

# Topic 8 Section 3

# Public Relations

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# What are Public Relations?

‘Public Relations’ means the attempts an organisation makes to establish relationships with various groups of people who have an interest in its activities.

‘Public relations’ became a trade or craft in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as literacy increased throughout the population generally and the print and broadcast media expanded.

In modern corporations, every employee of a corporation is, or may need to be, involved in achieving the strategic goal of the organisation’s public relations, which is to project a favourable public image.

However, attempts to foster good public relations must be genuine. People will soon ‘see through’ attempts at whitewash and will reject lies outright, once they know the truth.

In the construction industry, various members of the public are involved during the construction phase of a project. Each separate group is called a ‘public’; there can be several publics or groups of people whom the contractor must attempt to deal with or influence—for example, motorists, adjoining landholders and local residents.

A considerate approach to people who will be affected by the construction process, and a willingness to release information that meets the public’s needs, will generally lead to the best outcomes.

The principal and contractor will need to deal with a number of publics during the construction process, including any or all of the following:

- the local community
- motorists passing through the construction site
- emergency services organisations
- community or special-interest groups
- property owners
- protesters.

## Importance of Good Public Relations

Good public relations are important for any organisation involved in construction work, as they can help to:

- Maintain a favourable image
- Avoid bad publicity
- Minimise political impacts.

## Role of the Media

Information about an organisation— whether favourable or unfavourable, true or false— can be transmitted instantaneously by electronic means. A wide audience may become aware of an event within a few minutes of its occurrence. In the print media, this evening's events can be front-page headlines in tomorrow morning's newspaper.

Media organizations may regard a road construction job as a possible source of a story, especially for a local newspaper or at times when there is little else to report. Much can happen during the course of a road works job; for example, there may be:

- traffic delays
- frustrated motorists
- dust nuisance
- restrictions on access to property.

Newspapers, radio or television reporters may regard any of these events or situations as 'fair game'. Reporters may suddenly appear on site when there is an opportunity for a story. They may invite or pressure road workers to make a statement or comment.

However, it is often the casual or spur-of-the-moment statement that does the most damage, because it can be quoted out of context or its meaning can become distorted. In addition, information gathered by reporters may be influenced by their own biases and perceptions, or a member of the public may make a comment that gives a different 'slant' to the story, or the original intent or main facts behind a story may be edited for length.



For whatever reason, the facts as perceived by people 'on the ground' at the construction site may bear little or no relationship to the story that appears in published or broadcast form.

The release of facts and information to media organisations must therefore be handled with great care and sensitivity, or the result may be damage to the company's image or reputation.

Because of this, most organizations only authorise senior personnel, such as the principal, superintendent or contractor on a road job, to make statements to media organizations. Generally, no-one else on site has the authority to do so.

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**Remember!**

*The general rule is: if you have any doubt whatsoever about your authority or capacity to make statements to the media, then DON'T.*

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## Gaining Co-operation

Roadworks affect many people; for example:

- parents may experience delay when attempting to get their children to or from school
- suppliers may be trying to deliver materials to the job
- slippery conditions may result in an accident.

For these and many other reasons, it is essential for the roadworks contractor to get as many people as possible 'on side' while the job is in progress. The dissatisfaction of even a single person can cause delay or angst, which in turn may lead to complaints, and the possibility of lost time and money.

The general principle is that a person who is dissatisfied with a product or service will tell seven others; each of these will tell two or three people about an alleged incident of discourtesy, delay or carelessness. In effect, one complaint generates a total of 28 adverse reports.

## Including Public Relations in Planning Before the Job Begins

Many events or incidents that may occur during road work are foreseeable, or predictable on the basis of past experience. The time to address public relations issues is therefore before the job starts.

Two important steps to address likely public relations issues are generally taken during the project planning phase:

- identifying potential impacts
- developing a plan.

## Identifying Potential Impacts

The principal, superintendent or contractor may develop their own lists of potential impacts, or a list of impacts may be formalised as part of a 'community liaison' plan (see later).

Regardless of the form in which they are recorded, the important points about impacts are that they are considered in the planning process, and that changes are made to include known effects of likely occurrences.

### *Impacts of Road Works on the Public and Community*

Effects of road works on the local community, travelling public and other stakeholders may include any or all of the following:

This is not meant to be a complete list of possible impacts and potential consequences of impacts. However, it clearly shows that many people may be affected by road works, and that they have various avenues for redressing real (and perceived) injuries or damages.

It is not enough to simply identify possible impacts. The main requirement is to develop strategies that directly address community concerns.

### *Responses to Potential Impacts*

Potential impacts may be addressed by good communication with stakeholders, or by making changes to the job itself.

Communications strategies are generally included in the community liaison plan. Other strategies (e.g. barricades, plant, hours of work) are included in the relevant contract documents for the job.

### Responses Involving Communication

People must be made aware of the likely effects and changes they will experience as a result of the road works. There are many ways of increasing awareness, both before and during the job:

- letter drops to advise local residents of changes and their duration
- invitation to residents to provide input to traffic management or community liaison plan
- public meetings
- individual discussions with property owners
- provide a freecall or other contact number, to allow people to lodge complaints or air concerns.

General Category	Group Affected	Possible Impact	Potential Adverse Consequences for Affected Group	Potential Redress
Local community	Businesses	Dust nuisance	Damage to shop stock Damage to reputation Reduced attractiveness of stock or service to customers	Complaint to superintendent Complaint to political representative Story in local media Legal claim for damages
		Restrictions on customer access	Temporary loss of business	Complaint to superintendent Complaint to political representative Story in local media Legal claim for damages
	Nearby residents and landholders	Restrictions on access	Inconvenience Delays in arrival of supplies Delays in despatch of product	Complaint to superintendent Complaint to political representative Story in local media Legal claim for damages
		Temporary loss of land use	Lost production Inconvenience (e.g. in moving stock)	Complaint to superintendent Complaint to political representative
		Accidents on road adjoining property	Damage to fences or stock	Story in local media Legal claim for damages
		Noise	Inconvenience Lost sleep	Complaint to superintendent Story in local media
Travelling public	People travelling to and from work	Delays, caused either by works or an accident	Late for work Late for business or private appointment	Abusive behaviour Complaint to superintendent Story in local media

General Category	Group Affected	Possible Impact	Potential Adverse Consequences for Affected Group	Potential Redress
		Accidents	Damage to own property and other people's property Injury to self or others	Complaint to political representative Story in local media Insurance claim
	People taking children to or from school	Delays, caused either by works or an accident	Children late for school Parental worry if children left unattended at school or outside school grounds	Complaint to political representative Story in local media
	People travelling on through route	Delays, caused either by works or an accident	Late for work Late for business or private appointment	Complaint to superintendent Story in local media
		Accidents	Damage to own property and other people's property Injury to self or others	Complaint to political representative Story in local media Insurance claim
Other stakeholders	Conservation organisations	Environmental damage associated with roadworks	Siltation of waterways Destruction of vegetation Chemical or petroleum spills	Complaint to political representative Story in local, state or national media Environmental prosecution

However, there is one communications strategy that must be adhered to regardless of the circumstances— that is, to treat people with courtesy and respect at all times. If these behaviours are given, they are often returned.

### Changes to the Works

Where dust is a concern, use of the water cart at regular intervals will reduce concerns and complaints.

Noise can be addressed in several ways:

- change type of plant used on the job (e.g. lower power, more modern machine)
- restrictions on hours of use of specified plant
- noise suppression devices (e.g. mufflers)
- use of noise barriers.

The use of barricades and signs is part of the communication strategy. All devices used must be in accordance with the Manual of Uniform Traffic Devices, in good condition, and placed so that they are clearly visible.

Signs can make or break the public's perceptions of a project. For example, failure to adequately signpost freshly laid bitumen surfacing may lead to property damage and legal claims; however, a sign indicating the likely duration of delays (e.g. "15 minutes") may change expectations and lead to increased patience.

In some cases, special or improved access to facilities that attract significant traffic flows may be needed— for example to a nursing home or school in a town area, or to a saleyards or showgrounds in a rural area.

## Community Liaison Plan

Issues related to the safety and convenience of both the local community and the travelling public are included in the Community Liaison Plan for the project. The contract will state whether a community liaison plan is needed or not.

The following discussion is about typical headings and content that form part of a community liaison plan.

### *Objectives*

The objectives of a community liaison plan may include:

- Ensuring safe passage for emergency vehicles and the public through the works, by providing information on the timing of various stages of the works to all affected parties prior to work commencing.
- Keeping the travelling public informed of the purpose, cost and progress of the work and the timing and duration of any inconveniences that may be experienced as a result of the work (e.g. by preparing regular fact sheets).

- Maintaining a complaints register.
- Establishing procedures for the management of emergency situations.
- Establishing lines of communication with all parties.
- Implementing a reporting system.

### *Target Audiences*

Target audiences of a community liaison plan may include:

- Local business
- Schools
- Hospitals
- Community groups
- Residents
- Relevant local government representatives and officers
- Emergency services.

These parties may be included in the process of drafting the plan.

### *Issues and Strategies*

The plan may include statements about the issues that the works create for the local communities, and the strategies used to address those issues. The following is an example of such a statement:

The project is located between Atown and Beetown, and the communities in and around these towns are the people most affected by the works. The local community is well served with radio stations and local newspapers. These media outlets will be the main form of communication between the contractor and the community. Emergency services will be contacted directly, so that they are informed of any changes to traffic movements. Residents and local business houses in the immediate vicinity of the works will also be kept informed by letter drop.

A community liaison officer will be appointed and shall be responsible directly to the project manager for the implementation and maintenance of the plan.

On this project, Joe Blow/Jane Doe will be the community liaison officer. He/she will convene initial meetings with any interested members of the local community affected by the works within 28 days after the date of acceptance of the tender.

## Reporting

The plan may include requirements for structured reporting about issues arising from community liaison. The following is an example.

The community liaison officer will report to the superintendent as follows:

- Immediately, in the event of
  - any emergency issue
  - any enquiries by members of the public
- Weekly, in relation to:
  - key activities achieved for previous week
  - key activities planned for coming weeks
  - summaries of responses made to complaints
  - summaries of outstanding responses
- Monthly, in relation to:
  - anticipated issues for coming month
  - proposed actions in response to issues
  - key actions and achievements

All publications and press notices are to be submitted to the superintendent for approval. All complaints are to be recorded in the complaints register, which is retained on site for inspection as required.

# Dealing With Property Owners During Construction

Property owners and tenants have the right to expect reasonable access to their property, the least possible damage to it, and the least possible disturbance to their way of life. The aim is to gain their co-operation and the best way of achieving this, in cases where there is a probability of inconvenience to the owner, is to discuss the matter with the owner before the work commences, i.e.

- Advise what is proposed.
- Give assurances that inconvenience will be minimised
- Invite the landholder to discuss any problems he or she may anticipate or encounter.

Negotiation an additional strategy for dealing with landholders' concerns; it may become important in particular circumstances.

For example, if an action of a subcontractor results in a grievance by an adjoining landholder, it is the project manager who must deal with the aggrieved party.

Case studies 4 and 5, presented at the end of the topic, describe examples where positive outcomes were achieved through negotiation.

However, not all negotiations with landholders result in 'win-win' outcomes. For example, some landholders choose to adopt an adversarial or litigious approach and will resist the contractor's attempts to negotiate a solution. In such cases, the matter is usually settled in court and (ultimately) proves to be expensive for both parties.

The merits of each landholder's requests need to be assessed in regard to the circumstances operating at the time of the negotiation, and by taking into account the company's policies and the requirements of the contract.

# Dealing with the Travelling Public During Construction

Dealing effectively with the travelling public during actual construction requires a determination to build good relationships, tact, patience, and a knowledge of appropriate responses.

Two strategies can assist in ensuring that dealings with the public are managed effectively:

- diary records
- changed perspective.

## Diary Records

Matters which, at the time, may appear to be minor public relation problem, can become major issues. Road workers dealing with a number of unhappy motorists each day may not remember all of them or the reasons for their complaints. However, a disgruntled person will certainly remember the incident or action that caused affront, and may go on to make a formal complaint or tell the story to a media reporter.

Consequently it is important to make sure all contacts are recorded in a diary. One person on site should be responsible for recording:

- All unusual occurrences which may become public issues, whether a member of the general public was involved or not.
- Any contacts made with the general public, particularly those where dissatisfaction or bad feeling remained at the end.

These notes are available for perusal by the superintendent or contractor, and may become valuable reference material if there is a complaint, story in the media or legal action.

## Public Perceptions

When dealing with the travelling public, all employees on the job should attempt to put themselves in the position of the person who is inconvenienced by the road works. This 'change of perspective' often has beneficial outcomes.

Road users may see delays and changed road conditions resulting from construction as inconvenient at best, and intimidating or dangerous at worst. When confronted with such situations, road users often expect that:

- Reasonable and safe road conditions will apply throughout the construction site
- Inconvenience will be kept to reasonable levels
- Dangers or changes in the road ahead will be accompanied by warning signs
- Signs will clearly point the way to their destination.

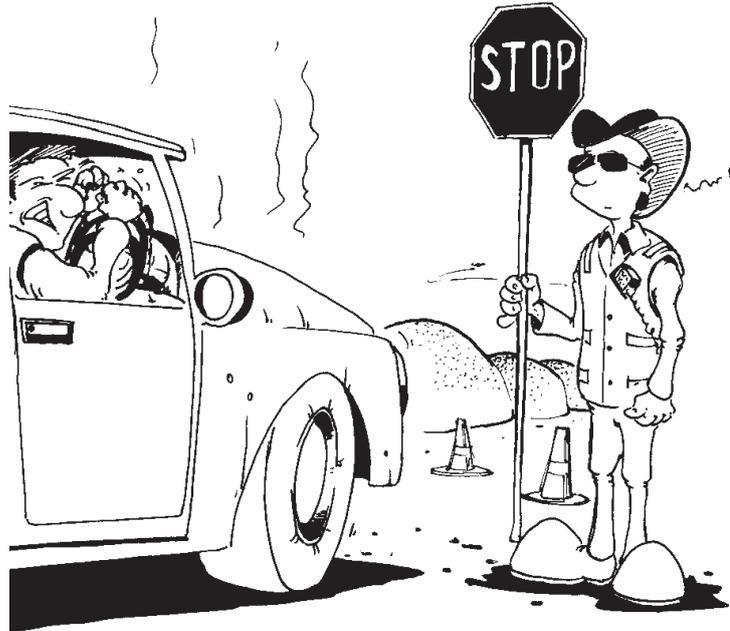
When people are inconvenienced by restrictions on road usage they tend to become critical and public relations tend to deteriorate. However, there are occasions when a certain amount

of inconvenience to the travelling public is inevitable.

People are often critical of plant and workers sitting idle. Such situations can't always be avoided, but careful job management greatly reduces their occurrence.

Construction workers are likely to become involved in a variety of situations, including:

- A motorist delayed by construction.
- An irate motorist complaining about conditions and restrictions.



- A bogged or damaged vehicle.
- A motorist seeking advice on direction or conditions.
- A motorist with a mechanical breakdown.
- Motorist with fuel, oil and water problems.

The guiding rules in handling all such situations are to be courteous and considerate, to put yourself in the other person's position, and to react accordingly. The best way to combat abuse is to avoid counter-abuse, threats and excuses. In some cases, the less you say the better. Interpersonal skills are covered in another section of this topic.

# Dealing with Environmental, Conservation and Heritage Concerns

All terms and conditions of the contract that relate to protection of environment must be observed. They may include:

- employment of an indigenous observer in areas where the presence of cultural heritage is likely
- hold points on discovery of indigenous or other heritage items during earthworks
- special conditions on discovery of fossils on site
- erosion protection (straw bales, silt traps, etc)
- revegetation requirements (e.g. topsoiling, tree planting)
- noise abatement (e.g. construction of noise barriers).

There are many practical steps the contractor may take to maintain good environmental practice and build public trust in the company's ability to effectively manage the environment during construction:

- Avoid focusing attention on the job site, by keeping it clean and tidy at all times.
- Avoid unnecessary interference with or damage to local flora and fauna.
- Dispose of rubbish regularly.
- Watch air and noise problems, e.g. immediately repair job vehicles and plant with faulty exhaust systems.
- Observe the revegetation requirements of the job and when the job is finished, make sure the job site and the surrounding area are left clean and tidy
- Deal with spillages, e.g. of chemicals or petroleum products, in accordance with the *Environmental Protection Act 1994* and regulations.
- Keep appropriate clean-up gear on site in a known and easily accessible location.
- Observe special conditions applicable to particular areas, e.g. the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.

These issues are discussed in greater detail in Topic 6, Works Management, in this training series.

An additional consideration is that small (but thoughtful) environmentally oriented actions on the part of the contractor's staff can do much to build trust and develop good public relations. Case Study 6 gives a practical example of this.

*Indigenous Observer*



## Section 3 – Assessment Activities

For information on how these assessment activities may be used as part of the learning process, see the section on 'Assessment' in the 'Topic Descriptor' section at the front of this topic.

### Theory Questions

The following questions allow you to assess your progress in understanding the material presented in Section 3. The questions may be of any of the following types:

- multiple choice (identify correct answer or answers)
- multiple choice (identify incorrect answer or answers)
- fill in the gaps in a sentence or statement
- identify a sentence or statement as TRUE or FALSE
- write a few sentences or a short paragraph.

Answers to the question are shown in the separate 'Answer' section.

#### Question 1

'Public relations' is the way that a company interacts with people affected by a construction job, by keeping them informed of work being undertaken:

True

False

#### Question 2

It is important to gain the co-operation of the travelling public because it will result in fewer complaints and make the job easier and less stressful.

True

False

### Question 3

A television crew arrives at a construction site and begins filming the work in progress. What action or actions would be appropriate in dealing with the film crew?

- Ask the crew to leave the site.
- Tell the supervisor there is a television crew on-site and answer 'no comment' to any questions from the crew.
- Answer questions honestly and do your best to make the construction works look worthwhile.
- Stop work until the crew leave and avoid being filmed.

### Question 4

Which of the following would be a good attitude to have when trying to promote good public relations?

- It is important to be polite and courteous to the public at all times.
- It is never possible to please everyone, so public relations are not always important.
- It is the supervisor's responsibility, so I won't worry about good public relations.
- We 'bend over backwards' trying to keep the public happy.

### Question 5

Is it better to start thinking about public relations before or after work starts?

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### Question 6

Which of the following would help to improve public relations?

- Use of the water cart to reduce dust.
- Noise kept to a minimum by use of noise barriers.
- Workers standing around doing nothing while traffic is stopped for construction.
- Politely but firmly telling a motorist who has run out of fuel that you have no spare petrol.

### Question 7

A community liaison plan lists who is likely to be affected by construction, the problems that may occur and how they can be solved or addressed:

True

False

### Question 8

A member of the public approaches a group of workers and asks them whether there will be traffic delays on a certain date. Who would this person be referred to?

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### Question 9

The local community should be advised when and where construction is going to happen and invited to discuss problems they have with the proposed construction works.

True

False

### Question 10

It is a hot, dry day and construction has caused delays in traffic flow. Which of the following would be the best way to help gain understanding and co-operation from motorists?

Nothing. Talking with the drivers and trying to calm them down will only make them angrier.

Consider how the drivers are feeling. Be courteous and understanding in dealing with them, explain what is going on, but avoid giving excuses.

Contact the community liaison officer if there are any problems.

### Question 11

Aboriginal artefacts are found when digging on a new residential estate. What should be done?

Contact the principal contractor and ask his advice.

Ignore the artefacts and push ahead with the work. No one will ever know.

Keep the artefacts safe, but keep working.

None of the above.

### Question 12

A road through a National Park needs upgrading. The contractor's representative should help preserve the area's biodiversity by ensuring all equipment stays on the road, except where it is to be widened:

True

False