NATIONAL COOPERATIVE HIGHWAY RESEARCH PROGRAM

NCHRP Report 364

Public Outreach Handbook for Departments of Transportation

Transportation Research Board
National Research Council

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Public Outreach Handbook for Departments of Transportation

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Laguna Hills, CA

Subject Areas

Planning and Administration
Energy and Environment
Highway and Facility Design
Public Transit

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NATIONAL COOPERATIVE HIGHWAY RESEARCH PROGRAM

Systematic, well-designed research provides the most effective approach to the solution of many problems facing highway administrators and engineers. Often, highway problems are of local interest and can best be studied by highway departments individually or in cooperation with their state universities and others. However, the accelerating growth of highway transportation develops increasingly complex problems of wide interest to highway authorities. These problems are best studied through a coordinated program of cooperative research.

In recognition of these needs, the highway administrators of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials initiated in 1962 an objective national highway research program employing modern scientific techniques. This program is supported on a continuing basis by funds from participating member states of the Association and it receives the full cooperation and support of the Federal Highway Administration, United States Department of Transportation.

The Transportation Research Board of the National Research Council was requested by the Association to administer the research program because of the Board's recognized objectivity and understanding of modern research practices. The Board is uniquely suited for this purpose as it maintains an extensive committee structure from which authorities on any highway transportation subject may be drawn; it possesses avenues of communications and cooperation with federal, state and local governmental agencies, universities, and industry; its relationship to the National Research Council is an insurance of objectivity; it maintains a full-time research correlation staff of specialists in highway transportation matters to bring the findings of research directly to those who are in a position to use them.

The program is developed on the basis of research needs identified by chief administrators of the highway and transportation departments and by committees of AASHTO. Each year, specific areas of research needs to be included in the program are proposed to the National Research Council and the Board by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. Research projects to fulfill these needs are defined by the Board, and qualified research agencies are selected from those that have submitted proposals. Administration and surveillance of research contracts are the responsibilities of the National Research Council and the Transportation Research Board.

The needs for highway research are many, and the National Cooperative Highway Research Program can make significant contributions to the solution of highway transportation problems of mutual concern to many responsible groups. The program, however, is intended to complement rather than to substitute for or duplicate other highway research programs.

Note: The Transportation Research Board, the National Research Council, the Federal Highway Administration, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and the individual states participating in the National Cooperative Highway Research Program do not endorse products or manufacturers. Trade or manufacturers names appear herein solely because they are considered essential to the object of this report.

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The members of the technical committee selected to monitor this project and to review this report were chosen for recognized scholarly competence and with due consideration for the balance of disciplines appropriate to the project. The opinions and conclusions expressed or implied are those of the research agency that performed the research, and, while they have been accepted as appropriate by the technical committee, they are not necessarily those of the Transportation Research Board, the National Research Council, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation officials, or the Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation.

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FOREWORD

By Staff
Transportation Research Board

This handbook contains information on strategies, techniques, and tools needed to develop and implement successful public outreach campaigns. The information will be of interest to public information officers. However, all individuals concerned with the transportation development process, provision of facilities and services, and performance of the system will also benefit. Public outreach techniques are designed for communicating with the public, and their use is a logical and effective business practice as well as being mandated in many cases by federal and state laws or regulations.

Many transportation departments are concerned that the public is relatively uninformed about such issues as how transportation facilities and services are financed, how they are provided, how well they function, and, in general, the importance of an effective transportation system. It is also perceived that the general public has little understanding of such things as the respective roles of federal, state, and local governments and the financial mechanisms being employed to operate and maintain these transportation facilities and services. This limited understanding complicates the process of consensus building in the provision and operation of the transportation system.

It is vital, first, to understand what the public think about how transportation is provided and what their feelings are regarding the adequacy of the system and how best to improve it, and, second, to develop and implement techniques for communicating the needed information to fill the identified gaps. In response to the first issue, a previous NCHRP project identified and described various market research techniques and included a demonstration of a nationally conducted public opinion survey. The results of that project are described in *NCHRP Report 329,* "Using Market Research to Improve Management of Transportation Systems."

Further activity in this area needed to be directed toward using the results of market research, as well as the results of other techniques that have identified communication needs, to help design consumer-oriented programs to communicate with various audiences. Special emphasis was required on techniques to enhance interaction with the public on 1) the development of policies, plans, and programs; 2) the provision of facilities and services; and 3) the performance of the transportation system.

Under NCHRP Project 20-24(5), "Public Outreach in Transportation Management," Frank Wilson & Associates, Inc. was selected to recommend to departments of transportation programs and techniques to better inform the public of transportation issues and identify examples of effective applications. The research has been successfully completed and produced three products.

The products are a research report, videotape, and handbook. The agency research report, titled "Public Outreach in Transportation Management," documents the conduct of the research effort. A videotape of three presentations at the 1992 AASHTO annual meeting in Rapid City, South Dakota, includes demonstrations of public outreach techniques used in a strategic planning process, in an awareness campaign during the reconstruction of a major highway system, and in the facilitation of an organizational move to a customer service orientation. The last product—published herein—is a public outreach handbook for departments of transportation. Earlier versions of the handbook, in a notebook format, were provided to state departments of transportation at the 1992 AASHTO annual meeting or soon thereafter.

The agency research report and the videotape are available for loan on request to NCHRP, Transportation Research Board, 2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20418.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research reported herein was performed under NCHRP Project 20-24(5) by Frank Wilson & Associates, Inc. The research team consisted of Dr. Gary Lawrence, a public opinion pollster; Mr. Jeff Adler, a political campaign strategist; Mr. Frank Wilson, head of a public relations and marketing agency with multiple transportation accounts; Ms. Donna Carter, marketing strategist and manager of multimedia public awareness campaigns; and Dr. Gary Edson, communications program developer and researcher. The team of experts was assisted with additional information and recommendations on specific campaign elements from other members of the Frank Wilson & Associates staff, including Mr. Greg Brooks, News Bureau Chief; Ms. Kathleen Bell, Community Relations Specialist; and Ms. Joanna Pashdag, Marketing Specialist.

PUBLIC OUTREACH HANDBOOK FOR DEPARTMENTS OF TRANSPORTATION

SUMMARY

In 1991, in the face of new federally mandated changes in the transportation-planning process nationwide, the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) of the Transportation Research Board commissioned a year-long study on the role of public outreach in transportation management. The study began with a series of focus groups in which a number of state department of transportation chief administrative officers (CAOs) and public information officers (PIOs) were questioned as to their areas of greatest concern in regards to public outreach, as well as their perceived audiences of greatest importance.

Using this information, the NCHRP consultants, a team of experts in the fields of public affairs, public relations, and transportation planning, have developed a program that offers all those involved with transportation-related public outreach a foundation course in the strategies, tactics, and tools needed to develop and implement successful public outreach campaigns. This handbook, one aspect of that program, is organized in four chapters:

- CHAPTER ONE, "Strategic Marketing Planning Guide," discusses the "why" of public outreach in transportation management, as well as provides an introduction to the theory of public communications. In keeping with its title, the Strategic Marketing Planning Guide focuses on such broad issues as the role of communications in conflict resolution, a redefinition of communications that includes all ongoing department operations as well as the specific activities of the public information office, and a six-step program for determining a department of transportation's (DOT) public communications situation, messages, and audiences.
- CHAPTER TWO, "Prototype Scenarios," takes the four areas shown to be of greatest concern to DOT CAOs and PIOs—public finance, environmental issues, overall department image, and construction disruption—and posits five specific scenarios based on those concerns. Having established the scenarios, Prototype Scenarios then present possible strategic responses to those scenarios to demonstrate how communications planning, on the strategic level, can assist in successfully addressing a DOT's concerns.
- CHAPTER THREE, "Toolbox," examines the specific tools a DOT can use to develop and implement both its overall communications strategy and specific, tactical public outreach campaigns. In addition to providing detailed descriptions of the various tools and materials, Toolbox offers a wealth of suggestions for their creation and effective use.

• CHAPTER FOUR, "Guide to Developing Campaigns," presents a series of self-analytic questions a DOT can use to determine the most appropriate and effective approach to virtually any public outreach issue. The Guide to Developing Campaigns also demonstrates the use of these questions by applying them to one of the scenarios developed in Chapter Two.

Together, these four chapters supply the basic, but essential, materials that can be used to address the issue of the role of public outreach in transportation management, as well as the issue of how to proceed once that role has been ascertained.

CHAPTER 1

STRATEGIC MARKETING PLANNING GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

State department of transportation managers nationwide are under enormous pressure. State budget deficits, tax limitation measures, increasing land acquisition costs, more stringent environmental restrictions on land use, clean air regulations, slow-growth and no-growth movements, and a host of other factors have brought DOT managers under a barrage of public and media attack for failing to meet transportation goals and expectations.

At the same time, an increased emphasis throughout government on democratic participation and government by consensus has given the public an increased sense of their role as overseers of government, even in areas such as transportation that have traditionally been left to experts. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), the comprehensive funding bill for DOTs signed by President Bush, even goes so far as to translate this expectation into law by requiring the DOTs work in partnership with their constituents in order to receive federal funding.

ISTEA and the reauthorization of the federal Clean Air Act have had major effects in three areas:

1. ISTEA provides greater flexibility in the use of funding at the local level, and increases the emphasis on and reduction of urban congestion and the use of transportation systems management. As a result, state and regional agencies will be reviewing plans and reconsidering their trade-offs between transit and highway projects.
2. ISTEA contains new requirements for the public's participation early in the process of determining transportation plans and priorities.
3. The federal Clean Air Act requires major employers in nonattainment areas to provide transportation management programs for their employees. It has also created a series of transportation planning requirements that will affect state and regional priorities.

The new emphasis on environmental concerns, public participation in the early stages of planning, involvement of employers in commuter transportation, and increased flexibility in the priority of funding all increase the level of scrutiny the public will give to each of the departments' strategies for transportation solutions. The DOTs' relationships with their various stakeholders are now more critically important than ever. If the attention given to public relations was considered optional a year ago, the new legislation has made it mandatory.

Rather than look on public participation as an encroachment on traditional territories, transportation agencies can and should recognize that partnerships with the public offer some real advantages to the departments in the delineation and execution of their duties.

The Scope of the Communications Plan

A transportation agency, through its products and staff, has thousands of interactions with the public each day. Each transaction either helps or harms the public's image of the department. Many of these transactions occur within the traditional framework of the communications program—through press releases, meetings, brochures, and other written and interpersonal communications. However, transactions that are often most able to shape public opinion occur outside of this traditional realm. In their everyday working activities, highway maintenance and construction workers, planners, and engineers make their mark on public opinion. Customers' interactions with the department's service staff, in whatever capacity, provide the customers with a rich amount of information about the department's concern for their needs and the quality of service the department delivers.

Indeed, the daily interactions of the public with the physical systems of the department, including highways, ramps, signage, detours, lanes and signals, all leave an impression of how caring and concerned the department is for the citizen-user of the transportation system. All of these interactions must be taken into account in developing communications plans.

There are four sources of communication with the public that are within the scope of organizational communications. Each of these sources must be considered as part of the department's communications strategies:

1. Mass media communications,
2. Interpersonal communications by management and communications personnel,
3. Organizational behavior exhibited during staff interactions with the public, and
4. Transactions by the public with the department's physical systems.

Effective communications programs are integrated with issues of organizational development and management that require the involvement and backing of senior management personnel to reduce the mismatches between the intended image and the department's operational reality.

A new graphic look, logo, motto, or other change in appearance may help a department's image, but cannot by itself change the public's opinion. Indeed, there is a danger in promoting an image of a caring, efficient, or environmentally concerned agency if that image is not upheld by the public's experience. Such deceptions are quickly identified and jeopardize the acceptance of other communications the department presents.

In addition, the public's image of the department is partially created through the interpretations the public bring to anything they see and experience. The citizens are not a blank slate on which the department can write an improved image. People have attitudes and opinions about many related topics that influence their perceptions of the department and its actions. Voters have strongly held views on the topics of taxes and government efficiency in general, about growth and economic vitality, about traffic and the experience of living in urban, suburban, and rural environments and what they want for their children. It is important to understand how public opinion is formed in general. The beliefs and feelings of the specific stakeholder groups can differ from others and must often be understood separately as they seek to influence policies (*1*).

DOTs have historically been the ones not only to identify transportation problems, but also to come up with their solutions at the same time. It is understandable that, because of this traditional role and their professional pride, DOT managers often want—and expect—the public to rely on their expertise.

Unfortunately, the financial situation for the transportation industry and the government has changed significantly in the past few years. Budget shortages have grown while costs for construction and labor continue to increase dramatically. At the same time, DOTs have become tightly bound, in the public's mind, to the traffic problems they face. Poorly maintained roads are seen to be a result of poor management on the part of the DOT, and not the financing problems, overwhelming growth in travel, or environmental regulations that may delay or prevent improvements from being built.

DOTs must focus attention on the challenges and difficulties they face, such as state budget deficits, the need to accommodate tremendous growth, land acquisition costs, tax limitation measures, the public's reliance on single-occupancy vehicle use, and stringent environmental restrictions. By making the public more aware of the limitations placed on the DOTs by external forces, DOTs can reduce public expectations to a more realistic level. When the public no longer automatically expects DOTs to be able to solve every traffic problem regardless of its cause, DOTs will begin to receive more credit in the public's eye for the problems they do solve. At the same time, by bringing the public into the planning process at the early stage of developing the issues, DOTs will give the public a sense of involvement that will only result in increased public support for the department at the later stages of project planning and construction.

The goal of communications

The ultimate goal of a communications plan is to build a relationship with the public in which there is a high level of trust and confidence in the department's ability to manage the transportation systems. It is under these circumstances of high levels of trust that the department earns the commitment of the public to its goals and methods of managing the system.

To earn the public's trust, the department must spend a significant amount of time and effort in listening to and understanding the public's attitudes, opinions, and needs from the transportation system and its impact on other aspects of their lives. An important part of the communications plan therefore is to ascertain who the stakeholders are and how the department will elicit their input. The plan should address the messages that are sent, as well as mechanisms for public input.

For many departments, this will be a radical departure from the engineering-based philosophy that the department knows the solutions and should just be left alone to implement them. However, asking the public for help in figuring out what to do to solve traffic problems does not require that DOTs give up their roles as the experts on technical issues or as the ultimate implementers of final plans. However, it does mean giving the public more ownership of the problem and even enlisting their support in its resolution.

Public-involvement processes can be used successfully at the implementation stages of a project as well as the planning stages, especially when the project is controversial, e.g., a High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lane that has been opposed by certain groups or received substantial attention from the media. Such projects have been shown to benefit greatly in acceptance (as well as in their ultimate use) when coalition-building and community relations techniques have been employed throughout the project planning and construction periods.

Strategic Planning as a step toward resolving conflicts

Nearly every state DOT has experienced a conflict with one or more interest groups over a substantive issue. Meetings with the specific interest groups over the issue and the use of conflict resolution techniques have generally resulted in agreements—if the parties are willing to meet, communicate their needs, hear the other side, and generate a list of alternative solutions with which they work toward agreement. But all too often these types of exchanges occur at the last minute, just before the bulldozers break ground, and the built-up tension explodes into a crisis or emergency situation.

Carpenter and Kennedy (*2*) have laid out a three-stage process that is able to resolve conflict in a large variety of cases. This simple list of steps illustrates how community involvement in the strategic planning process can become a tool to prevent such crises. The steps toward conflict resolution are 1) Ask each party to list what it considers to be a good resolution to the conflict, 2) Ask each party to list those elements that it thinks the other parties need in a satisfactory resolution, and 3) Post the lists for all to see.

The resulting generation of "what-ifs" and the discussion that follows often lead to reaching resolution.

During the strategic communications planning process described in the following sections, members of important stakeholder groups are asked to list their issues and to hear the concerns and needs of others. When this is done in an environment that is open, flexible, and nonthreatening, participants to the process become personally interested in the fair and balanced resolution of the multiple issues.

Communications planning can pay for itself over and over again through the time and energy saved in the avoidance of major conflict. Much of the conflict and tension that each department faces is a result of groups feeling left out of the decision process. The emotional tension felt by those left out can surpass even their concern toward the substantive issue itself. Such tension is relieved when group leaders can be assured that their concerns will be given a fair hearing and their concerns will be balanced as evenhandedly as possible with the concerns of other groups.

The emotions of those involved in conflict are of paramount importance to resolution of the issue. The department needs to have a reputation for openness, fairness, and a willingness to follow through on commitments. Providing opportunities for public participation early on can demonstrate those positive qualities. A communications planning process provides an opportunity to surface issues that have the potential to stir up conflicts.

In many cases, having participants understand all sides of the issue will be all that is needed to relieve the tension. In other cases, some aspect of the plans may need to change, and the agency can make the change and move on. But in those cases where misunderstandings are left unresolved for too long, the positions of the group can become hardened and much harder to resolve. Regaining the trust of a group that has disengaged from communicating is easily ten times tougher than working to get the right message across early and showing willingness to cooperate. Strategically identifying those issues that are important to the stakeholders and understanding their attitudes and concerns can avoid the need to spend time later in putting out fires and dealing with full-blown crises.

In seeking a consensus, a department must beware of seeking public input merely as a way to impose its own agenda. Calling a public meeting and then ignoring the issues that are raised or not following through on commitments will lead to the meetings being portrayed as a sham by those in attendance and by the press, which will in turn lead to even greater public resistance. There must be a commitment from the top that meetings are being held to listen, to understand, and to try to accommodate the various concerns of the individuals and groups represented. If that commitment is demonstrated and felt, the department will gain the necessary foundation of support for taking the plan through the legislative process. It will also produce allies for weathering the storms of the more day-to-day crises of public confidence that may occur.

Who to involve in communications planning

There is an implicit message to nearly every operational policy adopted by the DOT. Because of this, communications plans need to encompass nearly every operation at the department. This means not only involving the agency's communications officers from the beginning of operational and policy planning efforts, but also training upper and middle managers to be aware of the messages they are communicating to the public through their actions and the need to consider and implement new methods for improving that relationship.

PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATIONS

For a department of transportation to communicate effectively, certain basic questions must first be answered. What are the messages the department wants or needs to get across? Who are the audiences the department wants or needs to get those messages across to? Perhaps most importantly, why does the department want or need to get those particular messages across to those particular audiences?

To answer this last question requires that the department understand its mission and purpose. Many, if not most, public agencies today have gone through the process of developing a mission statement—an encapsulation of the agency's purpose, role, and philosophy in dealing with the public.

If, for example, a DOT has a mission statement that defines its purpose as providing and maintaining a transportation system for the benefit of the public, while taking into account such factors as fiscal and environmental responsibility and the wishes of both motorists and residents, then it immediately becomes clear that the department's public communications must address those environmental, fiscal, and local concerns as well as the more traditional engineering issues. Likewise, under such a mission statement, residents (and, by extension, local merchants, schools, churches, and other community institutions) are as much a part of the department's audience as are commuters and other motorists.

Generally speaking, a department's messages and audiences can be broken down into the following categories:

Messages

- WHAT: What is the department's mission and purpose? Is it simply to build and maintain roads, or is it a broader mission?
- WHO: Is the department just another government bureaucracy, or is it a professional engineering organization? What is the department's internal and external identity?
- WHY: Why is the department even necessary? What transportation issues and situations is the state facing that the department is charged with trying to solve?
- WHERE: What are the geographic limits of the department's concerns? Does the department take a statewide perspective while simultaneously paying attention to the special needs of each district or region, or do parochial, local issues prevail? Conversely, does the department have only a statewide perspective that keeps it from seeing or caring about important local concerns?
- WHEN: What is the department's timeframe? Is it constantly playing catch-up with problems of the past, or is it looking forward into the future and trying to solve tomorrow's transportation problems before they occur?

Audiences

Certain audiences for a DOT's messages, such as motorists, are obvious. Others may be less evident:

- THE GENERAL PUBLIC: Few state agencies have a greater impact on the day-to-day lives of the state's citizens than DOTs. As a result, they are perhaps the most visible component of a state's public image, and the entire citizenry of a state comprise their audience.
- RESIDENTS, MERCHANTS, SCHOOLS, EMPLOYERS, AND EMPLOYEES: When a DOT project is under way, it affects not only drivers, but also residents and businesses in the construction area. Detours affect how residents get to and from their houses, how children get to and from schools, how customers get to and

from local businesses, and how employees get to and from work. Noise and other disruptions also affect each of these groups.

• OPINION LEADERS: This group includes public officials as well as certain nongovernment opinion makers, such as user groups, trade associations, labor unions, local service clubs, chambers of commerce, and consumer groups and other interest coalitions. Anyone with a built-in audience of their own is a very important part of the DOT's audience.

• MEDIA: Likewise, the media's ability to reach and sway thousands, if not millions, can make them a vitally important ally or a very dangerous opponent; ensuring they become the former requires treating them as an important audience.

• THE DEPARTMENT ITSELF: A department's own employees, through their contact with the public, can create an image of a DOT as either a professional, committed public organization or an uncaring, spendthrift bureaucracy. For employees to even care about the image they present, the department must first communicate with its own employees, keeping them informed of the department's mission and accomplishments and instilling in them a sense of pride in the department and its (and their) work.

An understanding of messages and audiences is an essential foundation for any public communications program, but by itself, it is not enough. A successful public information officer must develop a methodology for communicating chosen messages to selected audiences. The following principles can be a guide to developing those needed skills.

SIX STEPS TO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

Step 1: Scan the Organization's Environment

Conduct an environmental assessment of the stakeholders' policies, events, and trends that are affecting the relationship between the department and its constituencies. The assessment is done in four stages:

1. *Determine the participants*—Identify key stakeholder groups and invite them to take part in the environmental scan.

2. *Identify and rank the significance of issues*—Conduct group discussions to identify and rank the importance of issues and trends affecting the agency's relations with the public.

3. *Gather existing information*—Once the most salient issues and trends are identified, begin a process of tracking available quantitative and qualitative information about the issues, policies, and stakeholder relationships.

4. *Conduct original research*—Conduct polling, focus groups, and ascertainment interviews to investigate the dynamics of specific issues.

Environmental or external scanning is an important first step in creating a strategic communications plan, for it will determine the issues and relationships with key stakeholder groups that are the most important to communicate with. Senior management and representatives of outside groups (perhaps separately at first and later together in the same room) should have an opportunity to meet in group discussions about the key issues and trends facing the transportation agency.

Methods to be used could include brainstorming a group discussion of issue papers either found in the literature or created for the sessions. An excellent source of issue papers discussing the future trends in transportation is *TRB Special Report 220,* "A Look Ahead—Year 2020, the Proceedings of the Conference in Long Range Trends and Requirements for the Nation's Highway and Public Transit System" (*3*).

One way to structure the group discussion would be to apply the Delphi Technique, which can be conducted in either written or computerized form, using a device called a "consensor" (*4*). The Delphi Technique allows for several rounds of discussion of issues using quantification of the individual ratings of importance to avoid the overemphasis on the opinions of the more vocal members of a group discussion (see References *5* and *6*).

The Minnesota DOT has used a technique called "matrix/impact probability" to assess a broader set of external issues that face the department. A matrix of issues is rated in terms of impact and probability of occurrence on the other axes. Other techniques called "impact networks" start with the trends most likely to occur and fill in the secondary impacts that are likely to take place if the first one occurs (*7*).

Eventually the research/environment assessment process will become a continuous "monitoring and evaluation of social attitudes and expectations related to the performance and behavior of the organization," and "continuing analysis of a) the significance of social attitudes and expectations for existing and potential corporate policies and programs, and b) specific actions that influence the reality and perception of organizational social performance" (*8*).

Actual methods for collecting the environmental assessment information will range from secondary analysis of articles and databases to generating some original research efforts. Information can also be obtained through a consortium of interested parties. The expense associated with each method will, of course, dictate that the bulk of the information will come from existing information found in newspaper, magazine, and journal articles, as well as newsletters, meetings, and other communications of professional and business associations, and other government agencies.

Most DOTs have developed some form of collecting information through existing media sources. Additional sources of information about agency issues and background on stakeholders and interest groups are available through databases collected by an increasing number of sources. Data are available on topics such as industry specific forecasts or population and labor demographics by zip code. (For a discussion of available information resources, see References *1* and *9*).

Research conducted by the department or through a consortium of interested parties can use any of a myriad of research and analysis techniques described in *NCHRP Report 329,* "Using Market Research to Improve Management of Transportation Systems" (*10*). Note the three key methods that can be used in conducting the customer and stakeholder analysis:

1. *Community Ascertainment Reports.* These are informal but highly informative records of interviews with business and opinion leaders. The Coro Foundation has developed methods for getting to the heart of business and opinion leaders' motivations through interview techniques that probe perceptions and attitudes

of key players. One method includes selecting and contacting key people to interview and structuring a series of open-ended questions to identify the issues, concerns, motivations, and plans of the individuals and groups that are important to the agency on one or more particular issues.

2. *Focus Groups.* These are small groups of individuals selected from the target markets. They allow the analyst to quickly identify needs, motivations, perceptions, and misperceptions of the larger population these individuals represent through observed small group discussion. Numerous DOTs have used focus groups effectively to ease development and implementation of ramp meters, HOV lanes, Traffic Management Plan (TMP) construction plans, and agency image.

3. *Public Opinion Poll.* Both community ascertainment reports and focus groups lack an adequate sample size to state statistically significant conclusions; their value, therefore, lies in their informed, but subjective judgments. To gain statistically reliable and objective results, define a confidence level and draw an adequate sample size from target populations and poll accordingly. Expense is an obstacle to extensive use of polls, and focus groups often provide adequate qualitative results at less cost.

Step 2: Organizational Analysis

Using the information collected above, analyze the organization's existing performance and behavior in relationship to the important stakeholder groups and compare that against a desired profile using a 5-year or longer time horizon. This process of organizational analysis should be done at a minimum with senior management and the organization's communicators, involving an increasingly large circle of managers and staff as the process continues.

1. Conduct a "SWOT" Assessment, evaluating the organization's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

2. Establish or review the organization's mission and goals.

3. Identify the desired state of the relationships with key stakeholder groups and the mismatches between desired and real (or perceived) organizational performance in those areas. Examine the implications to the organization's mission and goals.

4. Identify those aspects of the department's operations and policies that need modification to meet objectives.

5. Identify broad goals and directions for the communication of messages to the key stakeholder groups.

The organization's senior management must take some time to examine the position of the department in relation to the key issues and stakeholder groups identified in the environmental scanning process described previously. The next steps in the process would be to review the status of the organization's mission statement and goals and objectives to see if they align with the expectations of society as reflected in the new legislation and as identified in the review of outside relationships with the public.

This kind of honest and objective look at the organization can best be done using an outside consultant as facilitator of the process. The role of the facilitator is a very demanding one and none of the members of the management team should be expected to handle that role while also being expected to contribute to the discussion. In addition, the chances are that members of the team are so steeped in the culture and traditions of the organization as to be unable to recognize when the meeting is suffering from a weakness termed "Group Think" by Janis (*11*), in which certain ideas are rejected too early because of too high a level of cohesiveness among the group. (A good source of information regarding the management of such meetings is *How to Make Meetings Work* by M. Doyle, [*12*]).

Step 3: Determine Communication Strategies and Tactics

Beginning with the goals and objectives established in the Strategic Planning process (5-year time horizon), the next step is to create written plans for individual communications activities that have a 1-year time horizon. This plan development requires answering the following questions (*1*):

1. What, specifically, is the problem to be solved?

2. How is the organization perceived by members of key stakeholder groups?

3. How does the organization want to be perceived?

4. To what extent do perceptions among the stakeholders match organizational realities?

5. What steps must be taken to create the realities that management wants the stakeholders to perceive?

6. What messages must be transmitted to stakeholders to inform them of the new or existing realities?

7. What channels of communications should be used to transmit those messages?

8. What is the budget, schedule, and action plan for this activity?

9. How will monitoring or assessment of effectiveness be measured?

Mold message content to meet stated objectives within the constraints of the media and communications channels chosen. Focused message development may require additional research to understand the group's attitudes and perceptions regarding the issues and their experience with the organization's products and services. Messages would be designed to reinforce more positive perceptions.

Messages should be written in the plain language used by the stakeholder group targeted. Use simple and direct messages that are not full of transportation jargon, and not so "creatively" written as to lose the direct message to the audience. Deciding which segments of the public to focus communication activities on is a question of priorities. It is not cost-effective to attempt to communicate with everyone, and not everyone is interested in the message or should receive the same message in the same way. At the end of the analysis, the following questions must be answered: 1) Who are the users or potential users of the transportation system or facility? 2) Who are the largest users? 3) Who is the most affected by what is proposed? 4) What motivates customers to use the facility? 5) What changes in customer motivation are occurring or are most likely to occur? 6) What kinds of problems and dissatisfactions are customer groups experiencing? 7) How should the market segments be defined? Is there a message distribution system in place?

The last question is a key to success. There are many ways to approach audience segmentation. Depending on the communications, a vertical segmentation might be the following:

Geographic: the construction corridor, the origin/destination of commuters using the facility, the regional or state planning areas, etc.

Size of organization: at a certain employment level (usually 100), companies will have in place Employee Transportation Coordinators or a Human Resource specialist who can help transmit messages; smaller companies that do not have that staffing are approached differently.

Type of organization: goods movement companies are different than service industries. Opposition groups must be identified and understood. Governmental organizations may be key allies that can be mobilized.

For each message/medium combination and key stakeholder group, establish a mechanism for assessing the success of the message communication and the progress toward reaching established goals.

Step 4: Integration of the Strategic Messages with Operations

The operations portion of the organization needs to be involved in two aspects of the communications planning:

1. Determining how the physical system and services operations can be improved in accordance with the broad goals of the strategic communications plan.

2. Developing ways to deliver positive messages through each operation.

DOT managers may not think of their departments as having customers in the usual sense, but they do. DOT's customers are those who use the department's products and services— the driving public. Beyond these direct customers, everyone identified in the list of audiences earlier—which means virtually everyone in a state—is at least an indirect customer of the department with a stake in the development and delivery of the department's products and services. And, either they or their representatives in the legislature approve the DOT budget in one form or another or determine the budget level the DOT receives.

Consequently, customer service is as important to a DOT as it is to a department store. The impression that individuals get when dealing with the department on a daily basis is a major factor in the establishment of the department's image, and a department that wants to strengthen its image and support among the public must first strengthen its commitment to customer service.

This applies to all DOT workers from construction crews to those answering the telephones, as well as to higher-level employees. Front-line staff and any staff that interact with customers must be formally recognized by the organization as the most important link in the organization's customer service chain. Every time a customer encounters an employee, even if only for a few seconds, that employee is shaping the public's perception of your agency. These encounters are "moments of truth" for the whole agency. Employees must be encouraged to think of the public as valued customers rather than as mere hindrances to the performance of their more important duties, the public must be encouraged to think of DOT employees as committed, responsive public servants rather than as cold, unconcerned civil-service workers and tenured bureaucrats.

While strategic messages are oriented primarily toward developing relations with the stakeholder groups, communications for operations are typically (and legitimately) more action-oriented and focused on the transactions at hand. It is desirable to develop long-term processes for making the operational policies, practices, and communications consistent with the desired strategic messages. Once these goals are explained to the employees and middle managers themselves, solutions for integrating these strategic concerns may come more easily from the staff and managers on the front lines than from those in charge of communications. The communications staff should concentrate on assisting the front-line groups in identifying (or providing) support for the needed changes.

Internal communications

Internal communications mechanisms such as the employee newsletter, an employee annual or quarterly report, personal visits by senior management, special events, internal video productions, and direct written feedback can all be used to create additional communications opportunities to discuss the organization's values and positive image.

Employee involvement in goal setting

The Wisconsin DOT involved its employees in a discussion of the organization's mission and values and encouraged suggestions for changes in activities or policies that can reflect those positive values. The process was considered to be very valuable in achieving awareness and consensus regarding the agency's goals and values.

Quality circles

Employee training can provide an opportunity to discuss mutual problems. A "quality circle" is a training method that engages employees in defining quality standards and in identifying ways to improve customer service.

Other organizational changes that will promote improved customer service include: 1) Empowering employees to think for themselves, make their own decisions, and take action in the customer's interests; 2) Conducting employee evaluations based partly on the quality of customer contact; 3) Establishing "user-friendly" processes that support, rather than hinder, quality performance in customer contact; and 4) Soliciting meaningful, regular feedback from the public regarding their experiences as DOT customers.

Step 5: Implement the Communications Plan

1. Develop and produce communications materials.

2. Develop the organization's human resources to deliver the message. Train and develop communications skills among the members of the organization including a) individual training for executives on radio and television interviewing and b) speaking skills and classroom training for managers often designated as department spokespersons. Work with operational departments to train customer service representatives and others in both spoken and written communications skills.

3. Distribute the materials, produce the events, hold the press conferences, conduct the public participation meetings.

Once the plans are written and have gone through the organization's approval processes, it is time to implement the programs in their various forms.

Step 6: Feedback and Monitoring

1. *Feedback.* Establish mechanisms for receiving and responding to messages from the public including telephone helplines and procedures for responding to written and oral comments.

2. *Monitoring.* Once communications activities are specified, repeat the information scanning process to keep abreast of changing conditions. Establish a regular means of tracking events, people, and policies that reflect the progress the department is making in improving relationships with the stakeholder groups.

The same organizational information collection system that was created for environmental assessment can also be adapted for use in monitoring the progress of communications efforts planning above. *NCHRP Report 329* (*10*) contained a detailed description of the methods used in analyzing data for the evaluation of communications activities.

The information gathered from the feedback and monitoring process is then used in updating or changing the DOT communications plan. The objective is continuous improvement of interactions with the public.

CONCLUSIONS

The strategic communications planning process outlined in this chapter is an essential step in the development of a unified, successful communications program. It provides a foundation for dealing with the specific issues and scenarios that inevitably arise in the daily workings of a DOT. Without it, any communications plans that are developed in response to specific issues will be ad hoc, and the strength that comes from continuity will be lost.

The world of communications for a DOT can be compared to an ocean. At the top, skimming along the waves, are the public's *Attitudes* about the department, as influenced by their daily interaction with the department and its services. A little deeper—in the middle layer of the ocean—are the public's *Opinions,* which can be influenced by campaigns on specific issues, such as those examined in the prototype scenarios that follow. Finally, at the bottom of the ocean, are the deepest currents—the department's own *Values,* as determined by the strategic planning process.

Each layer constantly influences the others and is in turn influenced by them. Only a calm, forceful current at the deepest level—strategy and values—can keep a DOT from being carried off on the tides of opinion, or beaten by the waves of attitude, rather than remaining master of its own fate.

CHAPTER 2

PROTOTYPE SCENARIOS: APPLYING PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

Application of principles of communications and strategic communications plans to real-world situations is a skill that is developed over time and through experience. However, with the enormous stakes involved in transportation planning, construction, and maintenance projects, public information officers (PIOs) cannot afford to "learn on the job." Rather than waiting for real-life situations to present themselves, PIOs and their staffs can gain knowledge and experience by investigating hypothetical scenarios and developing responsive communications plans on paper. Ultimately, each department should develop scenarios that involve the issues of specific importance to its venue; nevertheless, the following scenarios are presented as examples that can be adapted to regional and local circumstances.

Interviews with 15 chief administrative officers (CAOs) of state departments of transportation revealed that although CAOs were satisfied with certain aspects of their communications programs, the following areas needed improvement:

- Public finance,
- Environmental issues,
- Overall department of transportation image, and
- Construction disruption.

Within these four areas, this report will present methods for dealing with five specific scenarios.

PUBLIC FINANCE

Department of transportation CAOs and PIOs face the crucial problem of obtaining consensus on the need for additional public financing of the transportation system. This consensus must be built on two levels. First, there is the political level, where state legislators and local officials must be convinced that new funds are needed and must choose among the alternative sources of revenue, including gasoline or highway taxes, general taxes, and user fees. Second, there is the need to obtain public support for a specific transportation plan and the funds required to implement it.

Scenario One: A consensus on what the transportation system should consist of has not been reached. Some people call for a concentration on new public transit systems at the expense of highway construction; others debate increased reliance on user fees versus increased taxes. State legislators have their own priorities for the funding of individual projects within their districts, and do not always seem to take the needs of the system as a whole into consideration. Aging roads are crumbling and continued growth leads to an increase in traffic congestion. How can the DOT manager build consensus around genuine system priorities, and get support for a balanced system among various constituencies?

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN TRANSPORTATION

Many DOT managers face significant challenges in dealing with such problems as clean air legislation, wetlands preservation, and endangered species acts. Some problems require working in conjunction with the business community to achieve a solution, while others involve a wide variety of environmental activist groups. In many cases, the media's attention to the problems seems to stir up more in the way of public outcries, rather than help to build a consensus. Several states, in fact, have recently gone through situations where road projects were stopped by environmentalists or historic preservationists. At least one situation is apparently headed to the U.S. Supreme Court for final resolution.

Scenario Two: Clean air regulations require a lowering of air emissions through the use of transportation control measures. How does the DOT manager work with businesses, other agencies and the public to meet these guidelines?

Scenario Three: Environmental groups are threatening demonstrations and lawsuits over the proposed route of a new freeway, which they feel impacts vital wetlands and certain endangered species. How does the DOT manager reach consensus and move the project forward?

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION IMAGE

State departments of transportation face a negative public image in a number of areas. Criticisms abound about an "engineering mentality," an inattention to environmental concerns, a lack of awareness of the needs of system users, lazy workers, and a perceived inefficiency in managing budgets.

Scenario Four: Shrinking tax revenues, combined with increased pressures for services, create a crisis situation for many state government agencies—the DOT included. Overall public perceptions are that all government agencies are wasteful and inefficient. Because of the DOT's highly visible role in providing for the daily transportation needs of the public, the agency is an easy mark for criticism and voter frustration. How can the DOT manager improve the public's perception of his department and thereby increase the DOT's chances of obtaining approval for necessary projects?

CONSTRUCTION DISRUPTION

The public demands an efficient, up-to-date transportation system, yet is unhappy whenever construction activities interfere with normal activities. The public's tendency to look at short-term consequences, as opposed to long-term benefits, means the DOT is often subject to criticism about how it carries out its construction projects.

Scenario Five: A proposed highway reconstruction project will affect traffic for months. How does the DOT manager lessen the impact on commuters and businesses?

SCENARIOS AND RESPONSES

The following outlines indicate possible ways of proceeding under each of the hypothetical scenarios. Specific tools that can be used to accomplish the desired actions are described and explained in the Toolbox section in Chapter 3.

Scenario One: Public Finance

A consensus on what the transportation system should consist of and how it should be funded has not been reached. Some people call for a concentration on new public transit systems at the expense of highway construction; others debate increased reliance on user fees versus increased taxes. State legislators have their own priorities for the funding of individual projects within their districts, and do not always appear to take the needs of the system as a whole into consideration. Aging roads are crumbling and continued growth leads to an increase in traffic congestion. How can the DOT manager build a consensus around genuine system priorities, and get support for a balanced system among various constituencies?

The development of a workable consensus requires a true partnership between a DOT and the public. Experience indicates that those states or regions that have sought out public opinion as part of the planning process enjoy broader support for their plans than those that have attempted to impose a pre-established plan on the public. Arriving at or building a consensus is vitally important as the first step in planning today's transportation systems.

- **Identify the stakeholders in the transportation system.** Have a clear understanding of just who cares about transportation decisions. In most cases, stakeholders will include such groups as voters, commuters, legislators, the media, other agencies, and key opinion leaders. Obviously, some of those groups overlap. Nevertheless, the involvement of all these groups is necessary to come up with a transportation plan that has sufficient support to be viable.

- **Identify those values or principles that motivate various transportation stakeholders.** A voter may be primarily interested in saving money. A legislator may care most about delivering benefits to his constituents. Commuters may care about decreasing congestion above all else. Each group's motivation will be slightly different. Assume that each group will want to know, "What's in it for me?" Self-interest is a strong motivator in nearly all areas of life, transportation decisions included.

- **Build a consensus from the bottom up.** Seek input from stakeholders at the local level, then let the solutions rise to the statewide level. Hold numerous small group meetings as an effective way to gauge the attitudes of the public. Open such meetings to the public, or invite specific local leaders who have been identified as crucial to the planning process.

- **Build trust with the public.** Begin public involvement processes in noncontroversial areas and move into the more unsettled topics as trust and relationships are built. Missouri, for example, had some success in putting together regional groups around the state that were at first asked to make plans for highway beautification. Once the groups had experienced success with this challenge, they were then asked to address other, more difficult transportation projects.

- **Create a sense of public ownership for the eventual solution.** Broad support is more likely if many people feel they have had a say in what is planned, rather than if they think that "the experts" are just stuffing another plan down the public's throat. Consider publicly acknowledging that transportation department officials don't have the solution to all the transportation problems, and that public input is essential. Anticipate that there will be some anger directed toward the department (inasmuch as the public would like someone else to provide them with easy answers to challenging problems) but recognize that this approach will create a feeling that the public can be part of the solution, not just passive bystanders.

- **Conduct public opinion research at several stages of the consensus-building process.** Use polls to identify levels of public concern and awareness about transportation problems. Hold focus groups to learn more about how people approach transportation problems, as well as to explore the needs and values that should be considered when formulating a transportation plan. At times, a clear direction may emerge from early research efforts. Even if solutions are not evident from the research, research will still serve to narrow the focus to particular areas of public interest.

- **Involve the media in the consensus-building process.** Alert the media to the plans that are under way, and work to create interest in and awareness of the planning process. Provide the media with full information regarding the problem to be solved so that they in turn can help generate the necessary public interest and involvement.

- **Inform and involve the state legislature, the executive branch, and local government leaders in the planning process.** The support of these groups is more likely if they are involved throughout the planning stages.

- **Compare what the public wants to what DOT professionals know the transportation system needs, and find the places where these two areas meet.** Once this common ground is identified, an agency can develop plans and goals with the confidence of receiving significant public support.

- **Conduct further public opinion research.** Confirm that the plan developed through the consensus process does, indeed, meet perceived public transportation needs.

• **Present the plan to the public and the media, emphasizing both the urgency of the plan in avoiding a potential crisis and the role the public played in the plan's creation.** Inform the public that the implementation of the plan depends on the allocation of funds and empower the public by making it clear that those allocations will depend on the public's demand for action from their legislators. Having the constituencies approach the legislators is far more effective than attempting to build support only by applying pressure from the DOT. Keep the media informed about the public's support for the plan—this will generate media support as well.

• **Anticipate attacks on the plan.** Few, if any, issues in the public sector enjoy unanimous support regardless of the depth of the consensus-building process. Be prepared to answer all possible objections to the plan from special interest groups, legislators, the media, and other quarters, rather than simply ignoring the objections or dismissing them out of hand. Respond to such attacks calmly and rationally, using the resultant controversy to attract attention to the problem and add to the public's demand for a solution.

At this point, a DOT should have a consensus plan in which large numbers of stakeholders feel they have a share. Public interest in transportation problems should be peaking as a result of well-placed public information efforts. Contacts should already be well-established with key local and statewide opinion leaders. Both the media and the legislature should be up-to-speed about plans. A transportation plan can then be placed on the ballot or sent to the legislature, and a traditional campaign waged for legislative and public support.

Scenario Two: Environmental Issues in Transportation

Clean air regulations require a lowering of air emissions through the use of transportation control measures. How does the DOT manager work with businesses, other agencies, and the public to meet these guidelines?

In many cases, state DOTs have been given responsibility for achieving goals such as cleaner air or less reliance on automobiles, but not necessarily the authority to implement the steps required to reach the goals. This places a DOT in a frustrating situation.

Each DOT has three options when dealing with environmental policies: a DOT can choose to embrace the goals, do nothing about them, or fight against them. As with developing a consensus, however, the option that leads to the greatest success is for a department to work in partnership with the public to find a workable balance between the competing demands of environmental regulations and a state's transportation needs.

• **Assess the impact that the department's response to environmental issues is likely to have among various audiences.** In formulating plans to achieve clean air mandates, a DOT will probably be dealing with items such as HOV lanes, mass transit, ridesharing, and flex-time. Look at each option in terms of how it meets the needs of both businesses and the public; a popular public stance may bring down the wrath of the regulatory community, and vice versa. Fully consider which stance will place the department in the strongest possible position to obtain final approval of a plan.

• **Obtain as much input as possible from those who will be affected by a plan.** Use such tools as community meetings and public opinion research to shape the plan.

• **Bring the policies down to the personal level.** Few people cared about the water shortage in California until it reached semicrisis proportions in 1991 and began to affect individual lives. A key factor in helping to reduce water use was restating the problem in terms the average person could understand. Since most people do not understand what an acre-foot is, many water companies changed their bills to reflect usage in terms of gallons, a much more familiar term. In addition, considerable efforts were expended to help people understand the impact that their small daily choices—shorter showers, repairing leaks, washing only full laundry loads—could have on the drought.

Make similar efforts to couch transportation decisions in terms of individuals' self-interests. If the department's goal is to increase ridesharing, for example, emphasize how much money an individual driver can save by ridesharing one day a week or how much time he or she can save by using HOV lanes, rather than simply presenting the total statewide dollar or fuel savings possible. If the issue is pollution, emphasize individual health issues rather than using impersonal statistics such as the pounds of pollutants released into the atmosphere.

• **Work with businesses to develop transportation management plans (TMP).** Suggest plans that provide employees with a significant personal benefit; these are much more likely to receive enthusiastic acceptance. Propose such benefits as reserved parking spaces, monetary awards, flexible hours, or the use of a company van. Help companies conduct research to determine which particular perks are most effective with their employees.

Scenario Three: Additional Environmental Issues in Transportation

Environmental groups are threatening demonstrations and lawsuits over the proposed route of a new freeway, which they feel impacts vital wetlands and endangered species. How does the DOT manager reach consensus and move the project forward?

• **Consider potential environmental objections when a project is first being considered.** Group issues for similarities and identify the core issues. Research precedents to determine how the public and the courts have responded to similar situations in the past. Decide whether a particular project is worth the court battles and potential lawsuits that may arise.

• **Identify the opposition before it becomes entrenched.** If an effective public outreach program is already in place, contact local DOT personnel to find out who the people and groups are who are likely to come into play on a specific issue. If the various players are not so readily identifiable, determine who they are through talks with local officials, newspaper research, discussions with legislators, and similar research.

• **Bring the various opposition groups together and engage in a dialog.** Make a sincere effort to understand the opposing positions. Remember that while most people are not active in an environmental group, studies have shown that average citizens like to think of themselves as environmentalists, nonetheless. Assume, therefore, that there is likely to be a great deal of public sympathy for whatever positions the active environmentalists take.

• **Consider hiring an environmental insider as a project consultant.** Use the consultant as a negotiator between the DOT and environmental groups. Proceed publicly and sincerely to prevent the consultant from being perceived as either selling out to the DOT or as a shill for DOT interests.

• **Build a public constituency for the project.** Invite a variety of public groups to act in an advisory role on the project. Use public meetings, outreach to community leaders, and a positive media relations program to increase public involvement. Be aware that the broader the coalition that is brought in under the project umbrella, the greater the chance for solid public support.

• **Maintain a unified view of the project within the DOT itself.** Keep all personnel involved aware of the arguments made by each side and the rationale behind the DOT's decision to move forward with the project. While it is unlikely that all employees involved with a project will be placed in the role of spokesperson, the fact that all are aware of the strategies involved means that each can bring to his everyday encounters the same set of supporting arguments. This increases public perceptions about a project's strengths and about the competence of the DOT.

Scenario Four: Department of Transportation Image

Shrinking tax revenues, combined with increased pressures for services, create a crisis situation for many state government agencies, the DOT included. Overall public perceptions are that all government agencies are wasteful and inefficient. Because of the DOT's highly visible role in providing for the daily transportation needs of the public, the agency is an easy mark for criticism and voter frustration. How can the DOT manager improve the public's perception of his department and thereby increase the department's chances of obtaining approval for needed projects?

Government employees tend to be a convenient target for public frustrations. General perceptions that government itself is wasteful and inefficient often carries over into negative attitudes about those who are employed by government. In addition, many people are frustrated by the "invisible bureaucrats" who seem to have a negative impact on their lives, but whom they can't see, and they may take out their frustration on those government employees whom they can see, such as DOT employees working on the roads. Still, it is important to remember that there are those public servants—firefighters, police, paramedics—who do retain a positive public image. DOTs need to learn from the image successes enjoyed by these groups.

DOTs are also associated with the development community. The problems associated with growth—crowds, pollution, overstressed infrastructures, traffic congestion, and the like—have given developers a poor reputation in many areas of the country. With additional growth comes the need for additional roads, and the builders of those roads are often blamed for the problems along with the developers themselves. If a DOT pushes strongly for new roads, the department may be accused of promoting excess growth or being in cahoots with developers, yet when the growth inevitably occurs, and the roads aren't there, a DOT is then criticized for failure to meet public needs. Reversing this negative image is a long-term process.

• **Instill a customer service orientation throughout the department.** It is not enough to create a customer service department or task force. Indeed, by so doing, a DOT runs the risk of generating the false impression among employees that only a particular group is responsible for customer service, and the remaining employees are excused from worrying about the subject. To effectively create a climate where customer service is paramount, it must become integral to everything done in a DOT. Everyone must feel a responsibility for providing good service. Everyone must realize that, whatever his or her job, each employee helps create the DOT's public image.

• **Determine who the customer is.** As a government department, DOTs serve a variety of constituencies. Among them are the public, the media, the executive branch of state government, the state legislature, the federal government, and the transportation industry. Employees must think in terms of the needs of each particular customer. Generally, a request from the trucking industry will be handled differently than one from the media. Indeed, it may even be helpful for different PIOs to specialize in handling different audiences.

• **Think in people terms rather than in engineering terms.** Examine all of the agency's activities through the eyes of various constituencies. Consider all forms of communication, from telephone calls to press releases, speeches, logos, and newsletters, in terms of the effect each will have on the specific audiences it will impact.

• **Humanize the face the department presents to the world.** Strive to present an image of the department as an association of dynamic, caring individuals who are committed to carrying out its programs for the public's benefit. Chevron, Dow Chemical, and the National Rifle Association (NRA) are three groups with somewhat controversial images that have used individuals or small groups from within the company to convey corporate messages to the public.* The message that "I'm the NRA" has given a human face to a group with major image problems. Chevron's "Do people care? People do" messages have served to blunt criticisms that oil companies don't care about the environment. Choose an image theme that conveys to the public that they are dealing with people, not with an impersonal institution.

• **Inform the public about the department's efforts to improve its efficiency and that of the state's transportation system.** The job of a modern DOT is not simply to build and maintain highways, but to find new ways to use existing highways more efficiently through transportation systems management (TSM). However, the majority of the public is unaware of the entire concept of TSM, much less its component parts such as traffic operations centers, HOV lanes, trafficways, and the like. Publicize these technological advances to further the image of your department as a forward-thinking, professional engineering organization that is working to create the best possible transportation system for the fu-

*NOTE: The Transportation Research Board, the National Research Council, the Federal Highway Administration, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and the individual states participating in the National Cooperative Highway Research Program do not endorse products or manufacturers. Trade or manufacturers names appear herein solely because they are considered essential to the object of this report.

ture, not one struggling to keep the present system from falling apart.

• **Create some institutional legends to counter the public's and the media's tendency to emphasize negative stories.** Prepare and disseminate stories describing how a DOT has successfully met significant challenges and how the public has benefited from that success. Draw from a variety of areas — engineering, highway beautification, customer service, and so on. Run these success stories in internal newsletters, put them into press releases, and use them as part of a public relations campaign. Stress each story again and again until it achieves a sort of "legend" status. Circulate such positive materials on a continuing basis.

• **Create a partnership with other state DOTs.** Share information and ideas with other departments; find out what's worked in neighboring states and let others know about your own successes with public image programs. Foster a shared attitude of professionalism among DOTs.

• **Use advertising and public relations to broaden the public's understanding of the department's role.** To counter the popular image of DOTs as simply hard-hatted construction workers, remind the public about the sophisticated engineering and planning efforts that modern highway projects require.

Scenario Five: Construction Disruption

A proposed highway reconstruction project will affect traffic for months. How does the DOT manager lessen the impact on commuters and businesses?

Throughout the nation, state highways are undergoing major reconstruction to provide additional capacity. Unfortunately, the highways most in need of reconstruction are usually operating at or near their existing capacity. This condition creates a special challenge to find ways to accommodate traffic at an acceptable level of service during the period of reconstruction.

During construction, additional demands are placed upon the freeway. Vehicle throughput often decreases because of narrowed lanes, elimination of medians or shoulders, the presence of gawk screens, k-rail barriers, heavy equipment, and resulting changes in driver behavior as motorists react to the reconfigured facility. This decrease in throughput may result in significant delays for motorists. Major construction activity can also disrupt adjoining neighborhoods and businesses and alter traffic patterns on nearby streets.

• **Develop a relationship between the department's public information office and the various planning, construction, and maintenance branches.** Utilize the knowledge and experience of the branches to help identify sensitive issues, the impact of projects on various audiences, and other information that could affect the direction or effectiveness of a public information campaign. Talk to the right-of-way branch to find out who the leaders are and what the major issues are in different communities; find out from project management and construction what sorts of impacts different projects are expected to have on drivers, residents, and other audiences; work with traffic management to find ways to mitigate those impacts. Let the branches know that by cooperating fully with the public information office, they will be helping to create an understanding of the project among the public, which will in turn help them move forward with their own work.

• **Create a TMP to mitigate some of the impact of an urban freeway construction project.** Utilize a variety of techniques, including controls on contractor operations, traffic management, transportation demand management, and public awareness measures. Select measures that are specific to the corridor in which they are applied and that address the unique traffic, topographical, demographic, and political considerations of the area.

• **Identify the impacts the project will have on an area or corridor.** Develop an advisory group of affected agencies and constituencies to help tailor the TMP to the specific project. Learn as much as possible about the possible consequences of construction disruptions and select TMP elements accordingly.

• **Implement those elements that will mitigate the impacts.** Select from such proven elements as a news bureau and telephone helpline to keep the press and public informed; a roving contract tow service, mobile changeable message signs, and highway advisory radio (HAR) to keep traffic flowing as smoothly as possible; and ridesharing and vanpool incentives to reduce the number of vehicles on the roadway.

• **Establish an evaluation program to determine the success of different elements of the TMP.** Conduct regular surveys during the construction period to determine how drivers, the public, and politicians react to the TMP measures that are provided and which TMP measures are perceived and measured to be the most effective.

CHAPTER 3

TOOLBOX

Just as an engineer would be hard-pressed to design a highway without knowing geometry, a DOT public information officer (PIO) can't successfully implement a public information campaign without knowing how to use the tools of the communications trade. The following explanations and examples, while not all-inclusive, present a useful overview of many of the tools, devices, and methods available to assist a PIO in the execution of his or her job.

Image Graphics

- Logo and name
- Signage
- Internal graphics
- Equipment and uniforms

Public Input

- Polls
- Audits
- Focus groups
- Meetings
- Organization outreach
- Speakers' bureau
- Employer outreach
- Response materials

Public Information Materials

- Features
- News releases
- Press kits
- Media alerts
- Closure lists
- Mat columns
- Clip art
- Brochures
- Newsletters
- Flyers
- Posters
- Displays
- Models
- Display boards
- Deciding what to use

Audio-Visual Materials

- Slide shows
- Videos
- Video news releases
- Public service announcements

On-Site Information Devices

- Highway advisory radio
- Changeable message signs

TOOLS AND HOW TO USE THEM

Image Graphics

In the private sector, firms often orchestrate every impression that a consumer will have of a company or product. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the fast food industry, where every detail is managed, from the advertising to the uniforms, placemats, and hamburger wrappers. Although it might seem a long way from fast food to highway engineering, the same attention to detail is applicable to DOT operations, and ultimately to DOT image.

Although it is important for DOT employees to maintain individual integrity, it is equally important for the DOT to present itself to its public as a cohesive agency that is working as a team to solve common problems. This can be achieved, in part, through management of external appearances. Perhaps the most important point in this area is a mandate for consistency and continuity.

In the private sector, for example, often one or two advertising/marketing campaigns unfold each year, but they conform to a basic "family look" so that consumers are not confused each time they see the product. These family looks can be developed graphically—the campaigns may actually look similar—or they can be developed through the use of a recurring slogan, character, or jingle. The different campaigns may have separate messages, often directed at different audiences, but those audiences can still recognize immediately what product or company the campaign is for.

For a DOT, this example is instructive. A family look helps the public identify the DOT as the umbrella organization sponsoring various projects or campaigns. Individual campaigns can be built around various themes, such as highway beautification, a major reconstruction project, proposed funding alternatives to support a new technology, or ongoing maintenance work, but by unifying each of these campaigns with a family look, the DOT can maximize its visibility.

This concept should be taken into consideration during the preparation of Requests for Proposals (RFPs), as well as solicitations for the development and execution of campaigns by outside firms and consultants. Such outside agencies should be directed to make sure the campaigns and products they develop still fit into the department's overall family look.

Logo and name

A logo—a visual representation of an agency's name—may seem like a small item, and yet, it's one that can have a great deal of impact to an agency's public image. Corporations know this; that's why they spend millions to design or redesign logos.

Why are logos so important? Because in today's world, the public is bombarded with so many names and images on a constant basis. A short, visually powerful logo can stand out among the clutter and draw the viewer's attention, even if the viewer is a motorist driving by at 55 miles per hour. The more often a motorist—or a resident or local merchant—notices your agency's logo, the more your agency will be thought of as a vital, ever-present component of the state's public services.

It is important for DOTs to create a name or logo for a project or for their entire agency that has meaning to the intended audience. For example, a DOT promoting a roving tow truck service dubbed the service the "Orange Angles"—named for the color of their tow trucks—and created a sleek, stylized logo. The name, which connoted a rescue service rather than just another anonymous government project, captured the public's attention and became an immensely popular traffic management service. The DOT's original acronym, FSP (Freeway Service Patrol), probably would not have had the same impact.

HOW TO

• A new logo—or even a new agency name—can be an effective way to revitalize an agency's image, if its existing image is so dated or unpopular as to be beyond redemption. If that's the case, it's a major design job, so look for the services of a professional graphic designer. Test possible new logos and names using focus groups to see which best portray the agency as a vital, important agency with a customer service orientation.

• In creating a name for a project or service, look for something short and punchy so the public will remember it more easily. Don't be afraid to use nicknames; they may seem "nongovernmental," but the public loves them, and that's what counts.

• Consider having a public contest to name a new project or service. It will generate additional publicity that will increase the public's familiarity with the project and its name from day one.

Internal graphics

Along with logos and names is the need to maintain internal graphic standards and continuity. If an agency uses one typeface for one division, another for a second, and still another for a third, or if one branch prints everything on white paper while another prints only on yellow, the public can become confused and may not realize that the pieces are all from the same agency. While all the materials don't have to look the same, maintaining a family look as discussed earlier will increase the impact of all the agency's materials.

The previous comments about not being afraid to use nicknames for new projects or services apply to graphics, as well. Some DOTs think that because they're government agencies, they have to use formal, official-looking typefaces and illustration styles at all times. Nothing could be further from the truth; try, instead, to match graphic styles to intended audiences and objectives, just as you would in deciding what kind of materials to produce.

For example, many agencies have had great success in creating mascots for construction projects, just as the U.S. Department of the Interior uses Woodsy Owl to promote environmental awareness. By creating a project mascot and using an illustration of the mascot in materials relating to the project, an agency can appear more friendly in the eyes of the public.

Signage

One of the most useful public information tools during a construction project is signage in the corridor and at the site. Signage can tell motorists which merchants are still open during disruptive construction and can divert traffic around heavily congested corridors. Consistent and accurate signage is paramount in these situations.

By making signage conform to a family look, a department can ensure that the projects it sponsors will be instantly recognizable to motorists driving by, even at the speed limit. An agency must never be afraid to take credit for its projects and accomplishments, as such recognition is vital in helping to build an agency's public image.

Signage can also be used to tie a particular project into its public information and advertising materials. For example, if a department has developed a mascot for a particular project and is using that mascot in its public information materials, using that mascot on signage in the project area can remind the driving public of the messages presented in the information materials, thus leading to greater compliance with those messages.

Equipment and uniforms

If someone were to ask you to name a real estate company, you might have one of a hundred different answers. If someone asked you to name a real estate company whose salespeople wear gold blazers, in many parts of the country, you'd immediately answer Century 21. Century 21 has learned that by giving its salespeople a recognizable uniform, it makes them stand out from the crowd and helps people remember them, while making the company itself seem larger.

The same holds true in the construction field. Most DOTs have learned that by putting its field workers in uniforms, the public can instantly recognize when the department is on the job. It goes without saying that the uniform should be kept as clean and unvarying as possible; just because someone is a highway worker doesn't mean he should wear his uniform any less proudly than a public safety officer or mail carrier. Obviously, allowances must be made for the soiling inherent in construction work, but there are ways to adjust for that; in France, for example, COFIROUTE, which operates 500 km of toll roads, issues clean white uniforms to its workers daily.

One variation on this is to provide different color uniforms for workers in different categories; for example, engineering personnel might wear one color, while construction crews would wear a different color and maintenance crews a third. By doing this, an agency can make it easier for the public to realize that the agency does many jobs related to building and maintaining highways, and that a team is at work, not just a collection of individuals.

Equipment is one of a DOT's most visible outward symbols, and as such, it can make a great impact toward upgrading or downgrading the agency's public image. Obviously, no piece of highway equipment is going to look like it just came out of the factory after a day on the job, but by keeping equipment well maintained and as clean as possible, a DOT can put its best face forward to the driving public at all times. A truck wash and a can of touch-up paint can have as much impact as a glossy brochure, if they're used to turn a dirty, run-down-looking road grader into one that displays a DOT's pride.

Public Input

It's difficult to develop a successful public information campaign unless an agency knows how the public feels about the different issues. There's no point in wasting time, effort, and money producing brochures that focus on removing a certain strand of landscaping, for example, if public polls or meetings would have shown you that the public didn't really care about that particular strand in the first place. Similarly, if a particular issue is very important to a community, a public information campaign that fails to address that issue will be in danger of failing completely.

There are a variety of techniques that make it possible to determine the public's stand regarding a project, location, or issue. In general, these techniques fall into four categories: Polls, Focus Groups, Meetings, and Response Materials.

Polls

The most effective way to determine the general range of public attitudes is through polling, which is simply asking the public what it thinks about the different issues. Polls can be designed to ask general questions, such as "Do you think there's too much traffic congestion in this area," or very specific questions, such as "Would you agree to the removal of the grove of trees at 1st and Main if that's the best place for the new freeway offramp?"

Poll questions can take many forms, from yes/no to multiple choice to essay questions or fill-in-the-blanks.

In the early planning stages of a project or a public information campaign, the most valuable questions are multiple choice and essay questions. These questions can easily determine what issues are on the public's mind and which of them are the most important to the public. General yes/no questions at this stage can also determine public attitudes toward a project in general.

Later on, once specific parameters of a project have been determined, yes/no questions are more useful in framing specific issues and testing specific messages. The way a question is worded has a great deal of influence on the answer received. Consider the following:

- The historic, 100-year-old grove of oak trees at 1st and Main should be saved at all costs.
  ____ Agree   ____ Disagree

or,

- A new freeway offramp that will ease the massive congestion downtown is more important than a few old trees.
  ____ Agree   ____ Disagree

Both questions ask the same thing, but the first question will obviously result in more "save the trees" responses. Which way to frame the question depends on whether an agency wants honest answers—at the start of a project, for example, to find out true public attitudes—or whether it wants answers that support its position—to identify supporters, for example, or to look for evidence of support to show to the media or political overseers.

In many cases, the framing of a question can be changed simply by adding adjectives. Consider:

- The grove of trees at 1st and Main is more important than a new freeway offramp.

or,

The historic grove of trees at 1st and Main is more important than a new freeway offramp.

or,

The grove of diseased trees at 1st and Main is more important than a vital new freeway offramp.

If honest answers are sought, avoid adjectives that place a positive or negative value judgment on an item or issue.

The following are examples of different types of questions that can be asked in a poll.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

General:

- Which of the following are major problems in our region?

  ____ Traffic congestion
  ____ Historic preservation
  ____ High taxes
  ____ Air quality
  ____ Unemployment

or,

- Please rate the following in order of importance:

  (same choices)

Note that of the two multiple choice questions, the first version simply indicates what issues are important to the public, while the second version gives important information in developing a public information campaign. For example, if the public rates unemployment as more important than historic preservation, the campaign can emphasize how a new offramp to downtown will bring increased local employment both during construction and afterwards, through easier access to the downtown business district.

MORE SPECIFIC

- Which of the following historic structures or locations should be saved at all cost?
  ___ Higgens Adobe
  ___ Town Hall
  ___ Oak Grove
  ___ The Water Tower
  ___ Sled Hill

or,

- Please rank the following historic structures and locations in order of importance:

  (same choices)

As in the previous two questions, the responses to the first question indicates which structures and locations are important to the community, while the second version indicates which locations the community might be willing to lose, as long as the most important locations are saved.

ESSAY QUESTIONS OR FILL-IN-THE-BLANKS

General:

- What are the most important problems facing our region?

or,

- Please list the five most important problems facing our region.

More specific:

- What historic structures or locations should be saved at all costs?

or,

- Please list the five most important historic structures or locations in town, in order of importance.

The value of a fill-in-the-blanks question is that it indicates what the public is thinking without prompting, rather than giving them a fixed list to choose from. This can be of great value in finding out which issues the department may not need to address; if the public doesn't think of a potentially controversial issue themselves, do not bring it to their attention.

YES/NO OR AGREE/DISAGREE

General:

- Traffic congestion is a major problem in our region.

  ___ Agree ___ Disagree

- Historic preservation is very important in our community.

  ___ Agree ___ Disagree

- Relieving traffic congestion is more important than historic preservation.

  ___ Agree ___ Disagree

MORE SPECIFIC

- We should build a new freeway offramp downtown to relieve traffic congestion.

  ___ Agree ___ Disagree

Very specific:

- We should build a new freeway offramp at 1st and Main.

  ___ Agree ___ Disagree

Although general yes/no questions can help determine the direction of a public information campaign, they are most useful for determining the public's position on specific issues. Therefore, responses to yes/no questions have more use later in a project or campaign, when specific issues are at the forefront of the debate.

There are a number of ways to deliver polls to the public. Polling can be done by direct mail; by telephone; or in person at such locations as central business districts or shopping malls. The choice depends on a number of factors, including cost, the number of responses needed, and the need for the answers to be statistically credible.

In-person polling is usually the least expensive alternative. However, it also results in the smallest number of responses, and it's the least accurate, statistically speaking. It's useful if the agency is on a limited budget and is trying to get a general idea of the public's mood or opinions.

Also, in the initial stages of planning a project when an agency is looking for ideas about how to frame the information campaign, the raw, unedited responses obtained from in-person polling can often give ideas for specific messages that can be used later in campaign materials.

HOW TO

- Pick a location, such as a shopping mall, with a large number of potential interviewees.

- Women interviewers are generally less threatening to the public, and they are likely to get more responses.

- Have the questions typed and copied, with one page or set of pages per interviewee.

• Keep the list of questions short so it won't take more than a few minutes to answer.

• Give the interviewee a questionnaire to fill out, or have the interviewer ask the questions verbally; people are usually more likely to take the time to answer verbal questions than written ones.

• Along with the questions, leave some space to write down the interviewee's thoughts about the subject of the interview—some of the most useful responses will come from these off-the-cuff comments.

Telephone polling results in a greater number of responses than in-person polling, and it's much more statistically accurate. However, it's also more time consuming and expensive, and is best handled by a professional research organization. Telephone polling is most useful when putting together a serious public information campaign about a major project or issue, because it accurately determines the public's opinion and mood about the question at hand.

Telephone polling can determine within a few percentage points the exact percentage of people who support a given project, or who believe a certain strand of trees is sacrosanct, or who are willing to support a tax increase for a new highway project. It can also determine the relative importance of different aspects of a project, or find out what messages would have the most effect in a public information campaign.

Telephone polling is also very useful in determining facts as well as opinions. For example, if the goal is to increase ridesharing on a certain stretch of freeway, a properly conducted telephone poll of commuters who drive alone on that stretch can tell why they don't carpool and what it would take to get them to try ridesharing.

HOW TO

• Use a professional research organization whenever possible, but especially for sensitive or "big ticket" issues.

• If a professional research organization is not used, begin by determining the "universe": who to interview. Is the agency interested in the opinion of any driver in the region, or only those who regularly use a certain stretch of highway for commuting?

Typically, an agency will be interested in the opinions of anyone who will be affected by the project or who might have a strong (and thus possibly disruptive) opinion about it. In the case of our hypothetical freeway offramp, for example, talk with commuters who drive past the central business district in question, drivers who take the offramps just before and just after the proposed new offramp location, and downtown residents and businesses.

• In many states, state agencies are allowed to use motor vehicle department information for state purposes. They could, for example, get the telephone numbers of commuters who use a certain offramp by recording the license plate numbers of all vehicles using that offramp for a week and then pulling out the ones that use it daily, and then using motor vehicle department records to find the telephone numbers of the registered owners of those vehicles. If motor vehicle department information is unavailable, use a reverse telephone directory—which lists telephone numbers according to address—to call residents and businesses within the survey area.

• For a telephone poll to have the necessary statistical accuracy, many calls need to be made. Professional research organizations generally try to actually contact about $\frac{1}{10}$ of 1% of the people in their survey area. To poll a city of 300,000 people, for example, about 300 people should be polled. Remember, that's completed phone calls—there will be many more calls that won't be answered, or where the resident won't want to answer the questions.

• As with the in-person poll, try to keep the list of questions short. However, telephone polls can be slightly longer than in-person polls, since someone who's willing to answer questions over the phone is usually less pressed for time than someone approached in person.

Mail polling is much simpler than either in-person or telephone polling; just mail out a survey and wait for the responses to come in. Because of the huge amount of direct mail most people receive, however, the percentage of responses will usually be very small. Thus, a much greater number of mail surveys needs to be sent—more than the amount needed for conducting in-person or telephone polling. Also, remember that to get the best response, provide prepaid reply cards. Even at bulk rates, it can be very expensive to pay for thousands of reply cards. The more responses needed, the more expensive this method is.

Also, the longer the survey, the more expensive it will be to mail. If the number of questions is kept low, a reply postcard can be used, whereas if the list of questions is long, a reply coupon and envelope are needed—at greater cost.

Mail polling is useful if physical evidence of public response is needed. If a planned project is in political trouble, for example, few displays of public support are more impressive than delivering a few thousand survey cards supporting the project to the legislator in charge. In this sense, a mail poll really functions like a bounce-back card, which will be discussed later.

Audits

Besides direct public polling, it's possible to poll the public indirectly by polling various organizations that can be expected to know the mood or opinion of their members. Groups to consider polling include political or quasi-political agencies; business, community, and service organizations; and major businesses and employers in the affected area.

These "audits" are best conducted by telephone, but in this case, you're looking for anecdotal comments and attitudes rather than statistics or percentages. Think of these audits as informal conversations, rather than formal polling.

Government agency audits can tell a department where its supporters and opponents are within the governmental structure. If a highway project is to go through a number of cities, for example, it is vitally important to know in advance what the cities along the route think of the project, and what the important issues are to those cities. The same applies to counties, intergovernmental agencies, and the offices of elected and appointed officials.

Organization audits are useful in two ways. First, major organizations such as auto clubs represent a large number of members, and asking the organizations how their members feel about certain issues is much less expensive (although less accurate) than polling the group's members individually. Second, certain organizations, by virtue of their size or political power, are in a position to lend strong support or opposition to projects in their region, and so their "group opinion" is important for its own sake.

Employer audits are much like organization audits, except that the organizations being polled are major employers or businesses within the project area. As with other organizations, the more employees or political influence a business has, the more important it is to find out where the business stands on the issues of importance to your project.

HOW TO

- State-issued directories are often the most useful for making lists of governmental, quasi-governmental, and intergovernmental agencies in your region. Chambers of commerce will usually supply lists of major organizations and businesses.
- Calls should be informal, from one government official or employee to another, or from a government agent to his or her counterpart in the private sector.
- Keep the list of questions very short.
- Tell interviewees that while their words may be used, attribution is by permission only. Generally, more insightful comments are received when responding "off the record."

There's a separate category of audit that is equally useful, but which has its own how-to methods and rules. *Media audits* can tell you what the key issues will be in the press long before any articles appear, and can also give you an idea of how the press are likely to treat those issues.

HOW TO

- Using the local library or a database such as NEXIS, review recent articles on highway projects or similar issues to see what the tone of the articles has been and to become familiar with the reporters who cover those issues.
- If possible, ask the reporters or their editors informally what their perceptions are of their readers' feelings and opinions toward highway projects in general.
- If a planned project has already been made public, ask what readers think of the project. If the project has not been made public, however, don't discuss any specifics, because the project can suddenly become public in the next day's newspaper. Avoid even asking about similar projects; reporters are paid to put two and two together.

Focus groups

A special type of public input device, designed to reveal attitudes and opinions in much more depth than most polls, is a focus group. In a focus group, a small group of people are brought together to talk about a particular issue. While polls reveal how people think they feel about issues—or how they're willing to admit to feeling—focus groups reveal how they really feel about them. In a focus group, people don't just answer a list of questions; they have a full, interactive discussion, and as a result, they're much more likely to reveal their true opinions or feelings. They may even reveal opinions they didn't know they had.

In the early stages of a project, a focus group may be used to determine how people really feel about an issue such as historic preservation. While many people will say they're in favor of preservation in a poll, a focus group will usually show that preservation is much less important to them than they say it is.

In the later stage of a project, when developing the public information program, a focus group can also help determine which messages are the most forceful. By presenting preliminary campaign ideas and materials to a focus group before putting the materials into production, an agency can find out which ones get the desired response, which ones need a little work, and which ones, if any, have entirely missed their target.

HOW TO

- Conducting a focus group is generally done with the help of a professional organization. Begin by selecting participants who have an interest in the subject or geographic area and who have an hour or more to spare. One way to do this is to review responses to in-person or telephone polls, and ask the people who had the most to say whether they'd be willing to take an hour of their time to talk about the subject in more detail. Telling them their answers will help determine the future of the transportation system in their neighborhood is often an effective way to obtain their cooperation.
- Focus groups work best with groups of about six to nine people. Any less, and the conversation can lag or be dominated by one participant; any more, and the conversation can get out of control or can turn into a debate between two or three very vocal participants.
- Hold the focus group meeting in a quiet, comfortable, relaxed setting so that the participants will be the most voluble. The setting should be large enough to hold all the participants comfortably, but not so large that they'll be distracted by a lot of empty space.
- If possible, tape record or videotape the session so that the participants' comments can be reviewed in depth. If a video is used, keep the camera as inconspicuous as possible to keep from distracting the participants. A camera that works via remote control without a camera operator in attendance will aid the spontaneity of the group.
- Although there's nothing wrong with letting the conversation find its own direction, remember the group's purpose is to discuss the issues at hand. An experienced moderator can help keep the conversation focused on the issues. Use tact and casual reminders rather than authoritarian commands.
- It is important to have a moderator who is not too invested in the project, or the group conversation can end up being a reflection of the moderator's views. This is another reason to use an outside professional.
- Begin by discussing the issue or issues in the most general terms, and then move on to specific applications. For example, to find out how deeply people feel about the grove of trees in the hypothetical situation, begin by asking about local issues such as transportation, pollution, and historic preservation in general, then move on to slightly more specific areas, such as specific local traffic problems and historic parks. Finally, ask the group to discuss your specific project and the grove of trees in question.

Bear in mind that if the project is likely to be very controversial, an agency can still accomplish most of its goals while stopping short of discussing the specific project. That way, if the project hasn't been made public yet, these will be less risk of having a particularly upset participant run to the media with the news about the project.

Meetings

Any agency that makes a genuine commitment to bringing the public into the decision-making process must develop a meeting process that allows the public to question and comment on the agency's plans and proposals in person.

Many sorts of meetings are now mandated by various laws, such as those connected with environmental impact studies; however, any meeting with the public, whether legally required or voluntary, can help the public feel that its views are important, thus defusing criticism of the agency as aloof and nonresponsive. In addition, along with polling, public meetings can help an agency gauge the depth of a community's feelings on certain potentially controversial issues. Meetings can also be used to help get the agency's messages out to certain targeted groups, or to a broad cross-section of the public.

It is important to be aware of the differences between public participation and consensus planning. Many agencies believe they are engaging in consensus planning whenever they hold a meeting. This is not necessarily so. Consensus planning is a process whereby the needs and concerns of all key stakeholders are brought to the table and then, in conjunction with the agency, are incorporated into the actual plan. The end result may be that the DOT's plans are significantly changed as a result of the planning process.

Contrasting that is the public participation process that most agencies engage in. Meetings are called so that the public can express their views; the agency then responds, but is not obligated to change its plans unless significant issues are raised, which precipitate the need for mitigation.

Open forums are meetings that are open to the general public. They are most often used at three junctures in the progress of a project: the start of the planning process; after a draft plan has been formulated; and at the start of construction.

At the start of the planning process, open forums are an important way of finding out how the public feels—and what they know—about the major issues surrounding a proposed project. You can think of these initial meetings as "mass in-person polling." Their purpose can be to find out something very basic, such as what concerns the public has about traffic and transportation in their area, or they can be used to determine more concrete matters, such as how the public feels about a project, what knowledge they're lacking, and how strongly felt their concerns are.

Such meetings could, for example, tell an agency that the public—or at least, the portion of the public that's involved enough to attend a meeting—thinks there's a great need for a new downtown offramp, but that there's a very vocal minority that doesn't want a new offramp if it would mean losing a grove of old oak trees.

Assuming the invitation process has been open and wide-ranging—that the agency has advertised the meeting widely instead of trying to hide it—the range and degree of emotions encountered during the meeting will most likely give a good indication of the overall public response the agency will receive as the planning and construction process continues.

Later in the planning process (after a draft Environmental Impact Statement has been prepared, for example) open forums can give an agency an accurate picture of what the public thinks of its plans. If there is vehement and widespread opposition to a plan at such a meeting, the agency can—and should—take time to consider the objections raised at the meeting by the public, and consider whether the objections are real and/or widespread enough to warrant changing the plan before incurring construction costs. If there is a small, but vocal, opposition, the agency may decide to go ahead with the project as planned, but at least it will be forewarned about the volume of the battle to come.

Once a project is about to begin construction, open forums can alert the public to the disruptions the construction may cause, and the steps they can take to help mitigate resulting congestion. The better informed the public is at this point, the more they can help the agency—and themselves—by participating enthusiastically in the agency's Traffic Management Plan.

HOW TO

• Make sure the public is fully informed about open meetings. Most newspapers are willing to print notices about such meetings, regardless of whether the agency can afford to purchase space to advertise the meetings. Distribute flyers to local community and business organizations. In smaller communities, notify local radio and television traffic reporters, so they can mention the meetings on the air.

• Hold the meeting at a time and place that will allow the majority of the interested public to attend. Weekday evenings (Monday– Thursday) are generally the most productive times, followed by late weekend mornings. Public schools are usually available for such meetings, and they're generally more centrally located and more familiar to local residents than an agency's own offices. In smaller communities, check community activity schedules to avoid scheduling conflicts, such as scheduling a meeting at the same time as the season's biggest high school football game.

• Plan and rehearse the presentation carefully. Prepare descriptive handouts, question-and-answer sheets, and other relevant "leave-behinds."

• Have visual aids available to help get the message across to the public. This suggestion doesn't mean expensive videos full of special effects. Simple slides, overheads, or even flip charts or photo boards will suffice, as long as they let the public see simply and clearly the important aspects of the problem and its proposed or possible solutions. Such visuals as slides of deteriorating roadway or extreme traffic congestion in recognizable local sites can help those in attendance understand the need for a reconstruction or widening project, for example, while an artist's rendering of a proposed new interchange could allay fears that it would overwhelm a neighborhood.

When preparing renderings, always ask the artist to show the perspective looking slightly down at the project. Do not use perspectives that look up at the project, as they usually make the project look larger and more overwhelming than it will actually be. If, in spite of using proper perspective, a rendering should indicate that the proposed interchange would indeed overwhelm a neighborhood, it is better to show it now and learn the strength of the public outcry now than to hide it and be accused—and legitimately so—of deceit at some crucial time in the future.

• Prepare an agenda and stick to it. Hand out copies of the agenda to the audience and announce the agenda at the start of the meeting. Keep control of the meeting; if the discussion begins to stray from the subject at hand, or if one person or group tries to monopolize the meeting, returning to the agenda is an easy way to get the meeting back on track. Also, by creating an agenda, an agency helps prioritize the subjects to be discussed, thus focusing the audience's attention on the really important matters.

• Consider opening the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance to engender a feeling of unity among the participants.

• Despite the emphasis on following an agenda, don't be dictatorial in running the meeting. Remember that the meeting is being held for the public's sake as well as for the agency's. When it's necessary to rein in the public discussion to return to the agenda or stay on schedule, provide some other way for those still interested in the current topic to vent their thoughts and feelings, such as inviting them to write to the department's public information office with their comments. Then maintain goodwill by responding to their written comments, even if it's only through a short note from a PIO.

• If faced with very strident opponents or hecklers, it's generally best to allow them to have their say and "burn themselves out" rather than fueling their fire by arguing back. Maintaining a calm, even response will allow the agency to keep the upper hand in the eyes of most of those attending. In responding to their issue(s), do so calmly and with reference to as much factual information as possible. It may be appropriate to voice an understanding of, and sympathy for, their position, even if the agency must then explain why their position isn't viable in the real-world situation under discussion.

• In the very rare event that a meeting is disrupted beyond preservation, quietly gather the materials and leave. Don't get into an argument with those being irrational; they can almost always yell more loudly; and to respond in kind would only portray the agency as being as overemotional and irrational as the opponent.

Key person briefings

From time to time, it may be useful to hold a private or small group discussion with certain members of the public. For example, if a portion of a project will impact a particular business district (such as by making access difficult for a period of time) a meeting might be held with that district's business owners to tell them exactly what to expect and to seek ways to mitigate the inconvenience to their customers.

Even if such a meeting doesn't result in any concrete solutions, the simple fact of meeting and being open to hearing the businesspersons' concerns could help reduce the number of later complaints. If local businesspersons (or residents, or school children's parents, or any such group) are fully informed about the ways a project or other DOT activities will affect them and why it's unavoidable, they're much more likely to accept the situation as a necessary inconvenience.

HOW TO

• Send invitations to a meeting by mail (addressed to the particular person) and then follow up with a telephone call. Such individual attention will result in increased attendance, and may also result in tempering any initial hostility on the part of attendees.

• The agency personnel attending the meeting should be at approximately the same level of importance as the public who attend, or higher, to allow the public to feel that they're talking to the agency as equals. For example, a meeting between a group of small city Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and a low-level DOT assistant PIO could easily result in the CEOs feeling that the agency didn't care enough about their comments to send someone on their own level.

• If the meeting is held at the DOT offices, provide water, coffee and tea, or soft drinks (depending on the time of day) to make the public feel welcome and relaxed. If the meeting is being held on the public's turf, such as a community club or the chamber of commerce, all that's necessary is to arrive on time.

Organization outreach

If a project will impact a community for a long period of time—such as a major highway reconstruction that may last 2–3 years or longer—it may be useful to establish a process for ongoing meetings with community or business organizations as a way of disseminating information and receiving feedback over the course of the project. This can be done either by holding a series of meetings over time, or by having an agency representative attend the organization's meetings on a regular basis. The latter has the added advantage of making the agency representative seem like "one of us" to the other members of the organizations, thereby increasing the agency's credibility within those organizations and promoting the flow of information in both directions.

This process can be formalized through the creation of a *Speaker's Bureau.* A speaker's bureau may consist of one person or 20; it depends on the number of requests for speakers the bureau receives and the time commitment available from qualified speakers, who are usually members of the public information staff. These speakers are extensively briefed on all aspects of the subject at hand before being made available to community and business organizations for presentations such as those outlined below.

HOW TO

• Determine which organizations would benefit from knowing the agency's message. Target those organizations for regular briefings, either through their regular programs or at special events. Many of these groups have regular programs that they are trying to fill with information of interest to their members. Speaking engagements can be as simple as a 20-minute presentation with visuals at a luncheon, or as complex as a slot on a formal program with a slide show. Also, make it a point to provide updates to these organizations on a regular basis, or as significant developments occur. This way, the agency can build a base of support within the organization that can be drawn upon when needed.

• Determine what these organizations want to know about the agency. What are their specific needs? Try to tailor the presentations to meet those needs. If a group is most interested in a proposed interchange, talk about it. When booking the engagement, try to get a sense of what the group knows about the agency and what its attitudes are (accepting, indifferent, or skeptical), and then structure the presentation accordingly.

Employer outreach

Employers can be an important group to communicate with, as employees must often commute to their jobs. As employers seek ways to maximize productivity and competitiveness, and as the workplace is becoming increasingly regulated in an effort to clean up the environment, this audience has become a prime target for DOT outreach efforts. Within large companies, human resource managers and personnel can be mobilized to assist in outreach efforts. New programs, such as carpool lanes and mass transit improvements, are of major interest to employers, as are projects that impact access and mobility for employees traveling to and from the workplace.

HOW TO

• Employers subject to air quality regulations thrive on agency-provided technical assistance and collateral materials that assist them in reaching average vehicle ridership goals. Technical assistance can be provided in the form of workshops and event support.

• Many companies have company newsletters, and companies with Employer Transportation Coordinators often distribute newsletters with information that affects employee commutes, encourages ridesharing, and promotes the company's rideshare incentive programs. Newsletter editors are always hungry for information; provide them with packages of media information and public information materials to spread the agency's messages through their employee bases at little cost.

Response materials

In addition to polls and meetings, there are other methods a DOT can use to find out what the public thinks or feels about a problem or a project.

An agency can establish and promote a *telephone helpline* ("hotline" is unnecessarily inflammatory and does not connote a customer service orientation) to serve multiple functions. A helpline can provide information about road conditions and construction closures; it can be used to answer the public's questions about a project; and it can serve as a center for receiving public complaints, thus freeing up the agency's other lines and personnel to go about their daily business.

Some helplines offer recorded information, while others provide live operators. Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages. Recorded information lines are the most convenient for the agency, but if a caller wants anything other than the recorded information, or wants to register a complaint, he or she is often left dissatisfied. Lines that provide live operators offer more complete information to the public, but they're more time-consuming and expensive to operate.

Voice-mail technology allows an agency to tailor a line that combines the best of both methods. If a caller just wants general road conditions or road closure information, he or she can hear the appropriate recording with the touch of a button, but by staying on the line, the caller with a more detailed question, problem, or request can be transferred to a live operator, most often someone in the public information department.

Remember that a telephone helpline isn't supposed to be just a dead-letter drop. If someone calls with a complaint, the purpose of the helpline won't be fulfilled unless someone from the agency follows up on the complaint and gets back to the caller with a timely and productive response.

HOW TO

• Use an "800" number, unless the area is small enough that all calls to the helpline from local numbers will be toll-free. Work with the phone company to select a number that's easy to remember, such as 1-800-CALL-DOT.

• Keep recorded information short and to the point; a 30- to 60-sec recording should be plenty for most construction and road closure situations.

• If the recording system allows the caller to respond, set the system for a maximum message time of 30 to 60 sec, and tell callers the maximum response time in the recording. Allowing unlimited-length messages is an invitation to an angry caller to tie up the entire message system.

• When using voice mail, keep the instructions as simple as possible to keep callers from becoming frustrated by the system itself.

• If live operators are used to answer callers' questions, they should be informed about general operations of the DOT. Collate information including updated closure notices, rosters with names and numbers of other agencies and personnel within the DOT who can answer more technical questions, and maps of the areas into books and make certain each operator has access to one.

• Make every attempt to answer a caller's question during the first call; this stops the "run-around" myth of government. Use tracking forms that indicate the disposition of calls. Periodic audits of services rendered to callers, and whether or not they got the information they needed, will help to assure continuous improvement in this important customer service area.

• As many helpline callers request similar information, the most senior PIOs do not need to answer every call. Knowledgeable operators will suffice, provided they have access to the necessary information, as described above. However, a helpline is sometimes used by a motorist to vent anger or frustration. These calls should be referred to more senior public information staff. Have an established hierarchy of calls or situations to avoid confusion during a confrontational call and to assure that the caller is satisfied by the outcome of the call.

Business reply cards and coupons are an effective way to invite public feedback and make the public feel involved in the agency's operations.

Business reply coupons can be made a part of nearly any brochure or other printed materials the agency distributes to the public. They can be used to solicit the public's opinion on various issues, to build a mailing list of citizens who are interested in the agency's work, or to develop a list of people who are interested in ridesharing, among other uses. Because they require senders to cut out the coupons and mail them in envelopes at their expense, the response rate is usually very low unless some sort of premium or gift—such as a map or a commuter's mug—is offered in return for sending in the coupon.

Business reply cards (sometimes called "bounce-back" cards) are prepaid post cards similar to those used for magazine subscriptions. They can be loose or attached to a brochure or other printed materials by a perforation. They're extremely simple for the public to use, and they usually get a higher response rate than coupons.

In both cases, the agency has to be prepared for the expense of "fulfilling" the coupon or card. If a premium has been offered in return for the completed coupon, it may not be possible to accurately estimate in advance the total number of premiums required—and thus their cost. With a card, even if no premium is offered, the agency will have to pay the cost of the return mailing, which will depend on the number of cards that are sent in. Also, a certain number of people will mail the cards in without filling out their name and address, or will use the cards to send a negative message to the agency at the agency's own expense. However, those usually will make up only a small percentage of the replies.

Typical response rates for any direct mail campaign range from about 1.5 percent to about 3 percent.

The message on a reply card or coupon will obviously change depending on the issues involved. A typical format, however, might be something like this:

Dear (name of agency);

____ Please send me information on the need for a new downtown interchange, along with my free commuter mug.

____ Please send me information on ridesharing incentives.

____ Please add my name to your mailing list.

Name: ____________________
Address: ____________________
City, State & Zip Code: ____________________
Telephone (daytime): ____________________
(evening): ____________________

HOW TO

- Coupons or reply cards on collateral material help to establish the image of a DOT as a responsive agency. The most important element of coupons or reply cards is that if the agency solicits the public's opinion or promises to send materials, it should do so in a timely manner.

- Coupons should be coded to determine their source, which is especially helpful if there is a family of materials.

Whenever an agency representative speaks to an open forum or a meeting of a community or business organization, providing *speaker comment forms* can give the audience a chance to offer their thoughts and opinions about the topic being discussed, as well as feedback on the way it was presented. These comments can then be used to refine the message for future meetings, printed materials, and other public information materials.

A typical comment form may look like this:

Thank you for taking the time to attend our meeting regarding the proposed downtown interchange. Your comments are welcomed and appreciated—we want to know what you think about this important issue. Please take just a moment to fill out the rest of this form, so we can consider your comments as we continue to develop this project. Thank you very much.

I felt the presentation was:
____ very informative
____ somewhat informative
____ not very informative

After hearing the presentation, I understand the need for a new interchange downtown:
____ yes
____ no

I felt the speaker was:
____ excellent
____ good
____ fair

I felt the visual materials were:
____ excellent
____ good
____ fair

Was there any part of the presentation you didn't understand? If so, please tell us:

____

Please add any other comments. Use the other side of this paper if necessary.

____

Please deposit this form in the box by the entrance.

Optional:

Name: ____________________
Address: ____________________
City/State/Zip: ____________________
Telephone (daytime): ____________________
(evening): ____________________

____ Please send me more information about the proposed downtown interchange.

____ Please add my name to your mailing list.

PUBLIC INFORMATION MATERIALS

While polls, surveys, and response materials let an agency find out what the public is thinking and feeling, public information materials let the public know what the agency is doing or preparing to do. Even though these materials are the most expensive and time consuming portion of the campaign, they are also the most important because they get the message into the hands of the people who will ultimately decide whether the project is a success or not.

Public information materials run the gamut from glossy, illustrated brochures, press kits, and posters to the simplest photocopied fliers. Provide mass mailings to entire zip codes, or hand-deliver pieces to people in a small portion of the project area. Whatever the piece and its distribution, its purpose is the same—to let people understand what's happening and how they benefit. When they have that understanding, there is less negativity associated with a project, and that means smoother sailing for your agency's work before, during, and after construction. If the issue isn't a particular project, but something on a broader scale such as agency funding, the purpose and importance of public information materials remains the same.

Consider the following:

- Ramp meters were activated along a stretch of highway. There had been no mass mailing and little press coverage prior to the event. As a result, most commuters didn't know what was happening and complained bitterly about waiting at meters to enter the highway. However, subsequent radio and newspaper reports explained why the meters were necessary and how they would soon begin to help traffic flow more smoothly. The result? Complaints ceased almost entirely.

Working with the Media

The general perception of a reporter as someone who, protected by several receptionists, leisurely spends a day arbitrarily deciding what to report, is greatly exaggerated. Most reporters have their own direct telephone lines and are easy to reach. They welcome the public's calls, which often germinate stories.

The best way to deal with reporters is to get to know them as people. Meet with reporters to develop a working relationship, they'll become more responsive to the agency's telephone calls and story ideas. Remember, though, that a reporter still has a job to do; don't take offense if a story sometimes takes a negative slant. Reporters can't be flattering all the time, or their editors will start wondering if they're biased.

A reporter's job is grueling and the days are often long. Many reporters work on more than one story a day, and most don't get to pick and choose which stories they'll report. Stories are either assigned by an editor or come to the reporter's attention by meeting the criteria of "news" or "feature."

To determine if the story is news, it should meet the following criteria:

- **Timeliness.** This means "today." Often, something that happened yesterday is deemed too old for newspapers and even more so for television and radio, which focus on what's happening right now. Notify reporters of a newsworthy event a few days in advance, so they can plan their coverage.

- **Public impact.** Unless an agency's actions affect many people they won't get any coverage.

- **General interest.** Is it interesting to the general public?

- **Money.** Anything involving large sums of money—especially taxpayers' money—is almost a sure bet to get coverage because reporters pride themselves on being the watchdogs of the government.

Features are lengthy pieces that cover a certain theme in depth, something you would read in the Sunday paper or see covered in a series of reports on the nightly news. Although the above rules apply to features as well, reporters aren't as strict about enforcing them.

While timeliness isn't as urgent, the event must still be recent, ongoing, or in the future to warrant feature coverage. Don't try to pitch something that happened 2 months ago unless it has a tie to what is happening now.

The biggest hook for a feature is a compelling story—the unusual. Who can forget reading about a brother and sister who were reunited after 50 years, or a dog that got lost on a family vacation and found its way home—200 miles away? While few transportation stories will have such dramatic turns, the most successful features will still be those that touch upon some basic human feeling.

There are a variety of tools that can be used to give stories to reporters.

News releases (or *press releases*) are one or two-page stories (with headlines) that tell reporters the "five Ws": Who, What, When, Where, and Why. They can be used to inform reporters of upcoming events, recent awards or promotions, new survey results, or any other newsworthy items. News releases are seldom printed as is, since reporters have a style format that they must follow.

A news release will look something like this:[†]

> • July 6, 1992
>
> Contact: John Smith, public information officer
> (913) 555-1111
>
> **State Funds New Turnpike Exit**
>
> TOPEKA—The Kansas State Legislature today agreed to provide funding for a new exit from the Kansas Turnpike at Lecompton, midway between Topeka and Lawrence. Jefferson County will build a new four-lane highway leading from the exit directly to Lake Perry, the site of a proposed new $30 million marina.
>
> State Highway Director William Hamm called the 32-to-30 vote in the Kansas State House "a victory for progress."
>
> Referring to the 6-hour backup on the old road leading from Lawrence to Lake Perry last Labor Day, Hamm said, "This new exit will prove to be a boon not just for the people of Lecompton and Perry, but for the thousands of Kansans who rely on Lake Perry for recreation, as well."
>
> Construction of the new turnpike exit is expected to begin in September 1993.

[†] Not an actual news release.

HOW TO

- Be precise and specific.

- Put the most important information in the opening paragraph (the lead), then add details in their order of importance.

- Don't try to give every background detail in a single news release. A reporter will call with additional questions if he or she wants to pursue the story.

- Include a date and a location. The location should be the actual location of the event, unless the release concerns an announcement by your agency; in that case, use the agency's location, even if the actual event occurred elsewhere.

> Example:
>
> TOPEKA, KS—The Department of Transportation today announced the completion of a new downtown freeway interchange in Wichita. . .

In the above example, since the DOT is making the announcement from its headquarters in the state capitol, the location of the story is given as Topeka, although the location could also have been given as Wichita.

- Include the name, title, and telephone number of someone the reporter can contact for more information.
- If the release is announcing a scheduled event, mail or fax the release several days before the event.
- Try to include a quote from an authorized official or spokesperson concerning the subject of the release; it helps to humanize the release.

Press kits are used to provide comprehensive background information for an agency, a project, or an event. A good press kit gives reporters all the information they need to write a detailed and accurate story.

A typical press kit for a major highway project, for example, might consist of the following items: 1) a general news release giving an overview of the entire project; 2) a news release focusing on the community planning effort that went into developing the project; 3) a news release on any traffic congestion mitigation procedures being undertaken on the project; 4) a news release telling how the public can help expedite the project (by ridesharing, etc.); 5) a fact sheet giving all pertinent facts about the project in "bullet-point" form; 6) a timeline giving the tentative project schedule; 7) a map showing exactly where the project is taking place; 8) photographs of key department personnel, if they're quoted extensively in the news releases, or of a groundbreaking or other newsworthy project-related event; 9) background information on the department or agency responsible for the project; and 10) a folder to hold all of the materials.

Besides being distributed on an ongoing basis to reporters who request them, press kits can also be distributed at major events, such as press conferences or grand openings. In those cases, the kits should also include a news release about the event itself.

Media alerts are short, urgent news releases that are usually faxed to reporters. Alerts let the media know about events that are taking place that day or the following day and that will impact the public, such as freeway closures, strikes, or disasters. Media alerts use the same format as news releases, only they're much shorter, such as the following:

> • URGENT!
> June 9, 1992
> Contact: Liz Jones, public awareness coordinator
> (222) 555-0044
>
> 515 FREEWAY TO CLOSE FOR REPAIRS
>
> PORTLAND—The 515 Freeway will be closed from Main Street to Jamaica Avenue Tuesday, to allow state crews to repair damage caused by yesterday's torrential rains.
>
> The closure, scheduled to begin at 8 a.m. and last until Midnight, is necessary to repair potholes and clean up mud slides in the area.
>
> Detours along First Street are posted.

Closure lists provide the media and other interested parties with up-to-date information on freeway, street, bridge, and ramp closures. Rather than feed these items to people piecemeal, it's a good idea to make a single, comprehensive list. The lists can be mailed or faxed on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis, depending on the number and frequency of closures. Be sure to include the start and finish times and dates for the closures, and the reason why they're necessary.

Many newspapers will run a closure list in its entirety, along with a map. For example, a massive freeway construction project in Orange County, CA, caused the area's major daily newspaper to run a map detailing closures on a regular weekly basis.

Mat columns are ready-made newspaper columns that you produce and send to newspapers. Instead of simply typing up a story, a mat column should be typeset in regular newspaper column format, with its own logo and headline. This can be done very inexpensively using desktop publishing.

While major newspapers will usually not use such materials, many smaller newspapers, particularly community weeklies, will. Of course, the materials have to apply to community or transportation issues in general, not just department activities.

For example, a DOT in one western state has had success with a mat column entitled, "The Traffic Man." Readers of the newspapers in which the column appears can write to the agency with questions or complaints about local traffic, and the traffic man (an agency public information officer) answers them through the column.

Clip art gets its name because newspapers and magazines clip the art from photostats sent to them. If the agency has a new logo, or if the construction project has a new illustrated mascot, send photostats of the art to newspapers and magazines, which will file the stats and use the artwork as needed. Sending out clip art gives reporters the chance to run an illustration with any story they write about the department or project.

Reaching the Public

While the foregoing are tools for reaching the media, there are other materials that target businesses and residents directly.

Brochures can be thick, glossy, and colorful, or they can be inexpensive offset pieces with black-and-white photos or illustrations. They can cost pennies or dollars to print, depending on your budget and the message you want to get across. They can be mailed to residents or merchants at the beginning of a major project, distributed at public meetings, or given to auto clubs for inclusion in their membership mailings; the distribution possibilities are nearly endless.

Brochures give an overview of a project or issue—they're sort of like a one-piece press kit for the general public. While they may not be truly comprehensive, they generally give average citizens all the information they want or need about the project or issue at hand. In general, a brochure is a single story that explains a project or concept in detail. As such, the brochure should be written so that it will be read in its entirety.

HOW TO

- Include as many visual aids, such as maps or charts and graphs, as possible. Few people will read a brochure that includes nothing but pages of finely printed text, and many transportation issues lend themselves well to graphic representation.

• Work closely with an art director to make sure the brochure has the appropriate look for its purpose and audience and that it fits into the agency's family look. If the intent is to promote the department's overall image, for example, it might want to mimic the corporate look of a public company's annual report. But to simply explain a construction project to the public, a glossy, upscale piece would probably strike most citizens as wastefully overproduced.

• Keep the text easy to read. Use short words and short sentences, and above all, avoid acronyms and jargon. Most people don't have the vaguest idea what "VMT" or a "multimodal, integrated transportation system" are, and most don't care. Remember to write for the general public, not other highway engineers.

• If the subject is new or complicated to the general public, or if the use of technical terms is unavoidable, include a glossary that defines the terms used in the brochure.

• If the brochure is about a particular project, consider including a clip-and-save panel that lists the most important facts, such as lane closure and detour information and a telephone helpline number, on one page. That way, people can tear out that page and save it somewhere convenient, such as on a refrigerator or home bulletin board.

Newsletters are similar to brochures, except that they're published on an ongoing basis over a period of time, usually the length of a project, to provide updated information. For example, newsletters that are published twice a year could easily include closure and detour information that would quickly be outdated in a brochure. Newsletters typically include items such as maps, telephone helpline numbers, and other useful information for motorists, residents, or businesses affected by a project in their area. In general, a newsletter is a series of stories that the reader can pick and choose from to get the information most pertinent to his or her needs.

Although less elaborate than most brochures—newsletters are often printed on a single folded sheet of paper—newsletters can be brightened with cartoons, black-and-white photos, or illustrations. All will increase a newsletter's utility and readership.

Flyers are used to inform the public about an imminent event in their area, such as right-of-way demolition or noisy pile driving. Besides an explanation of the event, a flyer should include detours (if applicable), a map, and a telephone number in case people have further questions. Flyers are usually single-purpose, time-sensitive materials.

Depending on the size of the affected area, flyers can be either mailed or hand-delivered. Hand-delivery is often more effective with merchants, because it makes them feel like the agency or department really is taking their needs into consideration.

Posters are a good way to get a message across in shopping malls, rail depots, and other busy public places. Posters on employee bulletin boards at workplaces are effective, drawing attention to a rideshare matching service, carpool incentive, or other offer that might otherwise be ignored.

HOW TO

• One way to get extra results from a poster is to hold a poster contest. Enlist students from a local school or college in the contest, and publicize it through local newspapers. Local merchants are usually willing to sponsor prizes. Thus, the agency gets a poster and local press coverage as well.

• As posters are primarily visual, keep copy to an absolute minimum; posters that are merely reformatted brochures are usually ignored.

Displays can be used at community events to give residents and business owners a look at a proposed project and its impact on the community, as well as to educate area drivers about a project and its possible impacts or about new facilities such as ramp meters or carpool lanes.

Models are the most effective way to show a project's size and shape in relationship to its surroundings; while some people have a hard time visualizing a completed project from an illustration, anyone can look at a 3-D model and imagine what the completed structure will look like. Bear in mind, however, that if the project will in fact dominate its surroundings, a model may only emphasize that fact, since it will only show a small portion of the surroundings.

If that's the case, "humanize" the impression of the project by treating the model like a model railroad layout. Instead of having the model maker build a basic, sterile, all-white model showing just the concrete and steel structures, put some life into the model by painting it and adding model trees, or even toy cars and pedestrians, to give it a more modest, human scale and to make the whole model "friendlier" to the viewer.

Display boards use photos and illustrations instead of models, but their purpose and effect are much the same. Their drawback, as mentioned, is that some people find it hard to imagine a completed project from an illustration, or to draw a mental picture of a new carpool lane from a photo or map instead of a model.

The possible advantage, on the other hand, is that a good illustrator can make almost any project look good in a rendering. Real estate developers and architects frequently make detail alterations in project illustrations, omitting an adjacent building or showing full-grown landscaping, for example, to make their design look more impressive, or drawing in full-grown trees where there aren't even saplings to give a proposed building that live-in look. You can easily do the same with a project illustration—but be aware that if your illustrator takes too much artistic license, the public is likely to realize the illustration probably looks better than the completed project will.

HOW TO

• Whether a model or a display board is being designed, keep size and portability in mind; a 10'x20' model may look extra impressive sitting in the department's lobby, but unless it's designed to easily come apart for moving, not many people will see it. Likewise, a photo or illustration display that's easily disassembled and reassembled will have more utility than one that can only be moved in a van or pickup.

• If the project is likely to change over a short period of time, stick with a display board instead of a model. It's much easier to replace an illustration on a display board than it is to restructure a three-dimensional model if the specs change.

• Accompanying models or display boards with collateral materials, such as brochures or fact sheets, provides additional back-up reading for members of the public who request additional information.

• Combine the model, display boards, and collateral material and put the show on the road. Schedule the show at shopping malls, county and city buildings, fair and local events—any place where people gather.

Deciding What to Use

One of the most important decisions in any public information campaign is deciding which information materials to use. Does a particular campaign need an expensive, glossy brochure, or will inexpensive photocopied leaflets suffice? Will a poster be the one item that will make your campaign successful, or will it just be a waste of money?

Keep the following in mind when deciding which materials are useful, and when.

First, who is the **audience** for a particular piece? Who will it be sent to, and how? If a piece is to be mailed to 100,000 households, as may be the case in some urban areas, cost alone may proscribe anything other than a short, two-color brochure; if the mailing is to be repeated quarterly or monthly, then a newsletter may make more sense. If a piece is to be given to state government and business leaders in small numbers, a glossy, "corporate"-looking brochure may be most appropriate, but if the piece is to be given out to everyone attending a football game at a major stadium, an inexpensively photocopied flyer is probably a better way to go.

Second, what is the **objective** of the piece? If the object is to promote an image of a department as a modern, high-tech engineering agency, a glossy, high-style brochure is most likely called for. If the object is to keep local residents and merchants informed of construction-related changes on an ongoing basis, a less-expensive newsletter with a "friendly" tone will have the most success. If a piece is intended to attract local merchants to a meeting that evening, a one-page easy-to-read flyer with bold headlines is all that's needed. If the intention is to evoke a response, then a coupon or reply card is obviously very important.

What about visuals? Again, they should be tailored to the audience and the objective of the piece. If the intent is to inform motorists about new temporary on- and off-ramps, for example, think about a map showing the new ramps. To soften the blow of a major construction project, consider using an illustration to show how the project will be scheduled to keep the maximum number of lanes open at all times over the course of the project.

There are no hard and fast rules about what kind of piece to use in every situation. However, just taking the above items into consideration can help create informative materials that will get the maximum attention and response.

AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIALS

Slide shows, videos, and public service announcements deserve their own category. Somewhere between public information materials and advertising, these materials can be used to give an extra emotional push to nearly any public information campaign.

At the same time, however, these materials have an important limitation. Most people respond to visual images emotionally rather than rationally. While A-V materials can generate emotional interest in a project or issue, they should be accompanied by print materials, since that's where most people will turn for more information or to review the subject.

Slide shows are inexpensive to produce, easily rearranged and updated, and very effective in helping general audiences understand the details of a project. Slides of graphs and charts can make the most boring financial aspects of a project come alive to an audience, and there's nothing like slides of a deteriorated highway surface or bridge to convince an audience of the need for reconstruction.

Even the best-photographed slides, however, can be boring in the hands of a presenter who doesn't know his or her material. Before presenting a slide show to any audience, the speaker who will be narrating the show should spend time going through it alone to become familiar with the slides and the script.

HOW TO

• Don't just have the bullet points of the presentation set as text slides, like lecture points on a blackboard. Instead, find or create visual images that illustrate the bullet points. For example, instead of a slide that said, "Urgent Need: Street Repaving," think how much more effective it would be to talk about the need for street repaving while showing a slide of a giant pothole.

• Before giving a slide presentation, rehearse it. Check to see that the slides are in the carousel the right way, so that they won't be projected upside down or backwards.

Videos are more dramatic and currently more popular than slide shows; department managers who used to routinely request slide shows now just as routinely request videos instead. It's true that a well-made video can tell a story more effectively than most slide shows, but it's also true that videos are much more expensive to produce.

Because of the popularity of home video recorders, many people have the misconception that anyone can make a video. In fact, it's a technical skill best left to experts. However, it's still up to you to decide whether your department needs a video, and it's your responsibility to help the video producer, director, and writer understand just what you need.

Because of their high cost—often $3,000 a minute or more—videos should only be used when they're really needed, such as in the following situations:

• An agency wants to send a slide show about driving safely in construction areas to all high schools in the state, but doesn't have the manpower to send speakers with the show. By translating the show onto video and adding narration and music, the department can send out a prepackaged, easy-to-present version of the show without worrying about manpower.

• A department is trying to build a new rapid transit system, but is facing opposition from citizens who don't want to pay the increased taxes the system would require. The department knows that some solution is necessary, and that the rapid transit system is the most cost-effective and long-lasting of all the proposed solutions; the problem is overcoming the strong emotional resistance to the idea of raising taxes for any reason. Because this is an emotional issue, video—which has the strongest emotional power of any medium—is an ideal medium to use to present the department's argument to community and business groups, or directly to the public through targeted mass mailings.

HOW TO

- Keep it short. As a rule, try to stay under 10 minutes, instead of the 20 minutes most agencies think "sounds about right." Remember, a video is supposed to set the emotional stage for an argument, which can then be backed up by more detailed print materials—it's not supposed to make the entire argument on its own. If your script looks like it will run longer than 10 minutes, you're probably trying to say too much. Eight minutes—the average audience's attention span—is better yet.

- Unless you're aiming at a technical audience, avoid "talking heads"—shots of experts sitting around talking. Many times, as soon as someone starts talking about making a video, every assistant branch chief and engineer wants to be in the picture. Just as a picture of a pothole is more powerful than a text slide, a visual image—of a new housing development under construction, for example—is more powerful than a shot of a planning engineer sitting at his desk, talking about the growth in the local area. If talking heads are used at all, use them sparingly, and only to add human interest.

- In general, quotes from officials should be less then 30 seconds in length. Try to encapsulate the agency's position into key points. Use quotes from officials as punctuation, not as the main content of a video.

- Hire a professional scriptwriter and narrator to sew the piece together with consistent messages; don't let the excitement of doing a video lead you into thinking you can do it all in-house.

- Take advantage of modern video production and editing techniques; don't be afraid of looking too "Hollywood." Today's viewers are used to—and even expect—fast-changing images and special effects. Using them in your video—as long as they're used correctly—will only make it seem more professional, and that will increase its credibility.

Video news releases (or *VNRs*) are short videos produced specifically to be sent to television news programs. A news release should be about news, especially since it costs so much more to make a video news release than to run off a typed news release on a copier.

A well-made VNR will look and sound just like a regular television news story; about the only difference is that there won't be a reporter in the picture, since someone from the department's public information office will probably be asking the questions if anyone is interviewed on camera.

VNRs can be most useful when an event is going to take place that would be of interest to local television stations, but which would be hard for them to cover because of time or distance. By producing its own VNR of the event, a DOT can give the local stations everything they need to run a story about the event without them actually having to be there.

HOW TO

- Once again, keep it short. The perfect VNR runs about 90 seconds, and should almost never be longer than 150 seconds. That may not seem like much time, but that's all the time you'd get from a typical news story produced by a TV station's own news department.

- Keep it timely. Most stations won't be at all interested in receiving a video on Friday of an event that took place on Wednesday. To have any chance of making the news shows, get it to them the same day you shoot it. In some cases, that may mean "prebuilding" most of the video—editing everything except the actual event footage, and leaving space for that footage so that it can be added to the edited master immediately after the event.

- Remember to answer the "five Ws" in the VNR—who, what, when, where, and why—as is done in a written news release.

- Begin the tape with a series of "slates"—still images that tell the following:
  - What the story is about;
  - Who the VNR is from;
  - Who to contact for more information (don't forget to include a phone number);
  - The total length of the VNR;
  - Whether audio is on one or both channels;
  - The names and titles of any people speaking on the tape, in the order in which they appear; and
  - The composition of "B-roll" footage, if any (B-roll will be explained below).

- Don't include any written or printed captions in the VNR, since the stations will want to use their own particular type styles and colors. The slate will tell them who the on-camera speakers are, so they can make their own captions.

- Provide voice-over narration on one audio channel, but put just "live sound"—background sounds and interviewees' comments— on the other audio channel. Some stations will want to put their own narration over the story.

- Send a copy of the narration script along with the VNR.

- Along with the edited story, include a few minutes of "B-roll"— unedited footage of the event or other VNR subject, along with longer clips of interviewees' responses to questions about the subject at hand. Precede each response with a slate showing the question that's being answered. Some stations may want to create their own story using this footage, rather than running your completed VNR.

- Check with the television stations for their tape format requirements. Most news departments prefer ¾" tape, but some may require 1" or Betacam.

Public Service Announcements (or *PSAs*) are short television or radio commercials "selling" a government agency's or non-profit organization's programs or services, instead of a commercial product. All broadcast television and radio stations are required to broadcast a certain number of PSAs as part of their licensing requirements. PSAs can be very inexpensive to produce, since no one expects a government agency's PSA to be as polished as a commercial for a new car or detergent.

Like any good commercial, a PSA should begin with an appeal to emotions, show how the project or service offered satisfies those emotions, and close with a call to action—ask the viewer to do something, whether it's to call a rideshare matching number or write for more information about a proposed highway project.

For example:

> • **PSA SPOT ANNOUNCEMENT**
>
> FROM: DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
>
> RIDESHARE WEEK
>
> LENGTH: 0:15
>
> ANNOUNCER: If you're a commuter, you should know that this is Rideshare Week. And, better yet, you should know that you can earn cash incentives for carpooling—up to $1 a day just for leaving your car at home. For more information, call the Department of Transportation at 1-800-555-RIDE. That's 1-800-555-7433.

HOW TO

• Don't spend a lot of money on production. Since PSAs are not competing against a multitude of other products as commercial manufacturers are, the spots don't have to be flashy to stand out.

• Put together an inexpensive television spot from slides; when accompanied by voice-over narration, the spot can be as effective as one shot on video or film, but at a fraction of the cost.

• Keep spots short; for television, a 15-second spot and a 30-second spot will usually suffice. The shorter the spot, the more chances a TV station will have to fit it into their schedule.

• For radio, instead of prerecording the spots, just write copy for the radio stations' regular announcers to say. Try to time the spots to be read in 15 or 30 seconds. To estimate the running time for the spots, just read them out loud at your normal speed; it won't matter if they're a little too short or too long.

• Some cable TV stations run "bulletin board" PSAs. These are captions that stay on the screen for anywhere from 5 seconds to a minute or more, usually backed by music. If your local cable stations offer this service, keep the copy very short—no more than 15 words or so—so that they're easy to read at a glance. As with radio copy, just send typewritten copy to the cable TV stations, and they'll create the actual captions that will appear on-screen.

ON-SITE INFORMATION DEVICES

One of the most important ways to get information about construction-related congestion, road closures, and other activities that will affect drivers is to provide the information on the highways themselves.

Highway Advisory Radio (*HAR*) is like having the department's own radio station. There are numerous uses. Most are traveler's information systems, providing information on road and weather conditions; some give instructions on how to use toll facilities; others broadcast traffic conditions and important information in construction areas.

Most HAR broadcasts use a low-power radio transmitter that can typically be heard within a 2- to 5-mile radius of the broadcast location. More advanced systems use fiber optic technology and linear antennas to provide a clear signal along a corridor. In addition, different frequencies can be used to transmit information to vehicles traveling in opposite directions.

Since HAR is your own radio station, you can choose exactly what to say. Along with up-to-date highway information, some departments run their own PSAs about ridesharing, give suggested alternate routes to upcoming sporting and cultural events, and provide other information of interest to drivers. However, since the average driver will only tune in to HAR to get the immediate traffic information he or she needs, there's no real need to provide anything more than essential traffic information.

Highway advisory radio takes many forms, from fully automated systems with prerecorded information that is activated when a situation occurs, to information that is updated as closure notices become available, to real-time traffic information provided by a live announcer. The type of programming depends upon the hardware and the commitment of the DOT to staffing HAR.

HOW TO

• Most essential to HAR operations is keeping the transmitters operational with accurate information so that a continuous signal is being broadcast. If the signal is intermittent, or information is hopelessly out of date, motorists will not tune to the station. HAR requires dedicated staff—usually as part of a traffic operations center—to keep the transmitters operational. Integrating HAR into regular closure and maintenance notification operations facilitates timely information. A diagram of the flow of information within a DOT and placement of HAR operations within that flow is a strategic consideration.

• HAR requires publicity to tell motorists that the service is available and has been created for their benefit. Highway signage is helpful, but tremendous media coverage can be garnered through events to publicize the start-up of HAR or significant upgrades in service or equipment.

• HAR operators should periodically drive the corridor and listen to the broadcast to determine whether salient information is being provided during the time it takes to drive through the broadcast range. Additionally, operators should consider whether motorists will stay tuned for an entire cycle, or if cycles of information should be shortened to accommodate listeners' needs.

Changeable message signs are probably the easiest way to let motorists know about problems on the road ahead. Many areas have permanent signs that can be programmed from a central location, but even rural areas can use portable signs that can be towed behind highway vehicles and programmed on the spot. Warning drivers of congestion, and accident, or construction ahead gives them the chance to exit the highway and look for an alternate route, or at least to be prepared to slow down.

CHAPTER 4

GUIDE TO DEVELOPING CAMPAIGNS

Applying the principles and strategies of communications and using the tools of communications practice are skills that are learned over time. However, for those who are not used to developing public communications campaigns, the following worksheets can be used to answer the questions needed to develop and implement a successful campaign, regardless of the specific issues involved.

The process of planning a communications program can be broken down into five major areas:

1. **What is the situation?**
   - What is the issue or project at hand?
   - Who is affected by the issue or project?
   - What do those affected think and feel about the issue or project?
     - Who are the issue's or project's supporters?
     - Who is the opposition?
     - What are the relative strengths of each side?
     - What are the department's needs concerning the issue or project?
2. **What are the department's goals?**
   - What does the department wish to accomplish?
   - What fall-back position can the department accept?
3. **Who is the department's audience?**
   - Who are the groups that can affect the outcome of the issue or project?
4. **What are the key messages of the department's campaign?**
   - What messages will strengthen support among those already in favor of the issue or project?
   - What messages will gather support from those opposed to the issue or project?
   - What messages will sway undecided audiences in favor of the issue or project?
5. **How can the campaign's key messages best be transmitted to the targeted audiences and thus accomplish the department's goals?**
   - What budget is allocated for the communications plan?
   - Where are the audiences located?
     - What is the most efficient distribution method?
   - What materials and distribution methods are most appropriate for the particular message?

Answering these questions may require research; they will certainly require thought. Just as important as knowing what questions to ask is knowing how to find or develop the answers. The following guidelines and worksheets can assist a department in finding the answers to the questions about its own situations and projects.

1. What is the situation?

- **What is the issue or project at hand?**

This question really requires a two-part answer. The first part will be self-evident. It may be a new freeway or interchange, a bridge widening, or any other type of project.

The second part of the answer, however, requires a DOT to look at the consequences of the proposed project. For example, if a proposed new highway will encroach on a wildlife sanctuary, then the issue is not only the highway itself, and the driving time it might save, but the impact the highway will have on the wildlife sanctuary as well.

Similarly, if a proposed new downtown interchange will require the relocation of low-cost housing, then that issue can become as important as any of the benefits the new interchange will provide.

To help define the issue or project at hand, ask the following questions:

- *What will the proposed project displace? Is any person or group likely to object to the displacement?*
- *Will the displacement affect any special interest groups, such as environmentalists or advocates for the poor or the elderly?*
- *Will the displacement affect any businesses, residential neighborhoods, or schools?*
- *How much will the project cost? Is any person or group likely to object to the cost?*
- *Will the project require any additional taxes or other burden on the public?*
- *Are other state needs competing for the same funding, particularly those having to do with special interest groups such as those mentioned above?*
- *Does the department have a history of cost overruns?*
- *Will the project disrupt traffic while it is being built?*

If the answers to *all* of the above questions are "no," then it's highly likely that the project will have smooth sailing, and no special communications effort may be called for. However, if the answer to *any* of the above questions is "yes," then a department may be faced with a situation that will require a public communications program to allow the project to proceed successfully and efficiently.

If that is the case, the next set of questions will help determine more specifically what may be encountered in terms of potential opposition.

- **Who is affected by the issue or project?**
  - *Are there motorists whose drive through the project area will be affected?*
  - *Will they have longer drive times during the construction period?*
  - *Will they be forced to use alternate routes?*
  - *Are there residents in or near the project area who will be affected by construction?*
  - *Will they be affected by noise and dirt?*
  - *Will they be affected by construction-related road closures?*
  - *Will neighborhood children be forced to take a longer or more dangerous route to school?*
  - *Are there businesses in the area that will be affected?*
  - *Will customers and employees find it hard to get to certain businesses during construction?*
  - *Will construction noise and dirt keep customers away?*
  - *Will businesses lose any parking during or after construction?*
  - *What special interest groups will be affected by the project?*
  - *Will the project have any real or perceived effect on the environment?*
  - *Will the project cause the displacement of any elderly or low-income people?*
  - *Will the project cause the disruption of any long-established neighborhood?*
  - *Will the project especially impact one ethnic group's neighborhood?*
  - *Will the project impact any historic buildings, sites, or trees?*
  - *Will the project force the relocation of any groups who use the construction area for recreation?*

The responses to the above questions will indicate who is likely to be particularly interested in the project. The next step is to find out more about how those interested parties think and feel about the project and the issues it raises, how likely they are to take action on their feelings, and how much influence they may have.

- **What do those affected think and feel about the issue or project? Who are the issue's or project's supporters? Who is the opposition?**

Preliminary answers to these questions may be obtained by using audits and organization outreach (see Toolbox).

- What are the relative strengths of each side?
  - *How numerous are the different groups?*
  - *How vocal are the different groups?*
  - *How politically connected are the different groups?*
  - *How interested and sympathetic is the media toward the different groups?*
  - *How financially solid are the different groups?*
  - *How intransigent are the different groups?*

By identifying and quantifying allies and opponents, an agency can get a good idea of the ultimate viability of the department's position, the resources needed to commit to any communications program, who to call on for active support, whether there is any opportunity for compromise and consensus, and many other attitudes that will affect the ultimate outcome of the plan.

For example, if the groups opposed to the project (for whatever reason) are numerous, outspoken, well-connected politically, well-funded, stubborn in defense of their position, and of interest to the media, the agency then needs to decide whether to commit the necessary resources to conduct a public communications campaign to overcome such strong opposition, or whether to bow to the opposition (who are, after all, a part of the public the agency serves) and reallocate those resources to a more "winnable" project.

Similarly, if the opposition attributes are all of the above, with the exception that they are typically inclined to compromise (which can be found out during the auditing process), it may be worthwhile to sit down with the opposition early in the planning process and make them a partner in the project's development.

To take a more common example, what if the opposition are small in number, outsiders to the political process, and poorly funded, but are very outspoken, of great interest to the media, and very stubborn in their opposition? In such a case, it should be possible to develop a communications program that will appeal to the great majority of people who are at least neutral toward the project, and convince them, the political establishment, and ultimately the media that the opposition is, in fact, a small group whose complaints, though possibly legitimate, are minor compared to the benefits the majority of the public will ultimately derive from the project's completion.

Unfortunately, there are no magic numbers that will enable a department to unfailingly determine the relative strengths of its supporters and opponents, or to predict the ultimate success or failure of any particular communications program. However, it is possible to combine the above questioning process with common sense, knowledge of the workings of the political process, and the understanding that even the most trenchant opposition are still legitimate stakeholders in the planning process, and develop a communications program that will ultimately serve the public good.

- **What are the department's needs concerning the issue or project?**

While this question refers to the department's transportation needs, it may not be as simple as it sounds. Part of the answer might be "to relieve traffic congestion in the area by widening a road," or "to reduce driving time between two major cities by building a new highway." However, there may be a sub-answer as well, such as, "to do so at the lowest possible cost," or "to do so within 12 months." These sub-answers can be affected by the considerations brought out through the assessment process described above.

For example, if one of the department's needs is, in fact, to build the freeway "at the lowest possible cost," the question should then be asked, "how can that lowest possible cost best be achieved?" If the cost of fighting a battle with strongly entrenched environmental groups is higher than the cost of rerouting the freeway, it may be to the department's benefit to accept the environmentalists' demands right at the start—to lose the battle, in that case, might be to win the war.

2. What are the department's goals?

There are really two parts to this question:

- **What does the department wish to accomplish?**

This question, unlike the last question in the section above, refers to more than just transportation needs. Certainly, one goal is to fulfill those needs by successfully completing the proposed project. However, depending on the political environment the department is facing and the provided by the department's chief executive branch, there will always be secondary goals attached. If a department has been on the firing line at the state capitol because of charges that it ignores the real needs of the state's citizens, a secondary goal might be "to complete the project while arousing a minimum of public opposition." A very typical secondary goal in today's regulatory climate would be "to do so while meeting applicable governmental regulations regarding environmental protection."

- **What fall-back position can the department accept?**

It's vitally important that a department have a fall-back position to which it can retreat in the event of overwhelming opposition. A department that carves one goal in stone and will not accept compromise is a department that will find its goals increasingly shattered by the hammers of public opinion. By establishing a fall-back position at the start of the planning process, a department not only knows where it must hold the line as the give-and-take of public negotiating with its opponents begins; in many cases, just the fact of having a compromise at the ready can lead to the department's achieving most of its goals in a shorter period of time and at less expense than if it had to deal with a worst-case scenario on an ad hoc basis.

A DOT should be aware of the circumstances when it comes to dealing with environmental groups and other typical opponents. A department that appears willing to bargain and willing to include the opposition in the planning process will, by virtue of its perceived openness, generally find that the opposition, too, is more willing to compromise.

How does a DOT establish a fall-back position? In much the same way it establishes its primary goals—by balancing the transportation needs of the area with the internal and external regulations and opposition, as well as with other legitimate public needs (such as cutting state spending) that run counter to those transportation needs, and then looking for a solution that allows it to accomplish most of its transportation needs while meeting most of the opposition's objections. An alternate method is to determine the minimum level of goal achievement that would make the entire planning, approval, and construction process worthwhile. In either event, a DOT should be prepared to postpone or even abandon a proposed project if it becomes evident that even its fall-back position will not make it intact through the public planning process.

3. Who is the department's audience?

One of the questions asked in the first section was, "who is affected by the issue or project?" Ideally, all of the groups given in answer to that question should be included in the answer to this question. However, the question must also be rephrased:

- **Who are the groups that can affect the outcome of the issue or project?**

Typically, this will include all the groups, previously mentioned—motorists, residents, businesses and their customers and employees, and various special interest groups—along with two very important additions: other government agencies and elected officials, and the media. The former are in a position to help or hinder the department in its pursuit of its goals, while the latter can either act as intermediaries in getting the department's messages out to its other audiences, or, conversely, present the opposition's messages, probably much more effectively than the opposition ever could on its own.

4. What are the key messages of the department's campaign?

What are the main things people need to know? Typically, key messages will fall into two categories. First, people who will be affected by the construction need to be fully informed about those effects and how they might be able to mitigate them—such things as freeway lane closures, street closures, and designated alternate routes clearly fall into this category.

Second, if the project or issue is at all controversial—if it meets the criteria listed in the first set of questions above—tell the audience the department's side of the story to enlist their support. Three questions can help determine appropriate messages for this task:

- **What messages will strengthen support among those already in favor of the issue or project? What messages will gather support from those opposed to the issue or project? What messages will sway undecided audiences in favor of the issue or project?**

Answering these questions again requires two approaches. The first is simple:

- *What transportation benefits will the public derive from the project?*

For example:

- *Will the project reduce congestion and commuting time?*
- *Will the project reduce the amount of traffic driving through residential neighborhoods?*
- *Will the project improve access to businesses?*
- *Will the project reduce pollution in the area, such as by reducing stop-and-go traffic?*
- *Will the project improve access to recreational facilities?*

All benefits of a proposed project or issue (such as an increase in highway taxes) should be considered among the key messages.

The second necessary approach is to ask the following:

- *What positive aspects of the project will outweigh the objections raised by the opposition?*

The only way to find out why people are opposed to a project and what would make them change their minds is to ask them. This approach requires the use of polls and focus groups. The project may have consequences that would be considered beneficial by the opposition groups, but the agency may very likely not be aware of them because of the different perspective; thus, a well-conducted poll or focus group could bring them into the light.

For the most accurate results, polls and focus groups should ideally be conducted by professional organizations that are experienced in asking the right questions of the right mix of people and in analyzing the results. However, the following questions can help give some ideas as to what types of polling or focus groups to consider:

- *Does the department want statistically accurate results, or will anecdotal responses suffice?*

Statistical accuracy is important in situations where a public vote may be required, but in many circumstances, all that may be needed are the public's major thoughts and feelings about the project, so that the department can respond to those concerns. For strictly anecdotal responses, in-person polling is useful.

For more statistical accuracy, use telephone polling or mail polling. To choose between the two, ask the following:

- *Do you have the manpower to support a telephone poll?*

If the answer is no, then consider mail polling, even though the response rate is typically much smaller.

- *Do you need in-depth answers to your questions?*
- *Are there specific messages whose effectiveness you want to test?*

If the answers to the above are positive, hold one or more focus groups. A professionally run focus group can tell not only whether a message appeals to the targeted audience, but also how to change it if necessary.

5. How can the campaign's key messages best be transmitted to the targeted audiences and thus accomplish the department's goals?

Once it is known what messages will appeal to target audiences, determine what devices to use to get those messages across. To make this determination, find out as much as possible about where the audiences are located and what media are most effective (and cost-effective) in reaching them, as well as determining your specific distribution needs for your different messages. The first question to ask is:

- **What budget is allocated for the communications plan?**

In an ideal world, a department could put together the best possible communications plan, determine its budget, and simply ask its funding component for that amount. As everyone knows, when it comes to department budgets, the ideal world is left far behind. More often, the executive branch will determine what amount is available for the execution of the plan, and the public information office must then build the specific parts of the plan's budget within those limits.

- **Where are the audiences located?**
  - *Is the audience concentrated in one relatively small geographic area, or is it spread out over a wide area?*

If it's the former, such devices as public meetings and flyers can be very effective ways to reach the public, both to let them know about the department's plans and to solicit their input. If it's the latter, then materials that can be mailed, such as brochures and newsletters, take on added importance.

- *Are the motorists who will be impacted by the project also residents of the area, or are they commuters just passing through?*

If the only motorists who will be affected also live in the area, materials that are directed at residents will also reach them. However, if most of the affected motorists are commuters who live and/or work outside the residential area, find other ways to reach them. Besides mailing them information, send press releases to the news media in motorists' origin and destination areas, as well as posters to major employment sites. Also, consider the use of Highway Advisory Radio and Changeable Message Signs, which deliver messages to motorists as they're actually driving through the affected project area.

Once questions about the budget and the audiences' locations have been answered combine the information to determine the following:

- *What is the most efficient distribution method?*

As noted, very rarely will an agency have the luxury of being able to fund every method of distributing messages. In most cases, it will be necessary to look not only for the distribution method that will reach the most people, but for the one that will reach the most people at the lowest relative cost. In advertising terms, that relative cost is known as CPM, or cost per thousand. While this cost is easy to find for advertising—the different media will provide their figures—such methods as mailing, door-to-door leafletting, public meetings, and other nonadvertising methods will need to be worked out.

Having answered all of the above, the final step is to ask:

- **What materials and distribution methods are most appropriate for the particular message?**

Just because a particular way of getting the message across is effective and efficient doesn't mean it's necessarily the only or even the best method. The method or methods finally chosen should also be appropriate in terms of timeliness, suitability to your audience, and the complexity of your project and messages.

- *Does the message concern a major project or issue that will have a complicated, wide-reaching or long-term impact, or is it a smaller project with only simple, local, and short-term consequences?*

Consider a simple bridge widening project—one that will impact only the people who regularly use that bridge, and that will be completed in 2 month's time. It should be obvious that no brochures, newsletters, or posters are needed, and that a simple press release to the local media would suffice.

Just as obviously, a major highway reconstruction project stretching across two counties and lasting 2 years would require a full communications program, with press kits to inform the press about the full extent of the project; brochures to encompass all the major messages about the project in a single document; newsletters to keep residents and merchants informed about the project's progress over time; and many of the other tools discussed in the Toolbox. Specific questions to ask include the following:

- *Is the project complex or simple?*

Only complex projects typically need brochures, newsletters, and other multipage or multiissue materials; simple projects can usually be handled with simple materials, such as press releases and flyers.

- *Is the project short term or long term?*

If the project will be spread out over a long period of time (such as more than 6 months), consider using newsletters to update audiences on a regular basis.

- *What is the education level, attention span, and degree of interest of the audience?*

It goes without saying that the content of the materials should be tailored to the different audiences—don't write a piece directed at the general public using the same terminology as a piece directed at other engineers. Choice of materials can be made to match audiences in the same way.

By answering these questions, a DOT can develop a workable communications plan for nearly any issue or project. The following example, using Scenario Three of the prototype scenarios, will demonstrate the process.

Scenario Three: Additional Environmental Issues in Transportation

Environmental groups are threatening demonstrations and lawsuits over the proposed route of a new freeway, which they feel impacts vital wetlands and certain endangered species. How does the DOT manager reach consensus and move the project forward?

1. What is the situation?

- **What is the issue or project at hand?**
  - The proposed route of a new freeway
  - Its potential impact on wetlands and endangered species
- **Who is affected by the issue or project?**
  - –Motorists
  - –Residents
  - –Businesses, their customers and employees
  - –Environmental groups and their members
  - –Recreational users of the wetlands
- **What do those affected think and feel about the issue or project?**
  - –Who are the issue's or project's supporters?
    - –Motorists
    - –Residents
    - –Businesses, their customers and employees
  - –Who are the opposition?
    - –Environmental groups and their members
    - –Recreational users of the wetlands
  - –What are the relative strengths of each side?
    - –Motorists
      - –numerous, but not very involved or vocal
      - –as a group, generally disenfranchised
    - –Residents
      - –vocal only when they are differently affected
      - –may be "connected" politically through neighborhood associations
    - –Businesses
      - –vocal only when they are directly affected
      - –may be connected politically
    - –Environmentalists
      - –small in number, but very vocal and involved
      - –may be connected politically
      - –typically of interest to TV & newspaper reporters
    - –Recreational users
      - –small in number, but may be vocal and involved
      - –typically not connected politically
      - –typically not of great interest to the news media
- **What are the department's needs concerning the issue or project?**
  - To relieve traffic congestion in the area by building the proposed freeway
  - To do so at the lowest possible cost

Looking at the above questions and answers, it is clear that the answers may change dramatically from project to project or region to region. In some areas, for example, recreational wetlands users may have strong political connections, while in other areas with particularly strong and vocal automobile clubs, motorists as a group may not be disenfranchised at all. *(Tools: Audits, Organization Outreach)*

2. What are the department's goals?

- **What does the department wish to accomplish?**
  - –To build the freeway through the wetlands
  - –To do so with a minimum of public opposition
  - –To meet applicable government regulations regarding wetlands and endangered species protection
- **What fall-back position can the department accept?**
  - –To reroute the freeway, provided the additional funding is made available without impacting other needed projects
  - –To accept a certain amount of public opposition by environmental interest groups, provided the overall public support remains at a substantial majority level

Again, the answers may (and probably will) differ from project to project. For example, a DOT's cost-benefit analysis of a project may show that the cost of meeting government regulations regarding endangered species protection would be so high as to prohibit the construction of the project; in that case, a goal might be, "to obtain a legislative or executive exemption from the requirements of the endangered species acts"; another might be, "to obtain majority public support of such an exemption."

3. Who is the department's audience?

- **Who are the groups that can affect the outcome of the issue or project?**
  - –Environmental groups
  - –Recreational users
  - –Motorists (if mobilized)
  - –Residents (if mobilized)
  - –Businesses (if mobilized)
  - –State legislature
  - –Media

Note that the audiences mentioned are the same as those mentioned under the analysis of the situation, with the addition of two important groups: state legislators, who are in a position to help the department reach its goal (either by supporting an exemption to environmental regulations or by providing additional funding for rerouting), and the media, who can act as intermediaries in getting the department's messages out to its other audiences. *(Tools: Audits, Organization Outreach, Key Person Briefings)*

4. What are the key messages of the department's campaign?

- **What messages will strengthen support among those already in favor of the issue or project?**
  –The proposed freeway will significantly reduce congestion and commuting time (motorists)
  –The proposed freeway will reduce the amount of traffic driving through residential neighborhoods (residents)
  –The proposed freeway will improve access to local businesses (businesses)
- **What messages will gather support from those opposed to the issue or project?**
  –The proposed freeway will reduce air pollution in the area by reducing stop-and-go traffic (environmentalists)
  –The proposed freeway will improve access to recreational wetlands (recreational users)
- **What messages will sway undecided audiences in favor of the issue or project?**

The last question is always the hardest to answer—and the most critical to answer accurately. It is those "swing voters" who will often determine the outcome of a project. *(Tools: Polls, Focus Groups)*

5. How can the campaign's key messages best be transmitted to the targeted audiences and thus accomplish the department's goals?

- **What budget is allocated for the communications plan?**
  –$500,000 over 2 years
- **Where are the audiences located?**
  –Motorists—primarily commuters traveling through the construction region, but living and working on opposite sides of the region, rather than within the region itself
  –Residents—scattered over a wide geographic area throughout a rural county
  –Businesses—centered in the middle of the proposed construction area, in two clusters (small town downtown, suburban shopping mall)
  –Environmentalists—centered in the middle of the construction area, in the area's central small town
  –Recreational users—scattered over a wide geographic area throughout the county
  –State legislature—in the state capitol, 120 miles away from the construction area
  –Media—in the central small town
- **What is the most efficient distribution method?**
  –Motorists—through brochures included in mailings by local automobile clubs
  –Residents—through newsletter mailings targeted to zip codes in the affected area
  –Businesses—through mailings to the targeted business centers or through door-to-door leafletting
  –Environmentalists—through meetings in the central small town
  –Recreational users—through targeted mailings to owners of recreational vehicles; through posted notices at recreational sites
  –State legislature—through one-to-one contact at the state capitol or local field offices
  –Media—through one-to-one contact at newspaper offices and television stations

Obviously, the answers to these questions are hypothetical and will change radically for any given situation. For example, if the project area was a large urban metropolis instead of a rural county, or if residents were clustered in one geographic area while businesses were scattered, or if origin-and-destination studies showed that most motorists who would use the proposed freeway lived in one town in the center of the construction area, the choice of distribution would change accordingly.

Whatever the specifics of any situation, however, the application of this question-and-answer format to the problem can lead to the development of a coherent and effective communications plan that can lead the department to the accomplishment of its goals.

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