSA, on tape if necessary.

In general, a 30-second PSA contains about 75 words. To have an impression, a PSA needs memorable language and repetition. It should focus on one message. The use of jingles, alliteration, or slogans can help make the message memorable.

Public Relations Pitfalls

The local media often serve as the conduit for information between local government and the public. The tone and content of news coverage help shape perceptions of stakeholder groups. When local officials begin receiving calls and complaints from constituent groups, they become much less likely to support new initiatives. This makes it all the more important to work carefully with local media to ensure the messages conveyed are clear, accurate, timely, and positive. To avoid problems that

sometimes occur when working with the media, there are a few pitfalls to avoid. **Do not:**

- try to tell journalists how to do their jobs;
- complain about unfair coverage or mistakes unless they actually make a difference in perceptions or understanding of fact;
- pester the local media about running a story;
- overuse news releases, letters to the editor, or other communication;
- tell a reporter something "off the record" unless it is agreed to in advance;
- speak to a reporter in casual conversation about anything that cannot appear in print;
- send out written materials that contain factual, grammatical, spelling or syntax errors;
- comment on topics about which little is known or where the authority to comment is lacking;
- delay in responding to a reporter's inquiry; or
- prohibit any local government staff person from talking to a reporter, but do have a clearly identified official spokesperson for potentially controversial issues.

Even in smaller units of government, it is important to establish guidelines for media relations and to communicate them to elected and appointed officials and staff. The work of local government is too important to allow carelessness, mistakes, or errors in judgement to cause unnecessary problems.

In responding to interviews, there are a few more pitfalls to avoid. In answering questions, **do not:**

- "stonewall," or refuse to address an inquiry or avoid questions of accountability;
- "whitewash" an issue, minimize the effects of a mistake, or downplay concerns;
- set up a "smoke screen," or hide the truth to buy time or look better; and do not
- "block and blame," or try to distance oneself from an error or seek someone else to take responsibility.

Of course, all of these guidelines assume there is no pending or potential litigation related to the matter being questioned. In such an event, it is best to offer no comment at all.

Conclusion

A key element to the resolution of any public issue is the capacity to present an issue favorably. In this publication, a number of ideas about how to create an environment conducive to the resolution of community issues have been presented.

In addition to the ability to communicate effectively, other elements to resolving public controversies include demonstrating leadership capacity and the ability to resolve conflicts and disputes. These topics are included in other editions of this series.

This is one in a series of publications dealing with the issue of managing controversial public policy. The entire series includes:

- Leadership in the Public Arena
- Informing the Public Debate: Public Education Strategies
- Meaningful Input to Public Policy: Citizen Participation Strategies
- The Public Relations of Public Policy
- Successful Negotiating Skills
- Resolving Multiparty Disputes

Individually or together, these resources are intended to help local officials and others develop greater leadership capacity.

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