



GOAL-ORIENTED COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

Effective public communications requires advance planning. Create public awareness of the role of the regulator before controversial news pulls you into the spotlight. The best way to do this is to define your **goals**. You have to know where you are going, or you won't get there.

1. Your Goals: Short Term and Long Term: Before a hearing, discuss goals and write them down on a flip chart. Set priorities and make sure everybody in the group knows what they are. Both short term and long term goals should be clear to those communicating with the media on behalf of regulators. Consider how anything you might say fits with these goals. A short term goal might be keeping water or electric rates low to encourage economic development, while a long term goal might be ensuring sufficient investment for future growth of generating capacity.

2. The most Important Goal: Public Trust. Gaining and keeping public trust is perhaps your most important goal, because without this, all other goals will be difficult to achieve. Your behavior in the public eye is an important factor in instilling that trust. Regulators must be, and be perceived to be:

- Fair: regulatory proceedings must be open and must allow interveners to make their cases.
- Transparent: actively and openly keep the public informed.
- Public spirited: put the interests of the nation (or state, or city) first.
- Intelligent: able to grasp complex issues and balance them
- Ethical: Behave according to the law (It may be fine to be part of a working lunch with a utility executive, and you should pay your own bill, but never accept gifts or trips from a party involved in a hearing)
- Decisive: Be able to make decisions, even when the correct one is unpopular.

- Independent of outside pressures: be seen to be influenced only by evidence and the public good.

Good communications with the media is the only way the public can know that you are living up to this standard, and have earned their trust.

3. Meeting the Media's Goals: The media are not inclined to give free PR at anyone. To achieve your goals in public communication, you must help journalists achieve their goals, too. Give them answers they can use (Answering Questions Effectively) and provide them with the information they need to produce their stories well (see *Making Allies with the Media*).

4. Meeting the Public's Goals: The goals of the regulator, short term and long term, must be the same as the public interest. Keeping the public informed is part of a well-functioning regulatory process. The media is an excellent public forum. They are your natural allies. The more transparent the regulatory process, and the more open you can be with journalists, the better this will work. When speaking with journalists, be sure to address the concerns of their specific audience in terms they will understand. Simplify complex issues and use analogies to make your case.

5. Meeting the Government's Goals: Regulatory Boards are independent from the government to prevent improper political or unethical influence. So on the one hand, you must avoid even the appearance of undue influence. On the other hand, government policy may dictate the broad direction a regulatory board must take. For example, if government policy is to encourage economic development in a particular area, this may require a lowering of electricity tariffs for industry.

Regulators must have clear channels of communication with the government for this sort of direction, and must operate in the open. Secretive communications create suspicion that the public is being deceived, and journalists--especially those

antagonistic to the government--are quick to exploit any appearance that this is happening.

6. Meeting Utilities' Goals: Regulators must clearly understand the goals of applicant utilities, and they should demonstrate their total understanding of the issues. Fostering successful utilities must be one of your long-term goals. And privatized, for-profit utilities with some frequency will ask for more than what's in the public interest. Just as frequently, the public will object to any increase in rates, no matter what the improvement in service. It's up to regulators to strike a balance. Do not expect people to understand complex formulas or explanations, or to trust utility statistics. Find simple, everyday analogies to justify meeting long-term goals.

7. Meeting other Stakeholder and Intervenor's Goals: The media often reduces complex situations to winners and losers, villains and victims. You must present a balanced picture to the press that shows each intervenor in a hearing has been dealt with fairly and rationally. If it looks like you have neglected one group or shown bias towards another, expect the media to play up the conflict.

Perceived losers will complain bitterly to the press. Even fringe elements often get equal time with the media if they are boisterous enough--because this creates the emotion and drama that makes a good news story. You can respond by remaining empathetic with the unsatisfied party, and by demonstrating how other alternatives would produce worse results in terms of the public good. Never appear angry, dismissive, or argumentative in public; this feeds emotional conflict and lowers the ability to reason.

Goal-Oriented Preparation for a Hearing:

- List your goals as regulators in a group discussion. What do you want to accomplish in the hearing? What's in the public interest?

- Prioritize your goals.
- List and prioritize the goals of government, utilities, and other intervenors.
- Determine which goals match up, which conflict, and which are simply non-conflicting. Create as many high priority win-win solutions as possible.
- When you reach your decision, check it against your list. Make sure the benefits of each item for each group can be made clear in your briefing with the press. prepare to explain why some requests have been denied. Demonstrate that there is balance.
- Now consider the results in terms of the goals of the media:
 - What is newsworthy? How can the results be presented simply and clearly, with good word pictures?
 - What negative emotional issues will the press exploit? What conflicts are unresolved?
 - Which groups will think themselves “losers” and speak out against the decision? Have the “losers” goals been fairly taken into account?
 - Would a different decision actually be better for all parties and the public good?
- Revise your decision if necessary, and repeat the previous step.
- Once your course of action is set, prepare to handle objections by demonstrating your understanding of opposing viewpoints, and by showing that such a course of action would be worse for the public good.
- Before facing the press, decide who among you will handle which issues and possible questions the press might raise.

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