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Sources of Good Relations  
With the Public

by

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of

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

Presented at  
**Annual Convention**  
of the  
**Wisconsin Utilities Association**  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin,  
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## SOURCES OF GOOD RELATIONS WITH THE PUBLIC

(Note: Mr. Crocker's address delivered at the Annual Convention was very well received by the Executives and heads of departments present. The Executive Committee felt that the message should be passed on to every employee and official in a position of responsibility, in charge of subordinates, in any department of our operating organizations.)

Those of us in the public utility business hear much these days of the term "Public Relations". To most of us this phrase signifies eternal vigilance to earn the confidence of the public whom we serve. Good relations with the public is now recognized as one of the most essential parts of public utility operation. I shall discuss some phases of the handling of the problem which may present some new angles.

To analyze better the sources from which good—or bad—relations with the public originate, let us reduce the complex whole, namely the indefinite term "Public", to a simple equation, and consider one element of the public, an individual, and let us assume that he is a prospective consumer and follow his experiences and reactions in his contact with a utility.

Our business is fundamentally monopolistic. Monopoly means one source of supply. The user of the commodity which we sell—gas, street railway transportation, or electricity—must come to us for service. Now, the ordinary American citizen dislikes to be compelled to do anything, so our prospective

consumer (we will call him Mr. Blank) who has built a new home on land which he chose, employed a builder, a plumber and wiremen of his own selection, has reached a point where he needs gas or electricity and he has no option but to come to us for that service. So he comes down to the office to make application with potential irritation in his system, although he may not be conscious of this feeling.

His first contact is with the information clerk—and it is pleasant. Apparently that individual seems to take an interest in directing him to the proper place—the elevator man adds to this impression—even his credit is passed upon in a manner that does not hurt his pride. He feels when he goes home that he has been dealing with people who have an interest in their work and consequently in him. The next day the service crew puts in his service and meter. The work is done neatly, the men don't loaf and they seem to be happy in their job. They answer questions civilly.

The first trouble call brings a man who goes to some pains to help Mrs. Blank put her range, iron or other electric appliance in good order. If this is only a temporary repair, he follows it up and sees that permanent repairs are made and Mrs. Blank is satisfied. Mr. Blank gets a bill (if an electric bill, a difficult thing to understand). He pays it to a cashier who says "Thank You", and means it. Result: Mr. Blank is a friend. Mrs. Blank is a friend. If some neighbor says something derogatory about the company,

Mr. Blank may not argue for the company, but he has no grievance, so the disaffection does not spread. Increase this typical case to include a large part of your consumers and you have a friendly public.

The above is obvious if it can be accomplished, I can hear somebody say. It can, and it is being done. And the source of this accomplishment brings us to the first fundamental source of good public relations—the employees of your own organization. Good relations with them is a vital necessity if you hope to have good relations with your public.

When Mr. Blank came in contact with the employees in different departments, his pleasant experience was not the result of accident. It is human nature to reciprocate in kind. Your employee must be enthusiastic about his own company. He must have confidence in the management. He must have some conception of your problems and their solution. He must feel that the company has an interest in his welfare and he must know this from his own experience. What is his reaction? He is watching for every opportunity to help the company. He goes out of his way to do something for a consumer that will make a friend for his company. Therefore he avoids doing anything that might irritate a consumer.

I want to emphasize this factor, for it is the main-spring from which the public goodwill grows. The public knows a company—not by the spectacular things it does, but by these daily, personal, little contacts that either

please or irritate. A tactless, disgruntled clerk or trouble man can arouse more resentment than the general manager can counteract.

This is the only sure method of keeping out of politics. Politics thrives on dissension. A politician inherently is attracted to questions in which much interest is taken. If you can establish friendly relations with your consumers individually, the politician senses that there is no political capital for him should he attack the company, therefore he confines his efforts to other subjects.

The same underlying policy that gains the goodwill of your employees, if adopted in the treatment of your customers, will gain their friendship. That friendship once attained, you will find that the most difficult problem of public utility operation ceases to exist.

The American public is fair and will meet you more than half way if it is convinced that you are playing a square game. Michael Pupin, in his autobiography, "From Immigrant to Inventor", cites an instance of this feeling of fair play in his very interesting experiences when, as a young immigrant Serb, he landed in this country attired in the clothes of a peasant and wearing a red fez. As he walked up Broadway, he attracted considerable attention among newsboys. One boy knocked his fez from his head and Pupin immediately attacked him and, after a short scuffle, knocked him down. He expected others to come to the rescue of their fallen comrade, but he was surprised to find that they admired his pluck and did not interfere. When a policeman walked

up to see what it was all about, the boys who had lately jeered him took sides with Pupin, and as he walked away, cheered him. Pupin found this spirit of fair play an American characteristic throughout all the years of his experience in this country, the attitude of recognizing a man for what he is worth and playing a fair game.

Another source of good relations with the public—the elimination of incipient cases of dissatisfaction. When your company appears to be popular, don't take it for granted. You may have isolated cases of dissatisfaction that may grow to be sore spots. Obtain personal contact with your consumers through systematic, periodical surveys. These may be accomplished in one or more ways, one of which I will briefly outline.

Light trucks equipped with the full complement of fuses and lamps, in charge of a man who is specially trained for the work, calls on each resident consumer to check over the installation, ascertain whether the customer is experiencing any trouble with his equipment or the service, and in this way gives the consumer an opportunity to mention any minor complaint regarding any of his contacts with the utility. Often it may be found that the consumer may have some slight grievance, real or imaginary, which can be explained to him on the ground. If the complaint is more serious, a report is made to headquarters, the facts investigated and the complaint followed up to remove the cause of dissatisfaction. You will find that many troubles which might not be serious enough



to bring the consumer into the company's office, with a little tact can be explained away or remedied and make the incipient kicker a good booster for the company.

There are some in the utility business who contend that a survey of this nature encourages criticism. It does—and therein lies its value, provided you follow up these insignificant sources of antagonism, ascertain the facts and remove the cause, or, give the customer a satisfactory explanation of the reason why it cannot be removed, if that proves to be the case.

Follow this thought of contact with people a step farther. Are your executives and department heads generally known outside of your own organization? Do they come in personal touch with many people besides their immediate business associates, except in a business way? I do not mean that they should necessarily be the leaders of the community and therefore always in the limelight. I refer to the contact which comes from general participation in the social and civic life of a community. Where does the term "Big, Soulless Corporation" have its origin? Does it not arise from the general feeling that the company is a far-off, impersonal thing and functions in a mercenary, coldblooded way—controlled and operated by some intangible body which is in the community but apart from its every day activities? Contrast this with the position of the company, every mention of whose name brings forth an involuntary comment. "That company? Oh, yes, I know them, they are good fellows." The

Company takes on a personal aspect and a man immediately visualizes men who are like himself, men whom he knows in his work and in his pleasure. A criticism of such a company appears to him more like criticism of a friend.

Rates are generally considered the principal bone of contention between utilities and cities. Unless rates are unjustifiably high, a rate fight is the result rather than the cause of the controversy. Widespread complaints of high rates are danger signals for underlying dissatisfaction. More often than not they arise from lack of confidence in you and your organization, or antagonism towards the methods used in the conduct of your business. An attack is centered on rates because "Rates" is the most effective vehicle by which the consumer can show his displeasure. It affects the revenue of the Company and the public knows that a successful fight against rates is the most powerful weapon which it can use.

There are many other phases of the subject of good relations that are important which I shall not touch upon. Good service is an essential requisite which needs no further reference. It is the only product which we have to sell, our entire income is dependent upon it and therefore, like every successful merchant, we must produce an article that satisfies the purchaser.

I need not touch on the value of customer ownership or the good results that accrue to the frank discussion of your problems with

your public. In themselves they are subjects for papers such as this.

I have confined my discussion to those sources of good relations that have to do with the human equation—first, the spontaneous goodwill of your own employees; second, the natural effect on the public when it comes in contact with these employees; and third, the combination of the two wherein employees and public meet as equals and associates outside of their business connections. Public relations is the feeling engendered by little contacts. Everyday, petty experiences make up the sum total of that intangible and yet powerful force, good or bad relations with your public.

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