



John A. Giachino • Chair, FWEA Public Education Committee

Our country was founded on the principal that its citizens are free to maintain individual opinions on topics of interest. Some institutions exist solely to shape public opinion and policy while others make such endeavors part of their mission. This Tip Sheet identifies these institutions and offers ideas on how each can help you influence opinions and public policy on your initiatives and programs.

PE Tip Sheet No. 27:

Influencing Public Opinion

Opinions are like belly buttons—everyone has one and they come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Our daily lives are routinely influenced, in fact proscribed, by a number of institutions that shape our opinions and subsequent public policy.

To whom can you turn for help in shaping public opinion on your project or initiative, and how do they sway public opinion? You can obtain help from the media, special interest groups, research foundations, trade associations, prominent individuals, private-sector businesses, and state and local governments.

The Media

The media in the United States is controlled by the private sector, and because of our constitutional right of free speech, they face no political censorship by the government. There is a strong tradition of independent newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and other forms of media publicizing varying opinions, both critical and supportive of public policy. By educating the public about the issues and deliberately favoring certain courses of action, the media can shape public opinion directly.

The media serves at least three important functions in influencing public policy. First, policy makers are under constant scrutiny by the extensive media industry. Public officials realize that almost anything they do or say—even in private—may appear in the media, and so are reluctant to make decisions or take actions that they would not want publicized.

Second, the media reports facts and conducts independent analysis concerning public policy issues, thereby educating the public.

Finally, the media provides a forum for publishers and broadcasters (and their readers and listeners) to present editorial opinions that may influence others. As we have seen, many large newspapers, for example, endorse particular candidates for office or publish guest articles favoring one policy over another.

Special Interest Groups/ Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

We hear more and more about special interest groups, which are private-sector organizations whose members share common interests or positions on public policy, and who pool their resources to gain a more prominent voice in public opinion and subsequent policy debates. There are literally thousands of such groups representing almost every conceivable interest. Some organizations have a long history of working toward a general goal, while others are formed temporarily to advocate for or against a specific policy proposal. There are prominent examples of special interest groups that operate in the water environment arena, such as the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, National Wildlife Federation... the list goes on and on.

Public Policy Research Organizations

These organizations, sometimes called “think tanks,” conduct original research, publish books and articles, and prepare position papers on topics related to public policy. Their experts are often called to testify before governmental bodies and support or oppose policies and programs.

We should assume that some of these groups have a distinct partiality towards liberal or conservative policies, but many are highly respected as authoritative sources of study on matters that affect public policy. Some prominent think tanks with-a-long history of contributing to the public policy debate include the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

Trade Associations

Trade associations such as the Florida Water Environment Association (FWEA),

the Florida Section of the American Water Works Association (FSAWWA) and the Florida Water Pollution Control Operators Association (FWPCOA), are membership organizations that represent the interests of a particular industry or profession. They communicate the concerns of their members to policymakers. Just as importantly, they report back to their members about new policies, rules, and proposals so that the members are educated about what is required of them.

Both the FWEA and FSAWWA have imbedded Utility Councils, which are routinely and actively engaged in shaping opinion and educating policy makers such as the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), the state legislature, and others to influence outcomes of regulation and law.

Individuals

Private citizens commonly form coalitions or interest groups to make their voices heard, but many also take steps on their own to influence opinion and policy. These activities include writing to their elected and appointed officials about particular policies, writing letters to the editor of their local newspaper, and appearing at hearings and other public functions where opinions are formed and policy is debated.

Private-Sector Businesses

Because businesses are affected to a great degree by public policies, many corporations have established government relations offices. While a primary function of these corporate representatives is to educate and communicate to policymakers and sometimes to the general public how proposed programs and initiatives will affect the corporation, they also serve other functions:

- ◆ Ensuring that their employers are aware of laws and policies that apply to them. This facilitates compliance with the law.
- ◆ Providing expert, substantive advice about

the effects of proposed programs and initiatives, which can help policymakers arrive at better-informed decisions and create better programs with fewer unintended consequences.

State & Local Governmental Associations

State and local governments have formed their own associations to ensure that the interests of states, cities, counties, and other governments have a voice. Governmental associations in Florida include:

- ◆ The Florida Association of Counties
- ◆ The Florida League of Cities and its smaller local League members
- ◆ The Florida City and County Managers Association
- ◆ The Florida Government Communicators Association
- ◆ The Florida Government Finance Officers Association

These organizations are can be particularly vocal on environmental, transportation, tax, education, and social policy. Policymakers often turn to state and local governments and their associations for advice on how best to structure and implement programs that are funded federally, but delivered locally.

Back to Belly Buttons

In the children's book entitled, "The Boy Who Lost His Bellybutton," the search for his missing belly button takes a boy on an unlikely adventure through the jungle. The boy finally spies his own missing part on the "scaly, reptilian tummy" of a crocodile. When the rightful owner asks for it back, he is challenged by the crocodile to "Come and get it."

So, while you are finding your way through the jungle of shaping public opinion and policy on your program, initiative, or policy decision, your challenge is to obtain help from institutions that exist to do just that. Those institutions are saying to you, "Come and get it—we can help you." By doing so, your can effectively promote your opinion without the fear of losing public sentiment to the opposition crocodiles.

John Giachino is a principal with Boyle Engineering Corporation and serves as regional director, client services for the firm. He is based in Orlando, FL.

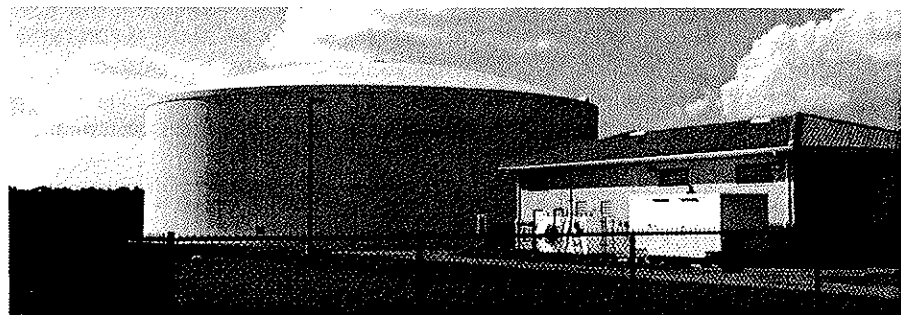
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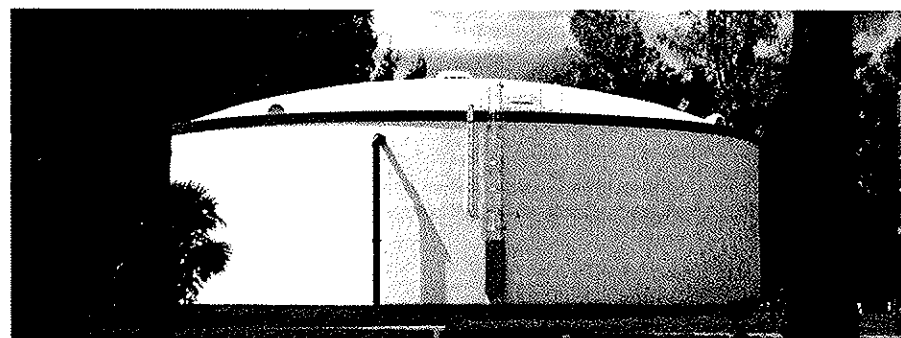
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