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[Craig McGuire](#)

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When Caithness Long Island planned a 350-megawatt, gas-fired power plant for Brookhaven, NY, the power producer started a multi-year campaign to gain public support.

With the project underway, Caithness experienced an array of opposition from groups that filed suits against the plant, as well as an onslaught of government-related issues. Harrison Leifer DiMarco Public Relations was hired to revamp the effort to show how the plant would benefit the environment and the community.

Strategy

Compliance issues and site permits plagued Caithness throughout 2007. The team wanted to resend the message to the community that this would be New York's cleanest and most energy-efficient power-generating plant.

Harrison knew the way to gain community support would be by getting public figures to endorse the project.

Donald Miller, VP of PR for Harrison, says the agency leveraged various tactics as milestones approached, such as ongoing site tours for elected officials, local media, and other interested parties to provide regular updates.

Tactics

The team arranged meetings with reporters to provide frequent updates, while endorsements were secured from local and national environment groups, as well as elected officials.

"Third-party endorsements proved highly effective and were used in press material," Miller says.

The team also leveraged favorable testimony from supporters and independent environmental experts in presentations for civic meetings, environmental review hearings, zoning and special use permit hearings, and Web site content.

A field trip was also arranged for local leaders to see a similar operation located in Tiverton, RI.

Results

"The endorsements we received from respected leaders across a spectrum was key in gaining the approvals necessary to move forward with this project," says Ross Ain, SVP of Caithness.

As a result of PR efforts, the team was able to rally support and publicize decisions made by the Suffolk County Supreme Court and New York State Supreme Court to dismiss suits that would have stalled construction into January 2008.

"By educating... stakeholders, the campaign was effective in keeping major opposition to a minimum, and many of those against the project became ardent proponents," Miller says.

Future

"While the project is under construction, we continue our strategic outreach by conducting site tours for elected officials, business leaders, media, and other interested parties," Miller says.

PRWeek's View

This campaign was about more than generating media buzz. Last year and into early 2008, as the debate raged on Long Island, permits needed to be pushed through and legal battles publicized.

A stunt would not achieve success, but persistent PR efforts could - and did.

It meant educating an entire community, constantly working the media, addressing the pointed barbs of the watchdogs, assuaging regulators, and generating true support among the civic and elected leaders sensitive to constituents' concerns.

Now that's the power of PR.

PR team: Caithness Long Island (New York) and Harrison Leifer DiMarco Public Relations (Rockville Centre, NY)

Campaign: Powering up Community Support

Duration: June 2004-ongoing

Budget: \$66,000 annually