Environmental Public Involvement and Outreach: Tools and Commentary

Finding (and using) the right outreach methods for each community

Carol J. Forrest

Public involvement and community outreach activities are intended to convey information to stakeholders and provide opportunities for them to engage in meaningful dialogues regarding issues of concern. In the environmental sphere, the need for public involvement and outreach can arise in a range of contexts: permitting actions, investigation and cleanup of contaminated sites, public complaints about facility emissions or truck traffic, and many others.

Many readers likely are acquainted with the outreach tools we discuss in this article. However, determining which tools to use in a given community—and how best to use them—can pose challenges for seasoned public involvement/outreach professionals and first-timers alike.

About This Article

This article describes outreach activities, events, informational pieces, and other resources that are traditionally used by public involvement or outreach professionals to work with stakeholders. Each description is followed by a list of the benefits that can accrue from the use of the tool, along with challenges that should be considered.

Regulatory Requirements

Requirements related to public involvement are included in many environmental regulations at the federal, state, and (occasionally) local levels. Readers should review any applicable regulations regarding public involvement requirements, and then consider how the tools discussed in this article can be used to meet those requirements.

Social Media

Other than discussing the possible interactive uses of websites (e.g., posting of moderated comments, e-mail notifications), we have not included information on the use of social media for environmental public involvement or outreach. At present, the practical uses of social media are still evolving. As was the case with websites in the mid-1990s, communicators are still learning how best to use these technologies within the public involvement context.

Many organizations are now using media such as Facebook and Twitter (in addition to their official company websites) in an effort to provide a more immediate and participative electronic

Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com)
DOI: 10.1002/tqem.21313

presence. We anticipate that the adoption of new media and technologies—and their use as public involvement tools—will continue to grow as outreach professionals learn how to make best use of them.

Getting the Right "Fit" Between Outreach Methods and the Community

Tools that work well in one community, such as large-group public meetings or availability sessions, may not work well in others. Communication materials that are professionally produced on glossy paper with color illustrations may hit the right note in some communities—but may be viewed by residents of another community as "slick" and evidence of an impending "con job." Thus, understanding the preferences and perceptions of stakeholders is the key to designing effective outreach programs.

We anticipate that the adoption of new media and technologies—and their use as public involvement tools—will continue to grow as outreach professionals learn how to make best use of them.

Communities can also vary in terms of the amount of involvement they desire. For example, in some communities, a simple fact sheet and a relatively informal public meeting can do the trick. This approach can work well if residents rely on a few elected officials, opinion leaders, or local environmental advocacy groups to look out for their interests and give them a thumbs-up or thumbs-down on a project or issue. Such a scenario does not indicate lack of interest. Instead, it indicates a tradition among those stakeholders of taking their cues from others whom they deem knowledgeable.

In other communities, stakeholders may be used to a highly participative decision-making process. In these communities, a public involvement program may require numerous meetings, availability sessions, workshops, reports and fact sheets, and other outreach efforts in order to be deemed a success—even if stakeholders were largely in agreement before the dialogue began.

The key is to tailor your public involvement effort to the individual community. Many different approaches, ranging from simple to highly structured, can be successful in terms of soliciting comments, suggestions, and feedback or garnering stakeholder support (or at least non-opposition)—even though they may require very different tools and levels of effort.

Activities and Events

The sections that follow describe a range of activities and events that may be useful in public involvement and outreach efforts.

Large-Group Public Meetings

Large-group public meetings can be useful for providing information to large numbers of people. When holding these types of meetings, outreach professionals need to find suitable venues and set meeting times and dates that will accommodate those stakeholders who wish to attend. Those responsible for the outreach effort must also publicize the meetings effectively so that interested parties will know about them.

Large-group meetings require agendas and facilitation to ensure that they stay on track and accomplish what they set out to achieve (e.g., providing an opportunity for stakeholders to ask questions and/or make comments regarding a draft permit or providing information on the status of a site investigation). The agenda should be made available to attendees, either as a handout or displayed at the front of the room in a format (such as a slide or a poster) that can be easily seen.

As discussed below, large-group meetings can spin out of control, especially if audience members fear that their questions are not going to be answered or their concerns heard. **Exhibit 1**

Exhibit 1. Working With a Restless Audience

When attendees at a public meeting are anxious to have their comments heard or to obtain answers to their questions, they often find it difficult to sit through presentations. They wonder, reasonably enough, "When are we going to get to the part I'm interested in?" or "When will I get a chance to tell them what I think?" Simply including time for a question-and-answer session on the agenda may not cut it with worried or angry audiences.

In some cases, the public meeting (which may be called a "public hearing" in certain jurisdictions) is being held to fulfill a statutory or regulatory requirement, such as gathering comments regarding a draft air permit. In such a case, the persons facilitating the meeting probably will not entertain complaints about other issues, such as truck traffic rumbling past a local elementary school—even though the truck traffic may be of more concern to attendees than the facility's air emissions. This can lead to anger and frustration on the part of attendees, and it leaves a potentially legitimate issue unaddressed and unresolved.

Different issues can arise in the case of voluntary public meetings that are held to address concerns regarding a facility or project. Stakeholders may worry that their specific questions or comments could "fall through the cracks" at these meetings, which typically are less structured.

How can outreach professionals ensure that important questions or concerns don't go unaddressed, while also ensuring that the rest of the public meeting is as productive as possible? One of the most effective methods is to hold a facilitated session to solicit audience members' questions and concerns.

This session should be held at the very beginning of the meeting. A facilitator will ask persons with questions to raise their hands and then, one by one, will record their questions and comments on a flipchart at the front of the room. Writing down the questions and comments on the flipchart is important. Not only does this demonstrate visually that questions or comments are being captured, but it also provides a record that outreach professionals can use to plan follow-up events or prepare fact sheets that will address issues that weren't covered during the original meeting.

After the questions and comments are gathered and memorialized on the flipchart, the facilitator can go through them in front of the audience and indicate which questions and comments can probably be addressed at the current meeting. The facilitator can then mark the other topics that will have to be addressed later. In many cases, these topics will be ones that require research, the presence of additional technical personnel, or other resources to address. Arrangements can be made to deal with these items at a later date, either at another meeting or by issuing fact sheets or making documents available as hard copies and/or online, via a facility or project website.

Once audience members know that their questions or concerns have been heard and recorded, the main portion of the meeting can proceed. Audience members will be in a much better position to listen (knowing what will be discussed) or to leave the meeting (if their specific concerns are not going to be discussed).

Note that it is important to follow up on any questions and concerns that were raised but not addressed (or adequately addressed) at the meeting. Once outreach professionals solicit stakeholders' concerns in this manner, they need to carry through or risk being viewed as having manipulated the audience for the sake of a peaceful public meeting.

describes a facilitation technique that can help manage an anxious crowd and ensure that their questions and concerns are heard and documented—while still allowing the meeting to accomplish the goals it is supposed to achieve (e.g., providing information and gathering comments on specific, targeted concerns).

Benefits of Large-Group Public Meetings

Among the benefits of large-group public meetings are the following:

- They provide an opportunity to address public concerns or provide information to a large number of people at one time.
- In some cases, residents or other stakeholders may be concerned that smaller meetings or one-on-one conversations might allow outreach professionals to "divide and conquer," or give different information to different people. In such situations, a large-group meeting will ensure that everyone is given the same information at the same time.
- Residents of some communities have traditions of attending large public meetings, and they expect to be able to participate in an audience with other interested community members.
- In cases where the timeliness of information is important (e.g., after an environmental in-

cident, such as a chemical release), holding a large-group public meeting is one of the best ways to get information out quickly—and to receive questions, concerns, or feedback from the community.

Challenges of Large-Group Public Meetings

There are a number of challenges associated with holding large-group public meetings. They include the following:

- Outreach professionals must be prepared to handle big crowds, which means finding a venue that will comfortably accommodate a large number of people. Large audiences can create logistical problems, such as the inability of attendees to hear either presentations or questions/comments from other attendees. This can lead to frustration and missed opportunities for good communication. Outreach professionals must also ensure that adequate on-site resources are available to meet the needs of a large crowd (for example, they need to make microphones available for audience use and have sufficient handouts available). They also must consider what they will do if more people show up than can be accommodated (options here include holding additional sessions).

Large audiences (and some midsized audiences) need to be facilitated in a manner that will ensure their questions or comments will be heard and either acknowledged and answered at the time or documented so they can be addressed at another time.

- Large audiences (and some midsized audiences) need to be facilitated in a manner that will ensure their questions or comments will be heard and either acknowledged and answered at the time or documented so they can be addressed at another time. Often attendees will ask questions or raise issues that cannot be addressed at the meeting itself (e.g., they may bring up concerns about truck traffic to and from a facility during a meeting held to discuss renewal of the facility's air permit). If questions come up that are not going to be addressed at the meeting, an effort should be made to address them at another time or by another means (e.g., a fact sheet).
- Large audiences can be unruly. At worst, out-of-control crowds can lead to violence. But any type of disruptive behavior (such as name-calling or angry outbursts) can taint the public dialogue, requiring significant effort and expertise to bring the outreach effort back on track. Steps should be taken to ensure that the crowd is effectively facilitated to prevent unruly behavior. It can be useful to involve officials and community leaders, such as the fire chief, mayor, staff from the state environmental agency, or others whom residents will regard as knowledgeable, impartial, and/or charged with protecting their interests. Especially in the case of meetings about recent environmental incidents, including officials and community leaders can help keep question-and-answer sessions from getting out of hand.

Small-Group Public Meetings

Small-group public meetings can be especially effective when numerous, diverse stakeholder groups (or stakeholders with differing work schedules) are concerned about an issue. Small-group meetings can be held in any location that will accommodate and be acceptable to those who wish to attend.

Small-group public meetings typically are informal sessions that are meant to encourage the airing of questions and concerns. Even so, providing a preliminary agenda can be useful for getting the discussion started, even if the meeting doesn't follow the agenda closely.

Benefits of Small-Group Public Meetings

Small-group public meetings offer a number of benefits:

- Attendees may be more willing to discuss their concerns in depth or ask questions in a small-group setting than in front of a large group. The discussions that occur during small-group meetings may allow outreach professionals to gain a better understanding of community issues and concerns. In addition, smaller groups provide more opportunity for attendees to have their questions answered in detail.
- Sometimes the issue in question creates different challenges or concerns for different neighborhoods or areas (e.g., truck traffic from a facility in one neighborhood, odors from its operations in another). When this is the case, it can make sense to hold multiple small-group meetings that will allow outreach professionals to address the specific concerns of each particular neighborhood.
- Some people don't like to attend large-group meetings but may be amenable to small, informal gatherings.
- Unlike large-group meetings, which typically require public venues, small-group meetings can often be held in residents' living rooms, at community centers, or in public library meeting rooms. Holding meetings near residents' homes—and at times when they are available—can be especially important for reaching older residents or those who don't have ready access to automobiles or public transportation. (Note: Restricted access to transportation and the need to accommodate irregular, shift-work schedules can be especially important considerations when working with environmental justice communities.)

Challenges of Small-Group Public Meetings

Among the challenges associated with small-group public meetings are the following:

- As mentioned earlier, some stakeholders may view small-group meetings as attempts to "divide and conquer" or tell different "stories" to different groups. When these concerns are present, outreach professionals may need to ensure that large-group public meetings are held at which all relevant issues can be openly aired. However, if some stakeholder groups have unique issues or simply wish to engage in the type of in-depth discussion that a small-group meeting (or one-on-one discussion) can provide, outreach professionals will want to continue with the small-group meetings, too.

Small-group public meetings typically are informal sessions that are meant to encourage the airing of questions and concerns. Even so, providing a preliminary agenda can be useful for getting the discussion started, even if the meeting doesn't follow the agenda closely.

- Small-group public meetings can become burdensome for outreach professionals in terms of time and logistics if stakeholders request or require numerous meetings. On the other hand, if multiple meetings are being requested, this suggests that the stakeholders want to be engaged in dialogue regarding the issue in question, and that the additional effort is warranted.

Presentations to Existing Groups

Making presentations before existing groups can be an effective method for providing information to stakeholders. This tool can be particularly useful in the case of issues with a long "lead time," such as permit renewals. With advance planning, outreach professionals or other project personnel can arrange to address target groups at their regularly scheduled meetings.

Groups that may be willing to host such presentations include local village or municipal councils and county boards (and/or their various committees), civic and business organizations, local environmental advocacy groups, and neighborhood organizations in areas located near a facility or contaminated site.

Making presentations before existing groups can be an effective method for providing information to stakeholders. This tool can be particularly useful in the case of issues with a long "lead time," such as permit renewals.

Benefits of Presentations to Existing Groups

Scheduled presentations to existing groups offer some key benefits:

- Presentations are proactive. They show that the organization wants to be open and aboveboard in its dealings, and that its managers or representatives are serious about communicating with stakeholders.
- The information conveyed in presentations can provide a starting place for dialogue with the community. (Note: Outreach professionals should prepare news releases that cover the main points of the presentation. They should provide these releases to reporters and to others who may be interested in covering the event, such as host-organization newsletter writers. This can help enhance the accuracy of news stories or newsletter pieces that may be published as a result of the presentation.)

Considerations When Making Presentations to Existing Groups

Considerations when scheduling presentations include the following:

- Outreach professionals will want to brief key public officials ahead of time on their plans to make presentations, especially if they need to obtain a spot on the meeting schedule of an official board and/or committee. In addition, outreach professionals should ensure that officials will be in a position to make knowledgeable statements about any planned presentations if reporters or constituents contact them for comments. Very little bothers public officials more than being blindsided by questions from reporters or constituents.
- Outreach professionals should ask about time limits for presentations and determine whether there are any other special etiquette or procedural issues.
- Outreach professionals may wish to tailor the content and terminology of their presentations to the specific audiences they are addressing (e.g., local environmental groups, neighborhood groups). However, it is important to avoid the appearance of telling one group one thing and another something else. Providing fact sheets that give general overviews (as well as definitions of important terms) can help provide a baseline of information. Additional technical information can be made available to persons who may want it, as well as posted on the project website.

Availability Sessions

Availability sessions are events staffed by project personnel that allow one-on-one conversations between these staff members and stakeholders. Availability sessions are usually held at public locations, such as public library meeting rooms. They are held over several hours, during which time members of the public can drop in to participate.

Availability sessions typically feature displays relevant to the issue (e.g., schematics showing emissions control equipment, cross-sections of soil excavation or remediation installations), along with fact sheets and other documents for public distribution. Availability sessions may also include short presentations (either by project personnel or by video). Such presentations can be offered either according to a preset schedule or when attendees request them.

Another staple of availability sessions are sign-up sheets that allow attendees to sign up for mailing/email lists. Many availability sessions also include opportunities for attendees to fill out note cards with questions or comments that they would like to see addressed. Exit questionnaires can provide outreach professionals with an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the event.

Benefits of Availability Sessions

Availability sessions offer a number of benefits:

- They encourage "drop-ins." If the event is held at a convenient location, significant numbers of people may attend.
- They allow the public to speak one-on-one with project personnel and obtain specific information.
- They allow project personnel and outreach professionals to provide significantly more information than is usually the case in public meetings. Information can be presented in several different formats (e.g., videos, displays) in settings that allow participants to study them at their leisure.
- Availability sessions that are sponsored by government agencies may draw participants who would not attend events held by the organization connected with the project. For example, some stakeholders might decline to visit an organization's facility for an open house, even if doing so would allow them to obtain information. They may, however, be willing to attend an agency-sponsored availability session.

Challenges When Using Availability Sessions

The challenges associated with holding availability sessions include the following:

- It can be difficult to publicize availability sessions and make them sound sufficiently compelling so that people will want to stop by. Significant efforts must often go into publicizing these events, especially in areas where residents are not familiar with the availability session format.
- Outreach professionals must be sure to select appropriate locations that are sufficiently accessible to stakeholders (e.g., with parking nearby, accessible by public transportation).

Availability sessions that are sponsored by government agencies may draw participants who would not attend events held by the organization connected with the project.

Tours and Open Houses

Tours and open houses have many of the same attributes as availability sessions. The difference is that they are held at the facility (or property) that is the subject of community questions or concerns. An "open house" is usually an event that is open to the general public. These events often include tours of the facility. The organization can also set up special tours at other times for specific groups who are interested in seeing the facility or property up close.

Like availability sessions, open houses and tours require significant planning and the preparation of communication tools, such as fact sheets, videos, and displays that show diagrams, maps, and schematics. Open houses also require having enough staff members on hand to answer attendees' questions and usher them through the facility.

Some facilities hold open houses on a regular basis to allow facility neighbors, employees' families, and other interested parties to visit. These open houses can be useful for building and maintaining good relations with a community. However, they often focus more on recreation than on providing information regarding a specific community concern, such as a permit renewal or facility expansion.

Benefits of Tours and Open Houses

Holding tours and open houses can provide some key benefits:

- These activities allow attendees to view a facility up close and to speak with the people who work there. This can often create a level of comfort among stakeholders that cannot be achieved from other outreach activities. Both tours and open houses can allow for in-depth discussions (depending on the number of people in attendance).

Holding open houses and tours strongly communicates the message that a facility has nothing to hide.

- Holding open houses and tours strongly communicates the message that a facility has nothing to hide. (Obviously, some manufacturers or waste management facilities may have to restrict access to areas that contain hazards or proprietary equipment or processes.)

Challenges of Holding Tours and Open Houses

The challenges associated with holding open houses and tours include the following:

- The expense and effort required to hold an open house can be considerable. In addition to staff time, these events often involve preparation of written information or displays. Such information resources may be required to explain aspects of the operation that are not directly involved with the particular issue or concern being addressed, but that are nonetheless aspects that people who are visiting a facility and seeing its equipment will likely want to know about. Tours may require less effort, depending on the size of the facility and whether standard tour routes have been established. In some cases, the facility may be able to use information resources that have previously been developed for customers or vendors (either as-is, or with minimal modification).
- Some stakeholders may be reluctant to visit a facility that they view as potentially dangerous (or run by managers they don't trust). Off-site availability sessions are a better bet with these people.
- Visiting a facility, particularly on private property, may be a foreign concept to many stakeholders. Thus, getting people to attend can require more than just publicizing the open house or the availability of tours. It may involve numerous one-on-one conversations with interested parties and opinion leaders to convince them to attend.

If a facility is interested in holding an open house, its managers or outreach professionals should discuss the proposal with stakeholders to get their thoughts on issues such as whether such an event would be of interest to residents, how to promote the event, and when to hold it. If interest in an open house is less than strong, outreach professionals should consider the alternative of simply offering tours to those who are interested. An open house can always be held at a later date if interest in visiting the facility increases.

Workshops

In workshops, participants receive information and resources, and then work with the data, often assisted by facilitators or technical experts.

Participants may develop their own recommendations, or simply gain a better understanding of the issue at hand.

Workshops may be used to assist in land use and other planning projects, such as watershed management or transportation projects involving identifying and/or analyzing possible roadway alignments. Workshops also frequently are used in complex, data-heavy cases that attract significant public concern and interest (for example, cases involving laboratory analytical results or risk assessment to weigh alternative remediation technologies).

Workshops often include initial presentations that provide participants with overviews on proposed plans or analytical data/risk assessment. Participants then break into groups and work with facilitators or technical staff to review the information or data. Work groups typically develop recommendations or other commentary.

In some complex situations, it may be necessary to hold multiple workshops over a period of time. Participants may need several sessions to understand and work with the data, request additional information, and consider alternatives. In some cases, such as the selection of major roadway alignments, workshops may be held over a number of years, typically in conjunction with other activities, such as public meetings.

Participants must be able to devote sufficient time to the workshop process. In addition, in some cases, concerns may be raised about whether candidates to participate in a workshop have the knowledge necessary to engage in complex analyses.

In our experience, lack of formal higher education should not automatically bar candidates from participating in a workshop. Rejecting such candidates could create environmental justice issues—and might result in the exclusion of important stakeholder groups. Moreover, having a college or graduate degree doesn't necessarily mean that a candidate possesses knowledge about the issue in question. We have found that, with proper information and assistance, most persons who have an interest in the process can grasp the necessary concepts and participate meaningfully in workshop discussions.

Benefits of Workshops

Benefits of using the workshop approach include the following:

- Workshops can generate meaningful and well-thought-out recommendations from stakeholders. These recommendations may include factors that professional staff members would not have thought of on their own.
- When workshops are well executed and include participants who represent all the various stakeholder groups within a community, the recommendations they generate can achieve a high level of legitimacy. Even when the workshop's recommendations do not please all groups, they may be seen as acceptable to the community because everyone has had a voice in the process of developing them. In contentious situations, the workshop approach may be the only way to break deadlocks in decision making.

We have found that, with proper information and assistance, most persons who have an interest in the process can grasp the necessary concepts and participate meaningfully in workshop discussions.

Challenges When Holding Workshops

Several challenges can be involved when using the workshop approach:

- Well-executed workshops are labor-intensive. Workshop sponsors must plan the sessions, recruit strong participants, prepare presentations, develop information for participants to use, and provide facilitation/assistance during the sessions. A staff member must also take detailed notes during workshop sessions so that important discussion points aren't lost. While workshops are a powerful tool for addressing major issues, they are not cheap and should not be conducted in a slipshod manner.

- Workshop objectives must be meaningful and achievable, and workshop recommendations must be taken seriously. A criticism sometimes leveled at workshops (or workshop-type activities) is that they are simply "window dressing" or "rubber stamps" to legitimize foregone conclusions. Workshop participants should be developing real alternatives (or dealing with real numbers, in cases where the workshop format is being used to help interested stakeholders better understand an issue, such as risk assessment). This does not mean that the workshop's sponsors must put every possibility on the table. It does mean, however, that the recommendations or conclusions of workshop participants need to be seriously considered in the decision-making processes they are intended to support. Otherwise, the entire exercise will lose its legitimacy.

The recommendations or conclusions of workshop participants need to be seriously considered in the decision-making processes they are intended to support. Otherwise, the entire exercise will lose its legitimacy.

- Workshop participants should be drawn from all stakeholder groups, if possible. As discussed earlier, lack of formal educational achievement should not bar an interested candidate from participating, nor should lack of professional occupational status. It is important to accommodate diverse viewpoints, questions, and concerns (although it may be necessary to reconsider truly combative participants who refuse to comply with reasonable rules of conduct). Occasionally, a stakeholder group that initially refused to become involved in the workshop effort may wish to join in after its members see that the process has promise. Efforts should be made to include new participants, if possible and practicable.

Advisory Groups

Advisory groups can go by a variety of names, including "community advisory panel," "restoration advisory board," and "citizens' advisory board." Whatever the name, the core concept involves convening a group of stakeholders to discuss their questions, concerns, and suggestions within a facilitated setting.

The group's focus may involve a specific environmental issue, a contaminated site, a facility, or the like. An advisory group may be permanent (for example, a group set up to ensure that a manufacturing facility is being responsive to its neighbors on an ongoing basis). Or it can be convened for a certain period of time and/or to address a specific issue.

At meetings, advisory group members typically hear presentations from experts, other invited speakers, or (in the case of groups formed to work with a facility) from facility management. Members then ask questions, provide feedback, or make suggestions regarding the issue in question. Advisory group members may request additional information or presentations at subsequent meetings.

Another important task that advisory group members perform is to convey comments or questions they have heard from neighbors or others about a facility or an issue. This provides facility managers or project managers (in the case of contaminated sites) with valuable information about emerging issues and concerns.

Some advisory groups are disbanded after they have completed the specific tasks they were convened to carry out. For example, we once worked with a group that had been convened to help local industry and emergency responders design an effective, areawide program for chemical risk education.

Benefits of Advisory Groups

Advisory groups can offer important benefits:

- Advisory groups that include a diverse array of participants can provide managers with accurate information about the questions and concerns that community residents and other stakeholders may have.
- Outspoken advisory group participants often make suggestions or observations that can help managers of a facility or a contaminated site be more responsive to their neighbors and other stakeholders. For example, such participants may recommend that managers communicate certain information to the community. Or they may point out operational issues that are creating a nuisance, such as facility or site traffic.

Challenges When Using Advisory Groups

Using the advisory group approach can also involve challenges:

- Some advisory groups are of dubious value because they don't include stakeholders who genuinely represent the community, or they exclude key stakeholder groups that facility or project managers need to hear from. Sometimes this happens out of ignorance (because managers don't know who their stakeholders are, and they haven't brought in outreach professionals to help them understand the community). Sometimes it happens intentionally (because managers don't want to deal with conflict). In some particularly unfortunate cases, managers may even recruit advisory group members from among their acquaintances or from factions they know to be supportive of the facility or site. While this may make meetings pleasantly harmonious, it defeats the purpose of having an advisory group, which should allow managers to hear from critics as well as supporters.
- Project or facility managers (or their support personnel) sometimes make the grievous error of expecting an advisory group, or specific members of the group, to speak for the facility, provide endorsements of their good deeds, or otherwise "go to bat" for them. Advisory groups should be treated as sovereign organizations, not as rubber stamps for management. An advisory group should not be expected to do anything other than provide feedback and make suggestions about the facility, site, or project, and pass along comments they hear from others in the community. Managers need to be very careful about how they discuss their advisory groups during, for example, public meetings regarding environmental permits, or during environmental crises. Managers should not imply that an advisory group endorses the facility or its actions.

Advisory groups that include a diverse array of participants can provide managers with accurate information about the questions and concerns that community residents and other stakeholders may have.

- If an advisory group is intended to be permanent or long-standing, it is important to ensure that it continues to reflect the community and its concerns. The community from which the group is drawn may change over time (e.g., there may be an influx of new residents). In addition, the issues that gave rise to the group may shift (e.g., new concerns may arise in certain neighborhoods because of changes in operations, or a contaminated site may no longer be a "hot button" issue because of progress on a cleanup). When this happens, it will be necessary to add members to represent new groups, or sometimes new sets of stakeholders with different concerns.

- When an advisory group is permanent or long-standing, members can start to suffer from fatigue over time. In addition, some members may move away or have changes in circumstances that make attending meetings difficult. Many long-term advisory groups develop guidelines to rotate "fatigued" members out and replace them with others who represent the same or similar constituencies. Some permanent or long-standing advisory groups routinely replace members to make sure that the group remains abreast of community concerns.

An advisory group should not be expected to do anything other than provide feedback and make suggestions about the facility, site, or project, and pass along comments they hear from others in the community.

Informational Materials and Resources

In addition to sponsoring activities and events, outreach professionals need to develop information resources for the public. The sections that follow describe some informational tools that are commonly used in environmental public involvement and outreach. Factors that should be considered in the production and use of all of these tools include readability (e.g., preparing the materials to the appropriate grade level of the anticipated audience) and whether translations of documents will be needed to accommodate non-English-speaking stakeholders.

Fact Sheets, Brochures, and Similar Materials (Including Web-Based, Downloadable Documents)

Fact sheets are the workhorses of printed materials. They may be single-page documents or they may run several pages. Regardless of length, they are designed to deliver straightforward information, usually on a single topic. Many stakeholders are already familiar with the way information is presented in fact sheets, making them a particularly valuable tool for enhancing public understanding.

The language and approach of fact sheets should be objective and free of "spin." Some government agencies have developed set formats for fact sheets. We often use a question-and-answer approach when preparing fact sheets for private-sector clients. This format leads readers point by point through information that otherwise could be complex and confusing. The Q-and-A format also allows readers to scan the fact sheet and quickly get the gist of what it covers.

Brochures can be used to provide an overview and introduction to a project or organization. Brochures and similar materials typically provide background information that assists interested stakeholders in obtaining a more complete understanding of the project or organization in question. We do not recommend using sales or marketing materials to provide background information.

When preparing fact sheets, brochures, and similar communications materials, you should consider two basic issues:

- What facts or issues should be covered?
- How detailed should the information be?

A community and stakeholder assessment can provide initial insights into the questions and concerns that stakeholders may have. As public involvement activities progress, the actual questions raised by stakeholders can help outreach professionals determine what the content of subsequent communication materials should be.

The level of detail that stakeholders want often varies from community to community, and sometimes among stakeholder groups. Fortunately, websites can provide significant flexibility here. By providing broad overviews with links to more detailed information, you can give website users access to the level of detail they prefer. Outreach professionals will want to take advantage of this flexibility to provide both summaries and in-depth information on project websites. (We discuss websites in more detail later in this article.)

You should always include contact information on both websites and printed information pieces. Ideally, this information should include a name and phone number of someone that stakeholders can call if they have questions or wish to make comments or suggestions. Even in the cyber age, stakeholders like to know that they can speak to a person if they so desire. Stakeholders frequently judge the credibility of information pieces and websites by whether a contact is well identified and readily available.

It can be useful to include contact e-mail addresses on hard-copy information pieces. But remember that not all stakeholders have access to the Internet (or want to put their comments in writing). So contact phone numbers are still important.

Benefits of Using Fact Sheets, Brochures, and Similar Materials (Including Web-Based Documents)

The benefits of using printed or web-based, downloadable documents include the following:

- These resources make it easier to address rumors, questions, and concerns by providing definitive "baseline" information to the public (e.g., a fact sheet might explain that an organization is planning to build a landfill for municipal solid waste, not an incinerator or a hazardous waste landfill). The availability of fact sheets and similar materials promotes substantive dialogue, since all parties will be working with the same baseline information. Outreach professionals may still have to deal with rumors, misinformation, and issues of trust and credibility (e.g., "How do we know you won't install an incinerator without telling us?"). But at least they will have ensured that accurate basic information is available to the community.
- Written information (and the occasional accompanying video, audio, or graphic) conveys the organization's desire to make information available to the public. This helps communicate that the organization is serious about engaging stakeholders in a meaningful dialogue.

As public involvement activities progress, the actual questions raised by stakeholders can help outreach professionals determine what the content of subsequent communication materials should be.

Challenges of Using Fact Sheets, Brochures, and Similar Materials (Including Web-Based Documents)

Among the challenges of using printed or web-based downloadable documents are the following:

- The information you provide must be readily understandable to nontechnical readers and should address the particular questions and concerns they are likely to have. Preparing such information can be time-consuming and may require significant expertise.
- Some managers may want to spin or gloss over "difficult" information (e.g., "I wouldn't call the wastes '*hazardous*,' really, because we

will handle them safely"). Or they may want to employ innocuous-sounding euphemisms (e.g., using the term "impacts" rather than "contaminated"). But drafting information this way can undermine the reputation of the organization and make it seem that managers are not above-board in their communications.

- In an effort to "control" the information that stakeholders possess, managers may try to block the release of certain information in fact sheets or other materials, even if the information is already publicly available elsewhere (e.g., permit applications, Toxics Release Inventory data). It is better to provide information up front, even if it contains unfamiliar terms or technical data, rather than waiting until stakeholders find it on their own—and possibly misinterpret it. Outreach professionals should provide explanations and commentary on technical data and terminology, explaining what they mean in language the general public can understand.

Although printed or web-based documents can be useful for making information available, outreach professionals and project personnel still need to talk with stakeholders and engage them in actual, in-person dialogues.

- Although printed or web-based documents can be useful for making information available, outreach professionals and project personnel still need to talk with stakeholders and engage them in actual, in-person dialogues.

News Stories, Guest Columns, Letters to the Editor, and Other Media Pieces

News stories that appear in newspapers and other mass media have the benefit of "third-party origin." Stories created by reporters (even if they are based on press releases from outreach professionals) typically are viewed by the public as more objective than information distributed by an organization in support of a project or facility.

Outreach professionals can sometimes "pitch" a story to a reporter—about, for example, the cleanup of a site or a permitting action for a facility. If the reporter decides to do an article or broadcast segment on the topic, he or she generally will interview not only representatives of the sponsoring organization, but also members of the community, looking for their take on the project. This means that some skeptical or even negative comments may appear in the story. Nonetheless, the information value of the piece will still generally be very high because it will be coming from a third party (such as a local newspaper or TV station).

Obviously, before pitching a story, outreach professionals must take care to consider any possible negative angles that reporters might pursue. In some cases, outreach professionals can help clarify the situation by providing responses to concerns they know will arise. As is the case with other public involvement methods, if a project or issue is going to be a source of conflict, it is better to release information about it proactively, even if the information is met with some criticism. Doing so communicates that the organization wants to be forthcoming.

Guest columns and letters to the editor can also be used to convey information, announce public meetings or events, or refute rumors or misinformation. While these pieces may lack the "third-party credibility" of stories written by reporters, they can still provide useful information to support an ongoing dialogue.

Benefits of Communicating Through News Stories and Other Media Pieces

Communicating through newspapers and broadcast media can offer some key benefits:

- Newspapers and broadcast media can disseminate information to a wide audience.

This supports the public involvement effort by helping to inform the general public and encouraging stakeholder participation.

- As noted earlier, information conveyed through the media often has "third-party credibility" that informational pieces from the organization lack.

Challenges of Communicating Through News Stories and Other Media Pieces

Communicating through newspapers and broadcast media can also involve significant challenges:

- Outreach professionals have limited to no control over the way stories written by a reporter will be framed or guest columns and letters to the editor will be edited.
- If a media outlet appears to display significant bias, organizations may wish to steer clear of proactively providing information that outreach professionals believe may be misused. Regardless of perceived media bias, however, organizations should respond to reporters' inquiries regarding legitimate issues or during crisis situations. Failure to do so will result in story lines about the organization's unwillingness to respond to the media, which can seriously damage a public involvement effort.

Display Advertisements

Display advertisements in newspapers or other local publications are useful for publicizing meetings and other such activities or events and for addressing rumors or controversy. In some cases, an organization may also purchase advertising time on broadcast media (such as local TV and radio stations), although this practice is less common when dealing with local issues than is buying display ads in newspapers.

The benefit of using display advertisements is:

- Outreach professionals have complete control over the content, the placement within a publication, and the date the ad is run when they buy display advertisement space.

The challenges of using display advertisements include:

- Depending on readership, a particular ad may or may not reach all stakeholders. It may be necessary to advertise in several publications.
- While display ads are good for making announcements and correcting some types of rumors (mostly benign rumors), their ability to sway public opinion in cases of controversy is less certain. Still, organizations that "go on record" regarding a controversy can help move the public dialogue along.

Newspapers and broadcast media can disseminate information to a wide audience. This supports the public involvement effort by helping to inform the general public and encouraging stakeholder participation.

Public Service Announcements

Public service announcements (PSAs) can be used to publicize meetings or other public involvement activities and events. They can also convey information in the public interest (e.g., warnings to avoid eating homegrown vegetables that have been exposed to a recent chemical release).

PSAs are aired on broadcast media, such as local TV or radio stations, or local affiliates of major networks. Broadcasters are not required to air PSAs. However, they are required by the Federal Communications Commission to prove that they are operating in the public interest as a condition of their maintaining licenses, and PSAs are a method they can use to show they are meeting this requirement.

The benefits of public service announcements include:

- PSAs get the word out to the public about events and activities. Outreach professionals usually provide a script for the PSA (helping to ensure that the announcement conveys accurate information about times, locations, and the nature of the event).
- PSAs are free.

The challenges associated with using public service announcements include the following:

- Outreach professionals have no control over when PSAs are broadcast.
- PSAs cannot convey complex messages. They can provide only limited information, such as announcements about events that are of public interest.

Posters

Posters can be extremely useful for publicizing public meetings and other events and for conveying simple information about a project. If outreach professionals can obtain permission to place posters at key locations where people congregate—such as convenience stores, supermarkets, local churches, and public buildings—they can reach a large number of stakeholders, including those who don't read local newspapers.

If outreach professionals can obtain permission to place posters at key locations where people congregate—such as convenience stores, supermarkets, local churches, and public buildings—they can reach a large number of stakeholders, including those who don't read local newspapers.

Posters can be a particularly effective way to reach new residents (who often are not yet "tuned in" to local channels of communication), residents of "enclaves" or insular neighborhoods who don't venture outside of them often, and non-English-speaking residents (this requires that posters be translated).

Benefits of Posters

The benefits of using posters include:

- Posters are relatively easy to make and are quite inexpensive.
- Posters can usually be made and put in place quickly (after permission is obtained), which means they provide timely communication.

Challenges When Using Posters

There are also several challenges associated with using posters:

- Posters cannot be used for complex communication.
- Effective placement of posters (meaning placement in locations where the stakeholders one wishes to reach will see them) requires knowledge of the community and the stakeholder groups within it.
- It generally is necessary to obtain permission before placing posters. In controversial situations, shop owners and others may not want to have posters displayed at their establishments out of concern that they may face customer or public backlash.
- Posters need to be removed promptly after the event they are publicizing is over (or the issue they are addressing is resolved). Leaving old posters around can create the impression (often subconscious) that outreach professionals are not on top of the public involvement process.
- In cases where posters are used for ongoing communication (e.g., reminding residents where they can obtain information on a project), outreach professionals must be sure to replace worn posters or post new ones when updated information becomes available.

Websites

A well-constructed website can be a superb outreach tool. For stakeholders, having information available online eases the task of learning about a project or facility. For outreach professionals, the ability to include links and downloadable material creates flexibility in providing information that can't be achieved using only paper documents.

Websites should provide clearly written, relevant information, and they should be easy for visitors to use. If information is difficult to find, the utility of the website suffers and stakeholders will be frustrated.

As discussed earlier in the section on fact sheets, the information provided on a website generally should be tailored to address community or stakeholder concerns. However, additional general information may be included since a website can provide access to a large number of documents. Like fact sheets and other paper documents, websites should provide contact information (including the phone number of a contact person) in order to encourage public questions and feedback.

Benefits of Using Websites

Among the benefits of using a website to provide information are the following:

- Websites can make a large amount of information available at all times to whoever wishes to view it. A well-constructed, user-friendly website can allow visitors to zero in on the information they are most interested in obtaining.
- Websites can minimize the amount of paper used to provide information. Stakeholders can view information online without the need to print it. If they do decide to print out documents, they can limit their printouts to the documents or sections in which they are most interested, rather than having to obtain an entire paper copy.
- Stakeholders can easily refer their friends and other stakeholders to a website, thereby increasing public knowledge about the project or facility.
- Websites can offer a venue for commentary and online questions and answers (although such features need to be moderated).
- Websites can be used to make important information available to the public very quickly, simply by posting it. In cases where stakeholders are awaiting information such as laboratory analytical results, timely posting can be important.

Challenges When Using Websites

The challenges of using websites to provide information include the following:

Websites should provide clearly written, relevant information, and they should be easy for visitors to use. If information is difficult to find, the utility of the website suffers and stakeholders will be frustrated.

- Not everyone has access to, or wants to use, computers or the Internet. Thus, outreach professionals still need to use non-electronic methods of providing information.
- Websites require regular maintenance, which can be time-consuming. Failure to update or maintain websites in a timely manner can become a point of contention with stakeholders who are anxious to be sure that they are receiving all of the latest information.
- Outreach professionals must ensure that whatever is posted on the website has been thoroughly vetted and proofed (keeping in mind that electronic posts often do not go through the same review process as documents that are printed and distributed). Inaccurate or incomplete information posted on

the Internet—even if it is later taken down and replaced by corrected documents—can hang around in cyberspace, potentially creating confusion.
- Websites should not be used as a substitute for face-to-face communication or in-person events, such as public meetings. When an issue is important to stakeholders, they typically want an opportunity to communicate in real time and directly with another person. Although events such as public meetings may be uncomfortable if stakeholders have unpleasant things to say, the issues they raise need to be resolved. That isn't going to happen if an organization's managers or outreach professionals hide behind a website.

Repositories can be important to persons who don't have access to the Internet or who don't wish to view information online. In many communities, a significant percentage of the population still does not use or have access to computers.

Information Repositories

Information repositories are places where reports, plans, and other documents regarding a project or facility are made available for public review. Some government regulations include requirements for establishing information repositories as part of the public involvement efforts of agencies such as the US Environmental Protection Agency.

The usual sites for information repositories are public libraries and village, city, and county buildings. In some cases, repositories may make their materials available for review without supervision (although the original documents are expected to remain in the repository). In other cases, persons who want to view materials may be asked to sign them out (e.g., from a library's reference desk).

Benefits of Information Repositories

The benefits of using information repositories include:

- Information repositories allow stakeholders to view official documents in neutral, public locations. Stakeholders can view virtually all of the information that is available about a project, which can boost the credibility of the public involvement process since nothing is "hidden." (Note: If a repository is set up voluntarily by a facility, it may contain information that is non-official in nature.)
- Repositories make technical information available for those stakeholders who want to study supporting data themselves.
- Repositories can be important to persons who don't have access to the Internet or who don't wish to view information online. In many communities, a significant percentage of the population still does not use or have access to computers.

Challenges When Using Information Repositories

Among the challenges of using information repositories are the following:

- Many times, the sheer volume of information available (e.g., laboratory quality assurance/quality control forms, and long repetitive reports) can render repositories extremely user-unfriendly. To help would-be readers find what they are looking for, it can be useful to provide master lists of contents that summarize what each report provides, along with a binder or folder containing the fact sheets that have been written about the project or facility.
- Repositories need to be maintained on a regular basis. It is important to deliver new reports as they are issued and replace worn or missing materials.

Conclusion

Outreach professionals typically use the tools discussed in this article as part of the decision-making processes surrounding environmental issues. These tools can be used to provide information, solicit feedback, and engage stakeholders in dialogue.

All the tools described here can be valuable when used appropriately. But their effectiveness depends largely on selecting the particular approach that best meets the needs and preferences of the community and its residents.

Carol J. Forrest has more than 21 years of experience in the environmental consulting and management field. She is president of Rose Hill Communications, Inc. (www.rosehillcommunications.com), which specializes in environmental community relations/public involvement and environmental, risk, and crisis communication. She has worked with more than 60 private- and public-sector clients throughout the United States on site investigations, public communication programs, and corporate and facility environmental and safety programs. She holds a master's of management degree from the J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. She coauthored *The Practical Guide to Environmental Community Relations*, published by John Wiley & Sons (1997). She is based in Wheaton, Illinois. She can be reached at caroljforrest@aol.com.
