"PLASTICS PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT"

by

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Thank you for inviting me to talk with you today about "Plastics Public Relations and the Environment."

I believe that you and I have a lot in common. While I am not supposed to be more than a part-time practitioner of public relations, our environmental responsibilities are giving me lots of practice. I'll guarantee you I've had to become experienced in a hurry.

You know, this is really a great time for you to be in chemical public relations. I doubt if there is any more demanding public relations job anywhere else. You know you have quite a set of responsibilities -- to your profession, to your companies and to your industry. And, in fact, you have a responsibility to the well-being of the nation as a whole.

Your role must rise above mere partisanship. I don't mean to imply that all at once you must cease to be advocates for your company and its cause. But I do mean that the hackneyed concept of the public relations man as an advocate and nothing else is forever dead and buried.

By and large we can attribute your new pre-eminence to the changing concept of the corporation among the public at large. Corporations are no longer viewed solely as economic entities that buy labor and materials and convert them into products and services at a profit. Rather they are viewed in their totality as social entities that affect the entire fabric of our life in a variety of ways.

Public expectations of corporations today are higher than ever before.
Nowhere is this more evident than in the current outcry for consumer and environmental protection. No industry is more affected by these demands than the chemical industry. And no individual is closer to the battleline than the chemical public relations man.

The proper function of the public relations man today was forcefully presented recently in a speech by Harold Burson, chairman of Burson-Marsteller. He said: "As I see it, there are three basic objectives of a public relations program in any of these new social situations, whether it be environmental, ecological or consumerist.

"The first is to help calm the situation -- on both sides of the dispute -- so that the issues may be the subject of reasonable discourse.

"Second, we must help bring about reasonable standards of environmental (or ecological or consumer) control equitable to all elements of society.

"And third, public relations must gain the time needed to realistically implement the program that will solve the problem."

To calm the atmosphere, the key element is credibility. For many business leaders the most incredible idea of all is the thought that many people actually don't believe what corporate management says. Yet the truth is that corporate credibility in environmental and ecological matters is extremely low.

The reason is obvious. We have to admit that most of the business community faced up to the environmental issues with reluctance, and only after its hand was forced by expressions of mass public disapproval and threats of crippling restrictive legislation. To regain credibility, a corporation or an industry must demonstrate genuine concern for the environment. I stress
the word genuine. Of course, sincere statements aren't enough. A company must be prepared to back up its words with hard cash invested in environmental programs.

Your first responsibility here, as I see it, is to make sure that your management fully comprehends the hopes and fears of the general public. Whatever their private opinions may be regarding the criticisms and the people who voice them, management must listen. Only then can management's response be meaningful. Only then can credibility be restored. Only then will there be dispassionate discourse. Only then can we begin to change the minds of some of our critics.

What about the second point: reasonable standards of control? This does not mean business should throw up its hands and beg for regulations. It does mean that each corporation can't possibly cope with the problem all by itself and that the standards that apply to one should apply to all. It also means that we must have regulations to decide who is going to pay, and how, and what share of the responsibility belongs to industry and what to government on the Federal, State and Municipal level. Most important, regulations would help define the kind and degree of environmental damage we are willing to accept -- or are prepared to eliminate.

Writing standards may not be the job of public relations, but you must help create reasonable and enforceable standards by setting the groundwork for rational discourse.

The third objective, gaining time, may be the most difficult of all. The pressure for pollution abatement now is enormous, and in all likelihood it will
increase. It is your responsibility to communicate your company's case while controls are being developed and while the company's pollution control program is being implemented. That is a rough assignment.

Now let's turn to plastics and solid waste and evaluate the situation in terms of Harold Burson's three points.

In the first place, as the ecological clamor rose during the past year, your managements had to deal with the more immediate problems of air and water pollution. For most of them, plastics and solid waste was a distant third among pollution priorities. Besides, 1976 wasn't exactly a boom year and management had to deal with many urgent problems.

During the past several months it has been fascinating to watch corporate managements come alive to the ecological challenges posed for plastics. We have been able to gauge the reactions in several ways. First, we've seen the timing and the manner with which companies have joined in SPI's Environment Program. Second, there has been a steady stream of calls, letters, and visits from people with newly-assigned environmental responsibilities. Then, there have been the corporate statements of policy on environment, the press releases, and the other indications that a program is underway.

There's no doubt that awareness was accelerated on the basis of "whose ox was being gored." At the outset it was PVC bottles. Then polystyrene was singled out. A letter from General Motors asking for disposal answers from their reinforced plastics suppliers brought a fast awakening. The process continues, and only gradually comes the realization that all plastics are involved.
It's also becoming evident to more people that plastics waste management may become a more difficult challenge than either air or water pollution. The ultimate solutions for air and water problems are largely technical. Not so with plastics waste management.

In plastics, we have a very special problem: today many people are convinced that plastics have serious disposal consequences. When we tell them this is not so, they don't want to believe us. When we investigate the criticisms, we usually discover that the critics are quoting each other. Or else they are misquoting the Battelle Memorial Institute report on plastics we issued three years ago. Actually, there is very little solid evidence against plastics in disposal, and even this is being misinterpreted. As with others, our problems are compounded by the paradox that while many editors are very sceptical about statements made by businessmen, they will print virtually any environmental accusation without checking it out.

Of course, not all of our challenge is in public relations, just as not all of the air and water problems are technical. There's much to be done on technical solid waste matters especially in re-use and re-cycling. However, the toughest job - yours and mine - lies in communication. Two-way communication.

Now, that's the problem. What have we been doing about it?

Under Harold Burson's point one, calming the atmosphere for dispassionate discourse, we have been particularly busy. While SEI's Environment Program also encompasses the safe manufacture and safe use of plastics, we have had to concentrate on solid waste. At the very least, it's reasonable to say that we have made progress in alerting and mobilizing the plastics industry.
Incidentally, in today's report I don't propose to cover the specifics of our program or position. Such information is available from the SPI office any time you need it. I am presuming that most of you have already seen our material.

Information on plastics waste management has also been given to a great many others, including government officials, environmentalists and key editors. We have met with as many of them as time has permitted. As you know, there have also been radio and television appearances, plus some coverage in the general press. Our present budget has forced us to concentrate on opinion-leaders; we don't have the resources to do much with the general public.

Although there are bad days as well as good days, I do believe we are on good terms with many of the key people; the discourse has been dispassionate, and there is better understanding.

Harold Burson's second point is the developing of reasonable pollution standards. In plastics waste management, this pertains to technical data and to the techniques of disposal and reclamation.

Our Plastics Waste Management Committee, actually formed in 1968, had already accumulated a great deal of information prior to 1970. However, the process has certainly accelerated during the past year.

There has been a great deal of input from other parts of the world, thanks to the study conducted for the Manufacturing Chemists' Association by DeBell and Richardson. We've also participated in all kinds of conferences and meetings, from Oslo to San Francisco. There is good liaison with many private and public organizations involved in solid waste and especially with the trade associations for other materials.
Started a year ago, our incineration research program with Professors Kaiser and Carotti of New York University is nearing completion. We hope that the results will be ready for publication later this spring.

As many of us have studied the situation, we have come to realize that disposal solutions are available here and now. We realize that there is no technical solution solely within plastics: we have to work closely with many others to help bring about progress.

The basic solution lies in a total systems approach. This calls for modern, sophisticated collection systems. Plastics refuse bags are a big plus.

Where land is available, sanitary landfill will work well. For most urban areas new non-polluting incinerators will be needed. Some, if not most of them, will be power plants, utilizing the heat content of the refuse, especially the plastics. Maybe some of them will actually be pyrolysis units.

Capabilities for grinding and separating refuse are closer than most people realize. The paper, glass and metal industries are gearing up to utilize more of the "urban ore" thus generated, and we in plastics have to be ready as soon as we can. Right now we're not ready, but don't bet against us.

Meanwhile, in my opinion, the public doesn't yet realize what it's going to cost to do the job right. They are certainly aware of the problem, and they are clamoring for instant solutions.

This brings us to Harold Burson's third point, buying time until solutions can be achieved. We have already bought a year's worth, and I have the feeling
and some evidence that we are running out of time.

Ever alert to their constituents, the politicians have clearly seized on the environmental issues, and not just air and water pollution. Many bills or regulations are being considered right now. Fortunately for us, to date most of the solid waste bills have been to bar non-returnable bottles and cans. But on March 10, New York's Environmental Protection Administration begins hearings on two proposed new bills which single out plastics for very special treatment. Simultaneously, Los Angeles has a proposed new ordinance which would ban the burning of any plastics in hospital or other special incinerators. More are on the way.

Our competitors, both companies and trade associations, have been quite enlightened. All of us realize that there is no point in knocking each other; we know we have to work together. The paper industry, for example, stands to lose a lot more business to plastics in the seventies. Still, the American Paper Institute and the leading paper companies do not resort to unfair tactics.

Naturally, there's one maverick: Keyes Fibre Company. They are cynically misusing ecology to defend a market against polystyrene trays and cartons. They have been guilty of the worst kinds of mis-statements and fear tactics. What they're saying damages all plastics, too. They are alarming the public and scaring some retailers into switching back to pulp. A vigorous counter-attack is now being mounted.

This specific problem ties in with a subtle shift that has taken place in the attacks on plastics. While we're sure that we have fostered a more
reasonable attitude among many opinion-leaders, their earlier criticisms of plastics have been read and believed by your neighbors and mine. We face a "grass roots" challenge now.

Probably most of you have had the same kind of experience that I have had lately at cocktail parties, defending plastics. Plastics World's Chuck Cleworth says he hates to go to them now; he always seems to end up in a big environmental argument with somebody's wife.

Recently, a number of thoughtful plastics executives have told me that what's needed is a major public relations effort to gain understanding, acceptance and credibility. I certainly agree, but I'm not going to propose such a program until I hear from many more people.

My reason is that I don't think that the industry is convinced yet (or sufficiently alarmed) to put up the kind of money which will be needed. Sooner or later, we're going to have to gear up. The sooner we move, the more effective and the less expensive the program can be. If we wait until the panic button time, it will be more expensive to try to do everything at once. For the time being, we can at least think about the kinds of image-changing public relations techniques available to us. Our target is the general public - plus the politicians elected by them. Consider: a well-presented booklet on the ecological advantages of plastics to be mailed out broadside; a schools program; TV film clips; columnists, feature writers and TV commentators persuaded to speak in our behalf; full-page ads; movies or slide films for women's clubs, Rotary and similar groups. We have a good story to tell and really nothing to hide. All we need is ... but not yet.
Of course, there's nothing to prevent individual companies from large-scale environmental public relations. Many of your companies are already deriving great benefits from your efforts. However, no one company, or even a few of the largest, can do this job. Clearly, the situation calls for collective action in the interest of really reaching all of the public economically and effectively.

Meanwhile, we have one resource in our industry that we haven't really mobilized yet: manpower. We now need a "persuade your neighbor" program.

Under the Environment Program, SPI has just about completed a Speakers' Bureau plan, with a pattern speech and supporting information. We will soon announce a related Environment Grid, made up of men who have agreed to serve as listening posts and spokesmen in their home territories. Special emphasis will also be given to building closer liaison to Congress via member companies' Washington representatives. This is only the beginning.

Now I'd like to challenge you to organize programs within your own companies, mobilizing all the employees to serve as spokesmen for plastics. Through your employee newspapers, meetings, and special written materials you could really do a job.

Every day now SPI hears from members calling our attention to some new local outrage against plastics. They ask that SPI do something about it. This has led to an editorial entitled "Communicating is Everyone's Job" in "Plastics and the Environment" bulletin number 8 of March 8.

The message is simple: "Talk to your neighbors... Let them know what the facts are... The plastics industry's story will be far more believable when it
comes from you, a local resident... Communicate - your industry's future is at stake."

I can only wish that every company in the industry would send the same kind of message to every employee, backed up with a brief review of the facts, and the real solutions.

As far as the facts are concerned, we've already supplied over 25,000 copies of "Plastics and the Environment." We also have a one-page ad reprinted from "Industrial Ecology. In about three weeks a new and better statement on plastics will be available at the Government Printing Office. It was written by SPI for the National Industrial Pollution Control Council.

Summing up the situation in terms of the Burson credo, the dispassionate discourse is under way and the technical efforts are progressing well. But the time-buying process is about used up.

As a first step. Let's get going on the "persuade your neighbor" program. It will do part of the job, at least - buy some more time. At the same time let's get ready for the all-out communications effort which inevitably lies ahead.

In the past I'm sure that each of us has had many private thoughts about how things really ought to be done in our own organizations. The difference today is that we are at last really being given an opportunity to show how effective chemical public relations can be. Let's prove that we are ready to live up to our own aspirations and opportunities and to the new responsibilities being given to us.