

Chapter 12

Community Relations¹

Aggregates Overview

Aggregates are the primary ingredient in our roads, bridges, airports, water, and sewage treatment facilities, and are also used in communities for building houses, churches, schools, and businesses. However, the widespread use of aggregates in communities is largely invisible to the public. To a large extent, the public does not understand the importance of aggregates to economic prosperity. The availability of quality aggregate materials is not readily known throughout the community. Many people do not support mining due to a lack of understanding about its importance and their dependence on the aggregate industry.

For the future, those involved in the aggregate and industrial mineral industry need to communicate, to the public, the fact that enormous quantities of aggregate must be readily available. Long-range planning in our communities is needed to ensure that zoning regulations and competing land uses do not cover or prevent the mining of aggregate and industrial mineral reserves. (See Chapter 1 for additional information on aggregates and their importance.)

Communicating a commitment to the stewardship of natural resources is instrumental in ensuring future mining and business opportunities. Aggregate producers cannot afford to hide their heads in the sand and not involve the communities they supposedly support.

A sound public-relations program must include a multilevel approach. By enlisting employees, communicating stewardship for the resources, and promoting community outreach and good neighbor relations, the aggregate/industrial mineral producers can help change the public's image of the mining industry.

Community Relations as Communication

Nuisance

“Nuisance” is defined as something harmful, annoying, troublesome, and an inconvenience. The legal definition varies from state to state and can mean many things to many people. What is important to remember is that even a perfectly legal activity can still be deemed a nuisance by a judge or jury. Nuisance cases can threaten a company's existence and can be extremely expensive to defend.

The aggregate producer's primary means for heading off any nuisance claims concerning truck traffic, noise, blasting, dust, water quality and quantity issues, environmental concerns, property values, and other such issues is communication.

Aggregate producers must communicate effectively with their neighbors and show citizens that they are doing everything possible to address their concerns. Consequently, every

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aggregate/industrial mineral producer should develop an effective communications program with the community.

One way for a producer to develop effective communication with the community is to practice the seven rules of H. Wayne Phears*:

- Rule 1: Communicate with your neighbors. If there is going to be noticeable change in your operation, alert your neighbors. Things like blasting patterns, shift changes, truck flow changes, and other noticeable alterations can and should be communicated. 'Talk is cheap unless it's your lawyer doing the talking'!
- Rule 2: Form a neighborhood advisory committee, made up of neighbors you can meet with intermittently to identify and address concerns, and update with developments. You can also learn of problems you may have from your neighbors. In the past, operations were located on the outskirts of cities. As communities have expanded, producers often find themselves surrounded by housing developments, shopping centers, schools, and other activities. As a result, you must minimize the impact on the activities of your neighbors. When people in a community hear from existing neighbors that a producer is conscientious about being a good neighbor, you are communicating through them to the whole community.
- Rule 3: Perform a self-critical analysis of your own operation. How is your trucking operation? Any noise, blasting, or dust issues? What does your quarry look like? Upgrade your entrance and maintain good housekeeping. Planning efforts can include buffer zones, wheel washes, traffic control, and noise and dust control measures. Buffer zones help minimize the impact of the operations on our immediate neighbors. Berms, fences, screens, and tree plantings contribute to the public safety and provide aesthetic qualities for our neighbors. Noise can be mitigated through the use of buffer zones, berms, and locating equipment as far away from residents as possible. Truck traffic is one of the most serious problems for a community. As part of regulations, ensure that trucks are operating properly. Communicate to the public how you properly maintain your trucks. With sites in heavy traffic areas, possible solutions to concerns about truck traffic could include acceleration and deceleration strips, and caution lights and signs. Wheel washes also help to ensure that trucks do not carry materials onto the roadways.
- Rule 4: Feed your neighbors! Having an informal gathering, such as an open house can do wonders to personalize your company and solidify your relations with the community. Educating your community about the operation of your facility can help eliminate environmental and safety concerns. Proper planning for traffic, weather, and refreshments are just some of the issues associated with handling an open house. Neighbors will want to see and touch the equipment at your facility. Proper safety measures will need to be addressed before allowing the public to tour your site. Inclement weather conditions should also be anticipated. Stations educating the public on issues concerning the environment, safety, and operations for your facility could be manned with employees who can communicate effectively with the public as well as vendors and agencies that support your operation. And don't forget to pass out hats. People who wear your hats both advertise your company and show approval of your operation.
- Rule 5: Donate to the community! It doesn't take much money to sponsor Little League baseball, soccer, football, scouting and other programs. If your company is seen

as a supporter, your standing in the community can only improve. And be aware of other community programs in which you can participate or support, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Kiwanis, Eagles, VFW, Legion, Habitat for Humanity, school, campaigns, etc.

Rule 6: Donate to charitable causes, and publicize the company's participation. It may seem like you are seeking a pat on the back or other credit for your charitable causes, but it is important for the community to know about your support.

Rule 7: It's never too late to fix things! If you've been sued, identify and make changes before a case gets tried. If you are making all reasonable efforts to deal with complaints, a jury will look more favorably at your operation.

Principles for Communicating with a Concerned Public

The upcoming sections are paraphrased from the National Stone Association's (presently the NSSGA-National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association) *Community Relations Handbook*.

The success or failure of businesses often can be determined by public opinion. And, public opinion is often based on risk perceptions. When the risk is perceived to be high, public opinion will be strong and adversarial. When you have a highly concerned public, four principles of communication should be considered:

1. The Principle of Mental Noise means people will block the receipt of information; this situation needs to be countered by concise, clear, and quick communication.
2. The Principle of Threat Perception is the widening of the gap between perception and reality; to decrease these perceptions, you need to increase trust, control, benefits, and fairness.
3. The Principle of Trust and Credibility implies that when people are highly concerned, trust and credibility are the most important qualities they seek in a communicator. To emphasize these qualities, demonstrate concern, empathy, expertise, honesty, openness, dedication, and commitment, as well as recruiting and gaining the support of community notables or credible allies.
4. The Principle of Negative Dominance is when concerned people tend to view situations from a negative perspective. To counter this, avoid any negative impression and respond quickly with three positive and credible messages.

Seven Cardinal Rules of Communication

In addition to the previous four principles of communication, seven complimentary and overlapping rules of communication should be followed:

1. Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner.
2. Plan carefully and evaluate performance.
3. Listen to the community's specific concerns.
4. Be honest, frank, and open.
5. Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.
6. Meet the needs of the media.
7. Speak clearly and with compassion.

Goals and Objectives

Successful communication programs have clearly defined goals and objectives. Goals are what you hope to achieve with the communication program. Objectives are the results of the intermediate steps leading to the goals. Goals should be a stretch, yet attainable.

Stakeholder Identification

Probable stakeholder groups are employees, customers, neighbors, environmental activists, governmental officials, news media, and other community officials. A producer needs to identify, select, and prioritize these groups.

A producer's employees are the most valuable assets in communicating with the community. When people in a community hear from these employees that their work is satisfying, engaging, and safe, it tells the public that the producer cares about each employee. When employees are informed about a company's business objectives, they understand the importance of meeting those objectives.

Communication can be targeted and tailored to each specific group. In the prioritization, opinion leaders should be clearly identified and given a high priority. Systematic and objective research should be done to accurately prioritize these stakeholder groups. The research can include surveys, focus groups, and interviews with the public, friends, and employees.

Communication Forums and Techniques

Involve the public by listening to its concerns and responding before making decisions. It is both possible and advisable to work constructively and in collaboration with the public to reach mutually beneficial resolutions via open dialogue.

Possible outreach techniques are:

1. Open houses/facility tours (remember Rule 4 about feeding your neighbors?).
2. Door to door visits with at least adjacent or nearby neighbors.
3. Use of mass media with news releases/conferences, editorial boards, op-ed Columns, interviews, advertising, etc.
4. Community involvement with school programs, environmental projects, scholarship awards, and charitable contributions (Rules 5 and 6, Section B).
5. Group interaction such as community meetings or meetings with advisory panels (mentioned earlier)
6. Membership in local organizations like civic groups, planning/zoning bodies, and board supervisors.

In addition, scouting organizations can earn badges in geology or community service at your facility. Contacting local leaders in planning a successful site visit can only help to get the message out that you care about your community. Scouts can help plant trees, creating noise and dust barriers for the neighbors. The trees will also help build wildlife habitat. Geology badges could be earned by the scouts for touring your facility and understanding the importance of natural resources for the prosperity of the economy.

Fossils can be seen in the limestone deposits. Fossil Park, a park donated to the Sylvania Parks District, is a wonderful exhibit in Ohio. Visitors from all over the world have visited the park, where the process of fossil creation is explained. Fossils are very exciting for school children. In their study of science, children are fascinated with experiencing actual fossils. Access for those with special needs is provided with a safety ramp allowing access to the quarry floor.

Public service in the communities should also be a priority for a producing operation. By encouraging your employees to become involved in community efforts, you reinforce the commitment to your community. Examples of such public service include earth science support for schools through working with the local science teachers; and rock sample kits and educational material on the uses of aggregates in everyone's daily life that can transform a teacher's lesson on natural resources from mundane to exceptional. You can also donate construction materials for libraries, hospitals, and schools, and adopt a school to provide mentors for struggling students.

These methods of reaching out to the community can help establish a positive rapport that reinforces and communicates relationship building and involvement.

Message Development

When providing a presentation to the public or a stakeholder group, the message should be developed and tested before delivery. All messages should be viewed from the perspective of the stakeholder receiving the message. Points to consider are:

Discuss any risk in personal terms.

Begin a message with a statement of empathy.

Avoid jargon, negatives, and fear producing words, humor, and speculation.

Reference credible third parties.

Use visual aids.

Guidelines for spoken messages:

- Express empathy or concern.
- State the conclusion.
- Provide primary and secondary supporting facts.
- Repeat the conclusion and describe future actions.

Good non-verbal signals include keeping hands open, in view, and above the waist; standing or sitting erectly but leaning slightly forward; maintaining consistent eye contact without staring; and avoiding dry mouth clues such as throat clearing, licking your lips, frequent blinking, or drinking water.

Guidelines for written messages:

- Use a statement to express empathy and caring.
- State three key messages.
- Use two supporting facts for each message.
- Repeat the key messages.
- Describe future action.
- Written documents should be easily understood and at a 6th-grade reading level.
- Pre-test the message to improve the effectiveness.
- Pre-testing can include questionnaires, in-house panels, and interviews with the public, focus groups, and expert reviews.

Dialogue with the Community

Eliminate or minimize town-hall-type meetings due to the limitations they impose and because the set-up can induce confrontations. The layout creates a barrier where only a small number of attendees can speak; thereby, a small but vocal opposition group can dominate the meeting. Minimizing the limitations requires planning, logistics, a moderator, ground rules, an opening presentation, open discussion, and follow-up actions.

Planning: Identify the community's issues and concerns and prepare messages, facts, and visual aids that address those issues; train a spokesperson.

Logistics: Have presenters on the same level as the audience and avoid a stage. Also avoid a table in front since that creates a barrier. Provide welcome signs, greeters, sign-in sheets, handout materials, comment cards, refreshments, seating assistance, and public address and recording equipment.

Moderator: Use a neutral and objective third party who is respected by the community, such as a principal, clergy member, retired judge, etc.

Ground Rules: Set a time limit per speaker, a limit of one question or comment per person until everyone has had a chance to speak, an ending time, and provisions for a follow-up meeting. If need be, have an agreement to respect the moderator's ruling.

Opening Presentation: Be brief (less than 15 minutes) and follow the guidelines in the previous message development section.

Open Discussion: The opening discussion should follow the opening presentation and take up the rest of the meeting. It should be an opportunity for open and honest two-way dialogue, not a Q&A session.

Follow-up Actions: Close the meeting with a summary card and a statement of what happens next, and ask everyone to complete a response card.

Besides town-hall-type meetings, a better format can be Public Exhibit and Availability Sessions (also known as InfoExs). These are a series of four to six poster-station exhibits that each present a phase or element of the issue and are staffed or attended by a presenter

or team. These stations are in a large meeting room and are open for four to six hours per day for several days.

These InfoExs allow people to attend at their own convenience, are accepted by federal, state, and local governments as a substitute for town-hall-type public meetings, and have many advantages over town-hall-type meetings. They promote true two-way dialogue, reach more people, convey more information, answer more questions, and avoid disruptive confrontations. Most of the planning for InfoExs is the same as for town-hall-type meetings.

Evaluate Effectiveness

Process evaluations can determine if the communications program is being carried out, is following procedures and guidelines, and is on schedule. Types of process evaluations include tracking community concerns, tracking responses to inquiries, monitoring media coverage, and comparing activities to the plan and the budget.

Outcome evaluations such as analyzing media coverage, updating community research, interviewing opinion leaders, and tracking public relations can determine if changes have resulted from the communication activities, and whether those changes are positive or negative.

After the evaluations are complete, the entire community relations cycle from goal definition to community dialogue should be reviewed, with modifications made to improve the communications program.

Regulatory Requirements

The public needs to know about the measures used for the protection of the environment and aggregate employees. Too often, the public only hears about aggregate operations when a problem has been reported. Before problems arise, let your community know how you operate safe and environmentally sound operations.

Mining is a transitional land use. Aggregate producers need to work with their communities to ensure that the future use of the land is in keeping with the goals of the communities. They need to do their homework, understand the communities they operate in, and educate the public on the fact that many reclaimed sites enhance the surrounding properties by providing wildlife enhancement, lakes, and public and private housing.

Concerns from the public should be responded to in a timely, honest manner. The employee who responds to the public should be able to communicate in a thoughtful way. The response should recognize the concern of the public and communicate that the producer will strive to eliminate or reduce the cause of the concern.

Related Links

National Associations

American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM)
www.astm.org

Geological Society of American
www.geosociety.org

Info Mine
www.info-mine.com

National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association
www.nssga.org

Mineral Information Institute
www.mii.org

Pit and Quarry Magazine
www.quarryworld.com

Government Agencies

Army Corp of Engineers
www.usace.army.mil

Mining Safety and Health Administration
www.msha.gov

Environmental Protection Agency
www.epa.gov

U.S. Geological Survey
www.minerals.er.usgs.gov/minerals/

References

* H. Wayne Phears; Phears & Moldovan, Norcross, GA ‘Try communicating with your neighbors...’ 2002

** The Covello Group, LLC, ‘Community Relations Handbook for the Aggregate Industry’ prepared for the NSA (National Stone Association), 1999; now reorganized as the NSSGA (National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association)

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