

SHOULDERING CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITIES

*Community relations is not based on pure altruism;
it looks to the organisation's self-interest.*

Community relations, as a public relations function, is an institution's planned, active, and continuing participation with and within a community to maintain and enhance its environment to the benefit of both the institution and the community.

An organisation's community relations may be affected by such diverse factors as its recruitment methods, employee relations, waste disposal, energy use, design and maintenance of buildings and grounds, marketing and advertising strategies, and corporate philanthropy.

The quality of an organisation's employees, the cooperativeness of citizens and governmental agencies, the patronage of community members, the ability to attract financial support - indeed, the success or failure of an organisation may depend on the effectiveness of its community relations.

Special audiences for community relations include women, children, and minority groups.

Employment of the disadvantaged, stimulation of minority business enterprises, provision of basic housing, and many other issues have caused companies and other organisations to become more involved in community activities. Constructive community relations programmes are characterised by phrases like "corporate citizenship" or "good neighbour".

Community relations has long been a business priority. Indian businessmen fully share the social concerns and preoccupations of their fellow citizens. Although they have often been depicted - indeed caricatured - as single-minded pursuers of profit, the facts are quite otherwise.

Shining examples of corporations shouldering corporate responsibilities include the concept of virtual classrooms, courtesy one of India's biggest corporate houses, Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL). As part of its social obligation, HLL has decided to adopt 100 odd schools in 28 backward areas where its factories are located and promote education in rural India. HLL plans to use its satellite based communication network, linking over 200 company locations to air live educational packages aimed at children in rural India thus leveraging technology at its disposal.

The company's Vsat links will air educational packages covering several schools. An accompanying benefit of these packages is to equip communities with the knowledge

base for sustainable development, ensuring clean, green and healthy habitation. The audio visual packages on education and basic health have been made by an NGO.

Another appropriate example is the response of over 150 companies including SBI, Maruti, MTNL and NIIT to an invitation from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. MCD has realised its inadequacy in maintaining civic standards in the city and has invited corporations to adopt hospitals, parks, garbage dumps, dustbins, dispensaries, primary schools and community halls for maintenance or sponsorship. MCD is cooperating with NGOs to oversee each project that is undertaken.

Often organisations have viewed community relations as an extension of employee relations, tying programmes together. Employees who are treated well represent their organisation favourably through volunteer activities and informal communication. Employee volunteer activities have become a major community relations tool in large corporations such as Citibank. In fact, managers are assessed on performance in these areas by their immediate supervisors as part of their normal performance appraisals. The company regards corporate citizenship as a central plank in its strategic plan. By doing this, the company provides an example of the corporation's commitment to community relations backed by its resources and managerial experience.

Public Relations Spotlight

Employee Volunteerism: A Complement to Corporate Philanthropy

Volunteer Programmes and projects have the ability to unite employees by focusing them towards a common goal, by bringing them together in more relaxed friendships outside the work place. As any volunteer will explain, the real rewards of volunteering stem from the knowledge that someone else has benefited from your efforts.

Once the company has successfully matched its volunteers with appropriate organisations, it must continue to stimulate employee interest in the programme through newsletters, bulletin board displays, seminars, and other continual reminders. Luncheon meetings will encourage volunteers from various departments to share their experiences with one another and may serve to create informal volunteer networks to reinforce recruiting through word-of-mouth. Constant recruitment of new volunteers is vital to the success of any employee-volunteer programme and will help prevent employee burnout.

The company must not forget to recognise its employee-volunteers, whether by giving extra vacation days, certificates of appreciation, or awards. In some businesses, extra monetary compensation is offered as a thank-you for outstanding volunteer work. A company must never take its volunteers for granted; volunteerism is not part of employee job descriptions but a service provided in addition to regular duties.

If managed properly, employee-volunteer programmes constitute a "win-win-win" situation for all involved: NGOs, companies, and company employees all

benefit in numerous ways.

An appropriate basis for institutional efforts toward good community relations is derived from an understanding of the nature of community.

An Interdependent Relationship

Effective community relations depend on recognition of the interdependence of institutions. Management helps establish a social balance when it recognises the many ways organisations can have an impact on their local communities and the extent of reciprocal dependence.

Organisations of all types practice community relations. Schools and colleges, temples, churches, hospitals, museums, and groups like the Red Cross and the blood banks depend on community relations the way businesses depend on marketing - as the primary means for attracting "customers".

At the very least, an organisation expects the community to provide adequate municipal services, good living conditions for employees, an appropriate labour supply, and a reasonable degree of support for the company and its products. In addition to employment, wages, and taxes, communities expect from their institutions an attractive appearance, support of community institutions, economic stability, and a focus for hometown pride.

Positive community relations can affect worker productivity when an organisation sponsors community health and education programmes. Also, favourable community attitudes may influence worker attitudes toward the organisation. The appreciable community relations programmes are those that take cognisance of community needs, like TATA Steel has done in Jamshedpur.

The Community Relations Process

Community relations must be built into the structure and culture of an organisation. The community relations process embraces all aspects of an institution. In some ways, good community relations simply mean good performance. A company that offers poor products and unsatisfactory service is unlikely to benefit from positive community relations. Good community relations consists of recognising and fulfilling the organisation's responsibilities in, and to, the communities in which it operates.

It is maintained that even the internal standards of the organisation have a bearing on its community relations. A community becomes to a large extent an expression of the values, aspirations and achievements of its businesses. Thus, the internal standards a corporation sets for itself and for the members of its organisation have an influence that carries down through the work force and out into the community.

Arguably, community relations is an organisational attitude or state of mind, rather than any specific process or practice.

Determining Objectives

In a very general sense, community relations seeks to inform the community about the organisation and its products, services, and practices. It should correct community misconceptions and reply to criticism while gaining favourable opinion and support. Some general community relations objectives could be: obtaining support for legislation that will favourably affect the operating climate in the community; determining community attitudes, knowledge, and expectations; supporting community health, education, recreation, and cultural activities; gaining better access to local government; assisting the local economy in purchasing local supplies and services; or even provide some income generation support to the local community.

General objectives, however, will not suffice for specific institutions. Every community relations programme should have a written policy clearly defining management's view of its obligation to the community. Specific community relations objectives should be spelt out so efforts can be co-ordinated and concentrated. Failure to set forth concrete objectives kills too many community relations programmes before they get started.

Community relations policies and objectives are not determined according to idealistic principles. They arise from assessments of organisational needs, resources, and expertise on the one hand and community needs and expectations on the other. Before meaningful policies and objectives can be developed, the organisation must know its community.

Knowing the Community

Stated simply, "A basic ingredient of every good community relations programme is the necessity for officials up and down the line to know their community".

Of course, standard information about the community is useful to management. Demographic, historical, geographic, economic, and other readily accessible data are essential, but real knowledge of the community such as:

- the community structure
- formal and informal leadership structure
- the prevailing values
- particular problems of the community
- local economic situation
- local political situation
- the unique resources (human, cultural, natural) possessed by the community
- what does the community know and feel about the organisation?
- do the organisation's neighbours understand its products, services, practices, and policies?
- what are the community's beliefs about the organisation?
- do misunderstandings about the organisation exist?
- the community's expectations regarding the organisation's activities

The answers to such questions are not necessarily easy to obtain. Moreover it requires frequent monitoring. Local NGOs in the region provide useful information. So do the professional, civic, religious, or government officials and media editors through face-to-face meetings.

Explosive issues of population, jobs, literacy hunger and vehicles choking our roads and lungs need urgent attention. From the community relations standpoint, these are opportunities for corporations.

What ails India?		
Hunger	Human Poverty Index China - 17.5 per cent India - 36.7 per cent	53 per cent children above the age of four remain under nourished
Vehicular traffic		Number of vehicles in India rose from 0.3 million in 1950 to 25 million in 1998. In Delhi 166 vehicles per km. For Mumbai the figures is 455 per km
Illiteracy	Literacy China - 73 per cent India - 53 per cent	India has almost 2.5 times more illiterate people than the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa
Population	China - One billion+ India - 954 million	India's population will cross China's 1 billion mark in the next 50 years. India is a third of China's size
Unemployment	Market growth index China - 24.67 India - 8.7	In India almost 37.6 million people are on the streets with seven million being added to it every year

Channels of Communication

Community communication has no single audience. Messages reach communities through employees, their families, and local media. Other important communication channels consist of a community's opinion leaders: public officials, professionals and executives, bankers, union leaders, and neighbourhood leaders.

The communication channels through which community audiences are reached may range from an informal chat over lunch at a Rotary Club meeting to advertisements in local mass media. In-house publications, brochures, and annual reports dedicate at least a page or two to this area in most companies. Companies like National Grid Company of UK print special community relation newsletters annually to inform their audiences of the company's efforts in this direction. At TATA Steel, it became the theme of their advertising campaign.

A uniquely community-oriented method of organisational communication is the open house, which can be very effective if well planned and executed. Successful open houses provide small group tours of organisational facilities with knowledgeable guides.

Public Relations Spotlight

Guidelines for an effective Community Relations Programme

1. Know your community. Political skills, deep understanding of community problems, and the ability to resolve difficulties in an unfamiliar cultural setting are requisites for some activities. Special expertise of NGOs such as *Partners in Change* may have to be enlisted.
2. Develop an organisational community relations policy. Careful effort should be made to specify the objective top management wishes to achieve. The organisation may seek many objectives - reputation, experience with potential future payoff, stability of environment, and so on - but whatever it seeks should be established in realistic and concrete terms.
3. Spell out specific objectives. Base the policy on an assessment of organisational needs, resources, and expertise and on community needs and expectations. Following are some sample objectives: attract more employment applications from women and minorities; improve community awareness of the organisation's contributions; improve relations with local government; improve the local school system to make the community more attractive to potential executives and professional employees; improve the quality of local colleges for more effective recruitment; and so on.
4. Alternative strategies should be explored and choices made. If an organisation wishes to improve housing conditions in a city in which it operates, for instance, possibilities for action range from partially funding research into new ways to build low-cost housing to actually building such housing.
5. Review your organisation's policies, practices, and procedures. Are they consistent with sound community relations?
6. Consider especially the following issues: waste disposal; employee recruitment; employment policies (layoffs, compensation, overtime); noise or traffic problems; maintenance of organisational facilities and grounds; advertising, signs, marketing; and energy sources and energy waste.
7. Impact of a community relations programme on the organisation and the community should be anticipated. Offering training for jobs that will not exist when the training is concluded helps no one.
8. Attention should be paid to the likely total costs of a not-for-profit action and to the volume of the organisation's resources that may legitimately be allocated to community relations. It is not advantageous to either the organisation or the community if the organisation suddenly discovers a given programme is costing too much and abruptly stops all community service.
9. Utilise all means to communicate with the community. These may include employees, local media, open houses, local clubs and organisations, local advertising, direct mail, newsletters, brochures, annual reports, movies, exhibits, and so on.

10. Involve your company in local organisations. Do this by sponsoring employees who wish to join civic and professional groups, providing speakers for meetings, lending facilities for meetings or activities, sponsoring contests and programmes for youth, support fund-raising activities, and so on.
11. Evaluate the community relations efforts. Measure to determine the extent to which objectives have been achieved. Be prepared to develop new strategies if current programmes fail to meet expectations.

It is important in the interest of both the organisation as well as the community to develop and support a sustainable programme as opposed to a one time effort. Some simple examples of the appropriate programmes suited to their business include:

- “Health Lines” established by hospitals to provide health information services
- The banquets at hotel companies usually result in large quantities of surplus, which may be distributed among the underprivileged
- Income generating schemes for the weaker communities of society: like enabling them with special incentives on the sale of products
- Newspaper running a consumer grievance column
- Foster talent in arts and culture
- Instituting scholarships and chairs at local universities
- Pharmaceutical companies can sponsor medical vans with required medication for the rural communities that lack suitable health infrastructure
- Publisher can institute a library at schools and colleges

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit’s workshop - Emerging Constituencies, held in New Delhi on September 18, 1998)