Public Relations Considerations in Incinerator Plant Location

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Abstract

Engineers are charged with the responsibility for locating public works facilities required to provide vital services necessary to the health and welfare of the public. They are becoming aware of the need for a special public relations effort if proposed plans are to gain public acceptance. This public relations effort is particularly necessary when the proposed facility is an incinerator.

This paper describes one approach to the problem and describes some of the pitfalls to avoid.

Introduction

All of us are engaged in continuous public relations efforts in varying degrees as we conduct our day-to-day business activities. Some projects require only a minimum of effort to gain public acceptance, while others, such as the location of an incinerator or a sewage treatment plant, require an intensive, well-planned campaign of public education if the projects are to gain public approval.

Frequently the local opposition to a new incinerator location is well organized. Just as frequently many opposition leaders become over zealous in their efforts to thwart all attempts by the client and the engineer to present the true benefits of the planned project. I use the term client and engineer together because the public relations program must be a joint effort on their parts to be successful. Only the client can state his policies and position and, usually, only the engineer can outline the technical aspects of the project.

History

In Baltimore City we found ourselves in the position of having to try to overcome a well-organized opposition which had been defeating all efforts to locate a much needed incinerator for a period of over two years. Part of the problem came about when Baltimore City and adjacent Baltimore County began discussions which were planned to solve the refuse disposal problem on a modified metropolitan basis. City residents immediately took the attitude that Baltimore County was going to solve their problem. Opposition to the joint effort was not evident until it became apparent that the proposed county site was only a few hundred yards from the proposed city site. When this information was made public, residents of Baltimore City then began to oppose both proposed locations and we were almost back at the beginning.

At about this time it became apparent to everyone in the city government that a program of public education must be initiated if a plant were ever to be constructed. It was decided to produce a motion picture telling the story of incineration and showing the proposed solution to Baltimore City's problem, and our firm was engaged to produce the film. The film was limited to the Baltimore City approach since this would still be of value in the event that the metropolitan concept did not materialize.
It was also considered necessary to have the residents of Baltimore City in agreement on incineration as the desirable solution to the refuse problem even if Baltimore County constructed the plant. This philosophy was based on the fact that the Baltimore City Council would have to ratify any agreement with the County, and the citizens within the City, adjacent to the proposed county site, could block passage of the agreement through their representatives on the City Council.

Because of the importance of gaining public approval without further obstacles, we engaged the services of a public relations consultant and a professional motion picture producer to assist in the production of the film. Of course, neither of them knew anything about incineration; however, they were proficient in their fields and many of their ideas were used.

Script

Several factors must be considered in producing a public relations film. It is necessary to determine the length of time the film should run in order to tell the story before the audience becomes bored. The film you will see today is thirteen minutes long, which is within the ten-to-fifteen-minute limit normally considered reasonable for maintaining the interest of a captive audience.

It then became necessary to select a theme around which a script could be written. We decided that the film should accomplish certain basic tasks. In the first place it was necessary to show that incineration is the method for disposal used successfully in many areas. It was necessary to indicate advances in technology of incinerator design. It was also considered desirable to show that a modern incinerator can be operated in a nuisance-free manner.

From these basic ideas we conceived a plan to show advances in many areas so familiar to the people that they are accepted without question. Once this theme was established it was an easy task to follow with examples of modern incinerators as the natural evolution over the open-burning dump. This set the stage for describing the problem and showing the proposed solution for Baltimore City. The script was then prepared, by the public relations consultant with our technical guidance. After several script submissions the final script was written and filming began.

Film Production

Conferences established the photographic approach which was to be used in the filming to correlate it to the script. Of course, many feet of film were exposed at each location in order that the final editing could match the script.

At about the time the filming was reaching the final stages, the work began on the sound track. The narrator was selected not only for the quality of his voice, but also because he was a well known local television personality with a reputation for integrity. The background music was selected and the volume-mix ratio between music and voice was decided upon.

When the editing of the film and the sound track tape were complete, the film was color corrected, the lip movement synchronized with the sound track, the sound track incorporated on the film, and the premier showing set.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Here, again, special consideration must be given to public relations. It is of vital importance that the film be shown to various officials in the order of their importance before it is made available to the general public. It is also important to show the film to members of the general public whose endorsement of the project is essential for its success. When all of these people have been satisfied then, and only then, is the film ready for showing at public meetings.

There are several pitfalls to avoid in the production of a film such as you will see today. It is absolutely necessary that the film truly depict the narration without the use of trick photography of any kind. It is also important to decide in the beginning just what use will be made of the film. If it is to be used on television, several clearances are required for the music and narrator which are not otherwise needed. Copyrighting of the film is inexpensive and should be applied for as a matter of course.

Ownership of the final product is another area where a carefully worked out agreement or understanding is necessary if those participating in its production are to receive full credit. The film negative may become the property of the producer, the client, or the technical supervisor having the film produced for the client. Ground rules then follow for possible purchase and use of the film by others.

A rule of thumb for cost of such a film is $800 to $1000 per minute of the finished film, and prints usually cost about $16 per minute, so you can see the advantage of determining control of the finished product in the beginning.