

THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR RIGHT-TO-KNOW
Why Your Facilities Need to Be Talking to Their Neighbors Now
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**HAVE YOU TALKED TO YOUR NEIGHBORS LATELY? HAVE YOU HEARD
WHAT THEY HAVE TO SAY?**

These two questions are asked in the new *Community Awareness and Outreach Toolkit*, published by the Synthetic Organic Chemical Manufacturers Association (SOCMA). The publication is designed to help facilities jumpstart their environmental communication efforts. For many members of the chemical industry, the answer to both of these questions has too often been "no."

Even with the rapid expansion of the public's right-to-know, many chemical facilities have found it difficult to start community outreach. Facilities have plenty of excuses for not taking a proactive approach: time, money, personnel needs. But while the Responsible Care® and RMP Communications Planning binders are collecting dust on the shelf, a revolution is taking place in the way that the public receives information about the chemical industry:

- ?? Internet Web sites such as the Environmental Defense Fund's (EDF) Chemical Scorecard includes right-to-know information that is available to the public 24-hours-a-day.
- ?? In cases where facilities have not taken a proactive approach, right-to-know initiatives have left the public with a wealth of negative information about industrial operations but no positive data or reason to trust industry.

The right-to-know process is gaining momentum. EDF's High Production Volume (HPV) Chemical Challenge was quickly adopted last year by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has asked chemical companies to participate voluntarily or face mandatory compliance under a new test rule to be issued by Dec. 31, 1999.

IF A CHEMICAL COMPANY REDUCES ITS EMISSIONS AND NOBODY HEARS ABOUT IT, DOES IT MAKE A SOUND?

While the public has easy access to negative information about the chemical industry - even without industry's active involvement - the public is not receiving a positive message from the industry. The chemical industry saw major reductions in releases of both toxic chemicals and suspected carcinogens from 1991 to 1997, and the accident rate for the chemical industry declined 32 percent. So what is the public's opinion of the industry?

Twenty-five percent of people living near chemical plants have a favorable view of the industry, according to a Chemical Week survey. Only 8 percent have heard of Responsible Care®.

Even the Chemical Manufacturers Association's (CMA) slogan for Responsible Care®, "don't trust us, track us," has been seriously called into question by a recent survey that the United States Public Interest Group (US-PIRG) conducted. The survey shows that only 22 percent of CMA's member facilities could or would answer seven questions about basic facility operations and on-site chemicals. (See the complete survey at <http://www.pirg.org>.)

The right-to-know process continues to increase in both scope and speed. People now have access to more information more quickly than ever before. And chemical facilities that have not opened the lines of communication with their neighbors may soon find themselves unwillingly drawn into the process - under circumstances that will leave them on the defensive and subject to public concern, or even outrage.

SOCMA has developed the Community Awareness and Outreach Toolkit to help chemical facilities prepare for right-to-know policies of the future. The toolkit emphasizes key principles that can establish a solid foundation for communication efforts. One of the underlying ideas of the toolkit is the importance of building relationships over time with local communities and other key audiences. Such relationships can exist only when there is a consistent, long-term dialogue among the parties involved. This dialogue includes the exchanges of specific information about key right-to-know topics; it also involves many other issues - those that can be identified only by getting to know the community.

Members of the chemical industry need to develop community outreach and public communication as a regular part of their day-to-day business operations.

ARE YOU READY FOR THE "SEVEN QUESTION SHOWDOWN"?

SOCMA's Community Awareness and Outreach Toolkit allows you to test your facilities' preparedness level with a "Seven Question Showdown," patterned after US-PIRG's survey.

Imagine that it's a Tuesday afternoon in March, and the phone rings at one of your chemical facilities. Nothing unusual has been going on at the plant. There have been no odor complaints, no releases. In fact, most people in the neighborhood don't even know the facility is there. The caller identifies herself as a local resident, interested in talking to someone who can answer a few questions about the plant's operations and potential impact on the surrounding community. The secretary who answers the phone is suspicious, but transfers the call to the facility manager, who then finds himself facing a barrage of questions:

- 1. What are the names and amounts of chemicals that could cause cancer or birth defects that you brought into and shipped out of the facility last year?**
- 2. Can you tell me what chemicals may cause cancer or birth defects that workers are exposed to at the facility?**
- 3. Do you make products at the facility containing chemicals that are toxic or could cause cancer or birth defects? If so, can you tell me the names and amounts of toxic chemicals that go into the products you make at your facility?**
- 4. Have you had any accidents involving the transportation of toxic or hazardous chemicals to or from your facility in the past five years?**
- 5. Have you made available to the public your internal emergency management plans, including worst-case scenarios for accidental chemical releases?**
- 6. Does your facility conduct toxics use reduction or source reduction planning? If so, have you made available to the public your facility's toxics use reduction or source reduction plans or goals?**
- 7. Does your facility routinely collect data on how toxic materials move through the plant, including all aspects of product stewardship?**

Questions like these would not be easy, or pleasant, for any facility manager to answer. But by answering these questions, the facility manager builds trust with the public by showing that he is serious about sharing information. It's important, though, to keep in mind that these questions are much easier to answer if they are not the first issues ever discussed with the community member posing the questions.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

One of the goals of SOCMA's Community Awareness and Outreach Toolkit is to help chemical facilities break out of the "inside the box" thinking that keep them from communicating with their neighbors. The toolkit contains principles, strategies and practical steps that facilities can use to support right-to-know communications.

Companies are encouraged to start thinking "outside the box" about community outreach to identify the value of regular, consistent communications with the public. These core concepts are discussed at length in the toolkit, but merit a brief discussion here.

1. We're too small to do outreach.

Your facilities currently have no budget, no activities, no personnel allotted, not much of a community outreach program, but seemingly just right for such small, unobtrusive, mostly unnoticeable facilities. Before you start counting up all the time and money you've saved, consider this: your facilities already are involved in their communities; it's just that they are operated without a plan, leaving all the decision making and the power to somebody else. Even a small chemical facility can be the object of the public's wrath, especially if people feel the risk has been hidden from them.

2. Our facilities do a good job environmentally - so we're okay.

A solid environmental performance is certainly essential to a facility's efforts to be a good neighbor. However, a successful relationship can be achieved only when environmental performance is joined with regular communication and trust. Especially in situations where there is no record of communication between industry and the public, people will use their general impressions of a facility to form an opinion about whether or not the operation is a good neighbor. Every facility is vulnerable in some way to public questions, concerns and even outrage. What impression would you have of a facility if all you knew were determined by the "vulnerability points" listed in the chart (bottom of page)?

3. If we talk to people, they'll just get upset.

Sometimes after years or even decades of silence, an industrial facility will suddenly find itself engaged in an active and heated dialogue with its neighbors. The events precipitating the communication could be a minor chemical release, something that poses a small risk but requires a large response from the fire department and other emergency responders. The next thing you know, angry citizens are showing up at the gate, protesting against the facility, demanding a public meeting, and yelling at the facility manager when he tries to have a civil conversation with them.

Granted, people are upset, but are they angry because the facility manager is talking to them?

Peter Sandman has discussed the features of a risk that can lead to outrage. Is the risk voluntary or involuntary? Is it controlled by the individual or the system? Is it natural or industrial? Is it fair or unfair? The technical level of risk will certainly concern people, but these "outrage factors" and others will help determine their level of anger about the risk and will influence whether a risk is perceived as more or less risky.

4. Our people are already overworked. We don't have time or money for outreach.

While it would be wrong to insist that a facility can achieve an effective communication and outreach program with no investment of time or money, it is nonetheless true that the most important investment is a change in perspective: paying attention to facility

neighbors with an understanding attuned to potential concerns; reviewing facility operations through the perspective offered by vulnerability points and outrage factors, seeking opportunities for community involvement both inside and outside the fence line. These efforts may take time, but they provide a long-term return.

It is true in business that what gets measured, gets done. In order to make outreach a vital part of facility operations, it needs to be included as part of employees' job descriptions and as an integral component of day-to-day business operations.

VULNERABILITY POINTS

HOW DO YOUR FACILITIES SCORE?

- ?? **Things people can see, smell, hear (e.g. odors, clouds of steam, noise)**
- ?? **High volumes of emissions or hazardous wastes**
- ?? **History of community or employee health complaints**
- ?? **History of unexplained odors or releases**
- ?? **Presence of "dreaded" substances known to cause cancer**
- ?? **Poor facility housekeeping or appearance**
- ?? **Proximity to sensitive locations, including schools, nursing homes and hospitals**
- ?? **Reports of health problems among school children or staff**
- ?? **Proximity to important scenic or cultural sites**
- ?? **Active presence of organized environmental groups**
- ?? **History of poor community outreach**
- ?? **Lack of risk and crisis communication**

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

The SOCMA *Community Awareness and Outreach Toolkit* includes communication strategies for getting started in community outreach, particularly concerning the important role that needs to be played by frontline employees. It explains why facilities should "think small" in planning their initial outreach and why listening is typically a more important part of the communication process than talking.

The toolkit includes "Ten Steps in the Right Direction" - ten practical actions management and employees can take right now to get the process started. Additionally, the *Community Awareness and Outreach Toolkit* directs you to SOCMA and CMA resources available to assist with all aspects of your communication program.

And you'll have a better understanding of why you need to make use of these resources *now*.