

Reducing Outrage: Six Principal Strategies

Copyright © 1998 by Peter M. Sandman

1. **Stake out the middle, not the extreme.** In a fight between “terribly dangerous” and “perfectly safe,” the winner will be “terribly dangerous.” But “modestly dangerous” is a contender. If you deserve a B-, activists can get away with giving you an F instead; you can’t get away with giving yourself an A.
2. **Acknowledge prior misbehavior.** The prerogative of deciding when you can put your mistakes behind you belongs to your stakeholders, not to you. The more often and apologetically you acknowledge the sins of the past, the more quickly others decide it’s time to move on.
3. **Acknowledge current problems.** Omissions, distortions, and “spin control” damage credibility nearly as much as outright lies. The only way to build credibility is to acknowledge problems – before you solve them, before you know if you will be able to solve them – going beyond mere honesty to “transparency.”
4. **Discuss achievements with humility.** Odds are you resisted change until regulators or activists forced your hand. Now have the grace to say so. Attributing your good behavior to your own natural goodness triggers skepticism; attributing it to pressure greatly increases the likelihood that we’ll believe you actually did it.
5. **Share control and be accountable.** The higher the outrage, the less willing people are to leave the control in your hands. Look for ways to put the control elsewhere (or to show that it is already elsewhere). Let others – regulators, neighbors, activists – keep you honest and certify your good performance.
6. **Pay attention to unvoiced concerns and underlying motives.** Unvoiced concerns make the most trouble. Bring them to the surface subtly: “I wonder if anyone is worried about....” And remember to diagnose stakeholder motives other than outrage and hazard: ideology, revenge, self-esteem, and greed.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Managing controversy: Key to corporate reputation (Sep 1998) -- www.psandman.com/articles/managing.htm
- Risk = Hazard + Outrage: Coping with Controversy about Utility Risks (Oct 1999) – www.psandman.com/articles/amsa.htm
- Laundry List of 50 Outrage Reducers (Feb 2002) – www.psandman.com/col/laundry.htm
- Accountability (Oct 2002) – www.psandman.com/col/account.htm
- The Outrage Industries: The Role of Journalists and Activists in Risk Controversies (Mar 2006) – www.psandman.com/col/outrage.htm
- Giving Away the Credit: Managing Controversies by Claiming You're Responsive (though maybe not responsible) (Dec 2006) – www.psandman.com/col/credit.htm
- Tell People What's Going On: Building Trust through Candor (May 2014) – www.psandman.com/col/problems.htm

Peter M. Sandman, Ph.D.
Brooklyn, NY

Email: peter@psandman.com Web: www.psandman.com (U.S.) Phone: 1-609-683-4073
Consulting, Training, and Research in Risk Communication