

# HOW TO RUN OVER PEOPLE AND MAKE THEM LIKE IT

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\*TO SOME people, public relations means little. I understand that attitude, for I felt the same way a few years ago. I could not have cared less about what the public thought, and my attitude was, "To hell with public relations! Let's get on with the job and the public be damned if they get in the way!" One would suspect in viewing urban construction over the country that this attitude is shared by a majority of contractors. It may be more charitable to say that it is a subject that they do not think about or that it is a problem that is so vast that to find a solution would be hopeless.

Today I am a firm believer in the value of establishing good public relations and of creating a positive image for the construction industry. It is a subject that I am constantly thinking about as it applies to all of our construction and mining operations. No problem in this area is so great that it cannot be solved. I am not saying that public relations problems can be solved without thought, effort, and money. It takes plenty of all three to do the job successfully. Neither do I believe in gimmicks or slight-of-hand tricks to fool the public. You may get away with this once or twice, but I do not recommend it. It is true that we occasionally use gimmicks in some of our programs, but we use them not as solutions to a problem but as aids to get the public's attention in order to make them aware of what we are trying to accomplish.

It takes a great deal of thought, effort, and money to solve urban construction problems. Many people feel that contractors are willing to put the thought and energy into the effort to solve public relations problems but, because there is no bid item to recover any money expended for this, they are not willing to put out the cash. I think it is fun to think about these problems and create solutions with positive ideas. The money required to execute them is not wasted but is rather an investment that pays annual, as well as daily, dividends.

Several months ago, our state highway department advertised for competitive bids on many projects throughout the state. One was less than a mile from our main office. In reviewing the many jobs we planned to bid, our chief estimator made the remark that he did not want to bid the project close to our office because all of our people who had looked at it were of the opinion that the work was difficult and complicated by the necessity of maintaining 2-way traffic on 5 major streets tying into an expressway. His comment was that there would be too many problems in dealing with the public. He said we would ruin our good reputation if we got the job and blocked the 30,000 cars that would have to pass through the work daily. I initially agreed to his decision but after some reflection suggested that we figure a way to build the project with the least inconvenience to travelers and that we base our bid on handling the work in this manner. No one felt at the time that we would be low bidders on the project; our bid price was approximately \$250,000. Apparently, however, our competitors felt the same way because the state received only 2 bids and ours was the lowest. Even so, we were considerably above the state's estimate for doing the work. Subsequently, the highway department engineers called me and asked why our bid was so high. I gave them a copy of our estimate, showing more than \$35,000 allowed in this small job to protect the public and do those things that would prevent interference with the smooth movement of traffic. Another costly item in handling this project was our planned schedule to start work in traffic areas after 10:00 in the morning and to move out at 4:00 in the afternoon, prior to the heavy evening traffic. We also planned to work at night.

I explained to the state engineers that we did not want the job unless we could handle it without major traffic interruptions. I further said that I thought the time of the travelers, i. e., the taxpayers, if properly evaluated, could be said to be worth several hundred thousand dollars and that this vital point was being overlooked. Normally, a bid above the state's estimate is rejected, but the highway department awarded the project to us. We have not started the work yet, so I cannot tell you how we will come out; but I can say that our public relations program, which is well known to the state highway department, was responsible for the project being awarded to us.

The other example concerns an experience in public relations my company encountered during the construction of Birmingham's Red Mountain Expressway. This project had all kinds of public relations problems. They started in the courthouse with lengthy legal battles over condemnation proceedings long before any construction commenced. When we were awarded the construction contract, we knew that we had to develop a positive public relations program. We reviewed all the potential problem areas in an effort to anticipate everything that might happen. We made a basic decision that an educated and, therefore, knowledgeable public would more readily accept inconveniences and changes in travel routes than would a public that did not know or understand what was going on. With this in mind, we developed a program to inform every concerned person of what we were trying to do and to explain why delays and inconveniences would be required if rapid progress were to be made in the construction of this expressway. We implemented this program in many ways, and I will list only a few.

1. We mailed more than 600 personal letters to community leaders outlining our plan of executing the work required in the contract;
2. We placed weekly "plan-ahead" notices in the Sunday newspaper, calling attention to street closings and changes in detour routes;
3. We used radio and television advertising to alert the public to all major traffic interruptions;
4. We created and gave away automobile bumper stickers bearing our expressway slogan, "slow go today—go go tomorrow";
5. We gave 2 elaborate cocktail parties for the residents of 2 major apartment buildings that we had to tunnel under in the course of construction;
6. We published weekly progress bulletins and posted them on public street corners adjacent to the work;
7. We identified to people living in the area all of our workers, not just our superintendents and foremen but every single man on the job including equipment operators and riggers; and
8. We put up bleachers for people to sit in and watch the work and provided programs to explain what was going on.

What were the results of this positive public relations program? We literally ran all over the people, and they loved it.

It was expensive in terms of dollars but, frankly, I would not have believed it possible to accomplish what we did. In one area we were able to completely change the character of the work; the Bureau of Public Roads at first acted as if it did not want to go along, and the highway department followed closely behind in that sentiment. Public pressure, however, forced them to move into the area that we wished to go. This was worth many times the cost of the actual public relations program. We, as well as the Alabama State Highway Department, expected that there would be more than \$2 million worth of lawsuits in claims filed before the project was completed. Not only were there no suits filed but neither we nor the highway department received a single complaint during the entire period of construction.

Most construction disrupts or inconveniences some people, particularly those living or working nearby. Understandably, those inconveniences and interruptions cannot be eliminated entirely, but they certainly can be kept to a minimum. I strongly feel that doing this should be a part of the cost of the construction and that maintaining good public relations is just as important as doing quality work or completing a project on schedule.