

A Public Utility Commission's Public Relations Strategy

SERC and NJ BPU Partnership
Exchange Program

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Sofia, Bulgaria

I. Why Have a Public Relations Strategy?

- To provide accurate, helpful and timely information regarding commission's activities.
- To provide a portal out for information and a portal in for inquiries that the commission can monitor.

II. Public Relations to Whom?

A. The Mass Media

- Press
- Other Publications
- Radio
- TV
- Other

II. Public Relations to Whom?

B. The Government (The Ministry)

- Primarily through the Chairman

C. The Legislature (Parliament)

- Use of the Legislative Liaison Office
- Involvement of the Chairman and other commissioners

II. Public Relations to Whom?

D. Citizens

- Citizen groups.
- Education campaigns for the citizens in general.
- Feedback from citizens to the commission.

III. Who Gets Involved?

- Public Information Office to and from the mass media.
- Customer Relations Divisions: regarding incoming information requests from public and citizen groups.
- The role of the Legislative Liaison Office.
- The Commissioners with citizen groups and the Parliament.
- The Chairman with all of the above as needed, and exclusively with the ministry and the government.

How?

- Press releases
- Editorial board meetings
- Information campaigns
- Public meetings
- Briefings with special groups:
 - Parliamentarians
 - Civic leaders

Conclusions

1. An effective public relations procedure helps to educate all stakeholders (the commission, the government, the industry, the ratepayers) as to what is occurring in the utility sector.
2. It assists the commission in promulgating timely, accurate and well-formulated information about the commission's actions and activities.

Conclusions



3. It keeps other governmental actors informed and in the loop (few if any surprises!)
4. It avoids the negative by-products of lack of positive information, leaks, suspicion regarding future action, lack of involvement, etc.

Examples of Public Relations Activities in New Jersey



- New Jersey Choice Program
- Division of Customer Relations
- The Legislative Liaison Office

New Jersey Energy Choice

- New Jersey's energy restructuring law enacted on February 9, 1999.
- Consumers for the first time have the ability to choose an electric or natural gas supplier.
- An ongoing comprehensive consumer education campaign was designed to allay fears and promote the benefits of the new marketplace.
- This consumer education campaign was named New Jersey Energy Choice.
- The budget established for Energy Choice was \$45 Million for the 3 years (not all expended).

Overcoming Anxiety Over Change

- Educating consumers was an important component for the success of energy competition.
- The consumer education campaign attempted to:
 - Teach people how to shop and how to take full advantage of this new marketplace.
 - Prepare people for third party marketing messages.
 - Assure people that reliability would not change if they selected a new supplier.

Ensuring Objectivity is the Key

BPU

- Oversees entire energy restructuring program to ensure that the provisions of EDECA are met.
- Closely monitored the Utility Education Committee and the consumer education program, and determined the success of the program by measuring the level of public awareness.

Objectivity Cont'd

- BPU Consultant
 - Selected to assist in assessing the progress and effectiveness of the consumer education campaign.
- Utility Education Committee (UEC)
 - Charged with the mission to conduct a comprehensive and unbiased consumer education campaign, which it has labeled New Jersey Energy Choice.

Objectives of Program

- Promote competition and educate consumers about the restructuring of electric and natural gas markets.
- Maintain a positive perception about the concept of energy choice.



Where We Started

- 53% awareness statewide.
- Only nominal understanding and depth of knowledge.
- Though we had a head start in Southern NJ because Pennsylvania's experience was being played out in the Philadelphia media market.

Obstacles We Have Overcome

- Lack of compelling subject matter.
- Guaranteed savings reduce motivation to shop.
- Utilities and state organizations are targets for media and critics.
- Adapting the message to keep with the pace of the rollout of deregulation.

Local Utility Programs

- Targeted marketing
- Shopping guides
- Speaking bureaus
- Strategic partnerships
 - PSE&G and Citizen Action

Measures for Success: Consumer Education Program

- 71% suggest that they are very or somewhat supportive of deregulation.
- 10% reported receiving marketing appeals from competitive energy suppliers.
- 7% shopped around or actively looked for a new supplier.
- 40% understand the term “price-to-compare” in regards to energy shopping.
- 71% report an interest in receiving a shopping guide.
- 27% reported being aware of the NJ Energy Choice Hotline.
- 21% were aware of the NJ Energy Choice Web Site.
- 91% satisfaction rate for NJ Energy Choice Call Center.
- 75% suggested it was very or fairly easy to obtain the information or assistance they required when calling the Call Center.

Division of Customer Assistance

- The Division of Customer Assistance provides the most visible direct communications link between the BPU and the customers of the utilities it regulates as well as licensed third party energy suppliers and resellers of telephone service.
- The Division assists customers in resolving service and billing problems.
- The Division also participates in investigations and research activities related to emergencies.

Division of Customer Assistance

- In addition to maintaining local (973-648-2350) and toll free (800-624-0241) telephone numbers, the Division maintains an Electronic Data Interchange System, which enables major utilities to receive complaints instantaneously over high-speed data lines.
- Processing time is thus reduced and responses are provided faster.

Division of Customer Assistance

- The Division has seen an increase of 27% in the number of customers assisted since 1996.
- For comparison, the Division assisted customers with 10,548 verbal and 3,265 written complaints in the year 1996.
- In the year 2000, the Division assisted customers with 14,377 verbal and 4,439 written complaints.
- In addition, the Division received 1,649 emails from customers requesting assistance or general information.
- The Division received 138,637 telephone inquiries in the year 2000.

Division of Customer Assistance



- With the implementation of competition in the energy and telephone industry, other BPU Divisions, governmental agencies, State Public Utility Commissions and customers rely on the Division to provide information as to how well these companies are serving its customers.
- The Division has received inquiries from 952 different companies in which customers had expressed a problem.

The Legislative Liaison



- The day-to-day interaction between the BPU and the legislature is overseen by the BPU's Legislative Liaison.
- The Legislative Liaison is the primary contact point between the Board and the Legislature.
- However, individual commissioners and legislators do have contact from time to time.

The Role of the Legislative Liaison

- The function of the Legislative Liaison is similar to that of a lobbyist or a government relations specialist.
- As bills are introduced, the Legislative Liaison quickly reviews them to determine if they pertain to the BPU or the utilities BPU regulates.
- If the BPU has an interest in the bill, it is sent to the appropriate department within the Board for review and comments.
- Once the comments are returned to the Legislative Liaison, the President of the Board and senior staff first review the recommendations of the departmental staff.

Coordinating with the Governor's Office

- After a recommendation is determined at the Board, the Legislative Liaison shares the recommendation with the Governor's office, to ensure that it does not conflict with policy set forth by the Governor.
- Once the Governor's office is made aware of the Board's recommendations, the Legislative Liaison next communicates with the bill's sponsors. This is especially true in instances where the legislation may have a negative consequence for the Board, utilities, or consumers.

Legislative Areas of Interest to the BPU

- BPU is primarily concerned with legislation relating to public utilities.
- When a bill is introduced in one of the two legislative houses, it is assigned to a committee.
- Most bills that affect utilities are referred to:
 - The Assembly Telecommunications and Utilities Committee; and
 - The Senate Commerce and Economic Growth Committee

Committee Action

- Any Board concerns surrounding the legislation will also be expressed to the Chair of the assigned committee.
- When scheduled by the Chair, the committee considers the bill at a meeting open to the public.
- The committee may report the bill to the House as is, with amendments, or by a substitute bill. If not considered or reported, the bill remains in committee.

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