

Communications Committee 1987 Report  
to CMA Board of Directors  
Michael E. Thompson\*

Since this report is -- by definition -- an annual report, there's a natural temptation, to which I'm going to yield, to look back at the events of the past year and ask the familiar question: "Are we better off than we were 12 months ago?"

When I put that question to the members of the communications committee, the response was a strong conviction that the chemical industry today is in better standing with the public and the press than it was last year. This improvement is real, and even verifiable, as I'll point out in a minute. In short, it feels good and it is good, or at least getting better.

In our report to you last year, the committee felt that the industry was ready to make a move in improving its reputation. What the industry needed was continued commitment from senior management, a year without a major domestic incident, a major communications effort from the industry's plant people and communications professionals, and, frankly, a bit of luck.

Well, we got a lot of what we needed in 1986.

Starting at the top, senior managers in the industry gave their personal and corporate endorsement to our communications efforts, particularly on Superfund, CAER, and air toxics. Word has spread throughout your organizations that it is good business to commit time and manpower to communicating on these important issues.

We also had a year without a major chemical incident to rekindle the fears of Bhopal. The closest we came was the train derailment near Miamisburg, Ohio. Fortunately, there was no loss of life or serious injury and the operating and communications people involved in the incident did their jobs well. As a result, the accident was portrayed in the media as being as much a rail mishap as a chemical-related problem.

Perhaps the worst reporting on the Miamisburg incident may have occurred on the ABC network coverage of the golf tournament that was being played in nearby Dayton at the time of the wreck. I can remember cringing in front of my tv set watching and listening to those two noted environmental reporters -- Dave Marr and Jim McKay -- discussing how to play golf in sulfur fumes.

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\* Director-Corporate Media Relations, Amoco Corporation

We also seemed to have escaped much residual blame for the recent Rhine River spill in Switzerland. Frankly, I'm at a loss as to why that incident didn't receive more critical coverage in the U.S., but I'm sure not complaining about it. Each day without a page-one incident puts Bhopal one more day behind us.

1986 also saw a remarkable communications effort in the industry's support of the CAER program at the local level. If we had the time, I could have filled both days of this meeting with success stories on the communication of the CAER program in our plant communities.

In fact, 1986 could be called the Year of the Chemical Plant Open House. The chemical industry held more open houses than Century 21 last year and the overwhelmingly positive results reflect the considerable effort that went into these activities. I can't recall a single negative episode in the thousands of CAER-related communications activities that took place in 1986.

These local activities have further enhanced the role of the chemical plant manager as a communicator in his local community. These individuals today are more willing and capable of representing your companies and our industry than ever before. It's also clear to the committee that many companies are now placing increased value on communications skills when senior management selects the people to serve as your plant managers.

On the media relations front in 1986, the committee felt that we generally received fair coverage. Our relationships with environmental reporters for many major media were further strengthened during the year. Familiarity breeds respect in this regard, and we had another year to increase our industry's credibility with these reporters. In addition, all of our skins got a little bit thicker in 1986 as the industry learned anew that working with the media is a tough, no-nonsense, and sometime frustrating part of all of our jobs. As a result, our collective tolerance level with the media is even higher than it was. We have learned that no one story or single episode is critical and that it's the long term results that count in working with the press.

As a result of these and other efforts in 1986, the public's opinion of our industry improved, at least if you believe the public opinion surveys. I won't go into all the statistics, but I think a few trends are worth comment.

According to one prestigious national survey, the public's view of our industry improved measurably. Our approval rating in this survey increased by about 40 percent during 1986. However, fairness requires me to point out that we started the year dead last among 15 industries, with a rating so low that any improvement would seem large by comparison. This improvement, though slight, moved us from 15th place to about 12th or 13th on

the industry list. We're above the alcohol and nuclear power industries and very close to the electric utility industry. Now our standing doesn't begin to compare with the ratings of the top-rated computer industry or the food and retailing industries. But we moved up a notch or two and our ranking is the highest it's been since 1982. That has to qualify as good news.

This survey showed two other items of special interest. First, in a special questionnaire, the plastics industry received an approval rating that would place it at about 5th place on the 15-industry list. Since many of the companies here today have some interest in plastics, this approval rating should be encouraging.

And, secondly, the oil industry, which for years had been in the public's doghouse, improved noticeably. In 1982 the oil guys were in last place. By the fourth quarter of 1986 oil had moved all the way up to about the middle of the 15 industries. So major improvement is possible if we persevere.

Other results from other surveys show mixed results -- either the public's opinion about us stayed the same or improved only slightly. We seem to be rebounding slowly from last year's rock-bottom ratings.

Yet we should not confuse these slight improvements with any lessening of the public's concern about the environment and our industry.

Survey after survey continue to show that the American people place environmental concerns very high among their priorities, even to the point of preferring the environment over jobs or higher prices when faced with a choice in the surveys.

The public feels that the environment is improving, but feels that the improvement has been progressing too slowly and that nobody -- business or government -- is acting quickly enough. The public continues to rank the disposal of hazardous wastes as its number one environmental concern and cites the chemical industry consistently as the country's primary source of air and water pollution.

Faced with these conditions, the communications committee's 1987 objectives reflect our enthusiasm to support CMA's advocacy efforts and the opportunity to parlay these efforts, where possible, into improved communications with the public at large.

Heading our project list for 1987 is the followup on our CAER communication achievements of 1986. If there is a CMA member plant that hasn't yet conducted a CAER communications activity, we want to find it and get it on track with the rest of the industry.

CAER has been THE leadership effort for the chemical industry during this decade and we must not let it wither -- either in an operating or a communications sense. The committee's greatest fear is that our plant people will become complacent about CAER now that they have gone through all the effort of establishing it in their communities. Pardon the pun, but CAER will require a lot of tender loving care in the future if it is to continue as the industry's flagship health and safety program.

Another of the many values of CAER is that it gives us the opportunity to deal from strength in conducting our future communications activities at the plant level. With this in mind, the committee and CMA staff are building on CAER's success in tackling the industry's two upcoming communications hurdles -- air toxics and the implementation of the Title III provisions of Superfund.

In the air toxics area, a survey of the committee found that most of the companies intend to treat their air toxics communications as an extension of the CAER program.

However, we should realize that the air toxics issue presents some communications barriers that are quite different from our CAER effort.

For one thing, chemical plants in a community usually produce widely differing product slates. So while one plant can boast to the local media about its relatively clean products and lack of toxic air emissions, a neighboring plant manager may have a devil of a time explaining why he can't comment about chronic air emissions of his highly-toxic products. Remember too that most of these same plants worked closely together in introducing the CAER program to the community. The unified local approach that worked so well with the CAER program also could suffer when different plants are at different stages of implementing their air toxics programs.

Another concern is that many plant managers understandably are reluctant to be as aggressive in promoting the air toxics issue as they were with CAER. The reason is clear: Admitting to chronic air emissions of toxic chemicals is not a pleasant duty. And in some cases managers are not in a position to comment about the long-term effects of exposure to these emissions.

In overcoming these concerns, the communications committee, CMA staff, and your local managers will carry out a comprehensive and effective communications program. We've already held our first air toxics communications workshop -- earlier this month in Houston. It was well attended, including many plant managers, and many important questions were raised. We do plan to be a bit cautious in our approach to this communications program, and I hope you agree with our thinking.

We also plan to build on the CAER communications success in helping local plant people cope with the Title III provision of Superfund. These provisions will require your plants to make more information available about your products and processes than ever before. It will all be available at once and it will be available to anyone who wants it. Already some environmental groups have shown what they can do to embarrass us with our own information taken out of context. The committee has formed a separate task group that will help us formulate our communications policy in this area.

Our final major objective in 1987 is to continue to assist the state chemical councils in improving their communications capabilities. We've already have made important progress in Illinois, Louisiana, and New Jersey and we'll be working with more states in the future.

This state-level activity becomes more important when you realize that Proposition-65-type legislation will expand from California to many other states. The CICs so far have been receptive to our help and we plan to continue this partnership.

So our 1987 agenda will consist of four major objectives: following up on CAER communications, extending our communications activities to cover the air toxics and Title III issues, and working with the CICs. These objectives are in addition, of course, to our ongoing work with other committees within CMA to provide communications counsel and hands-on help as required.

The committee feels that these goals are achievable with current manpower and with current resources.

I would like to close with a comment that doesn't fall readily into our normal communications topics.

The committee feels that we should be wary of the recent attacks on the so-called "corpocracy" of major U.S. companies. While it's too early to call this a major trend, there are a lot of people out there, including some in the current administration, who may well be taking shots at U.S. businessmen.

Executives could be blamed for everything from working too hard on their golf game to operating bloated and inefficient organizations to sacrificing the blue-collar worker's future for the sake of their friends in the executive suite.

Along these lines, GM may be the first company to enter this quagmire. That company's so-so performance, the Perot buyout, the wave of Midwest plant closings, and a weak product slate have combined to focus public and media attention on the personal capabilities of those managing the giant auto company.

While GM may be the first, we shouldn't be fooled into thinking the public's attention will stop there. This is a trend we'll all have to watch very closely.

In conclusion, 1986 saw the chemical industry's reputation with the public improve for the first time in several years. This uptick did not come about by accident. It occurred because we operated safely, moved aggressively to meet the public's legitimate concerns about our operations, and took the time to tell people what we were doing.

Through CAER and other programs we showed a lot of confidence in the American public last year. Maybe they're beginning to return that confidence. I hope so.

We look forward to earning your continued support throughout 1987. I will be pleased to try to answer any questions you might have about the communications committee and our 1987 plans.

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