

Winning the Battle AND The War

As a “concerned citizen” I often (probably *too* frequently) find myself in the situation of trying to fix some type of community problem — high property taxes, septic pollution of lakewaters, large scale groundwater withdrawal, propagating wind towers, etc., etc.

Through years of valiant efforts — often successful but sometimes not — one thing I have learned is that **being right isn't enough**. As a scientist, this concept is *not* intuitive to my way of thinking. It generally seems to me that the facts should determine the outcome.

But no, people being people, that often is not what happens.

This had lead me to a greater appreciation of the value of **Public Relations**. Most people do not understand Public Relations very well, as they confuse it with “advertising”, or categorized as a “pseudo-science” that amounts to a lot of subjective opinions. It's neither.

I now appreciate Public Relations as really meaning “effective communication.” Clearly any issue stands a better chance of being resolved when there is better communication.

Public Relations is most applicable at public meetings, Letters to the Editor, websites, etc. Here is my opinion of what the key elements of good Public Relations are:

1 - KISS.

[Keeping It Simple is a critical element — especially when talking about relatively complex issues. And staying on point is a close cousin to KISS.]

2 - Don't Personalize.

[E.g. when speaking about an “opponent” in public, avoid using their name — or even referring to them. Likewise, emphasize the system's shortcomings rather than theirs.]

3 - State things in the Positive, rather than the Negative.

[The classic example is the half glass of water. There is no loss in the message when it is described as half full rather than as half empty.]

4 - Propose Reasonable Solutions for all Identified Problems.

[Anybody can complain about a problem. People will generally respond more favorably when a good way out is offered as well.]

5 - Develop Rapport.

[*The most important element for being a successful salesperson is to achieve rapport with the customer.* Surprisingly this is possible even when you have severe disagreements with the party being communicated to (who might be your opponent — e.g. a town supervisor).

The best solution to this predicament is this: *make a point of emphasizing where you DO agree with such a person.* An extreme case would be where you disagree with 99% of what someone says — but that leaves 1% to talk about in a supportive, positive way!]

6 - Inject Humor.

[Many local topics (property taxes, wind power, etc.) are rather technical. Humor can keep people's attention, plus send the message that the speaker is a “regular Joe.”]

john droz, jr.

11/1/07

“There are always death and taxes; — however, death doesn't get worse every year.”