

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#413 - Activist Malpractice

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I used to assume that all activist campaigns were designed to win. Or, at least if the activist leaders claimed that a victory was truly a possibility, I believed them. This, as it turns out, is a wrong assumption. While studying recent campaigns on bovine growth hormone and pesticides, I've learned that many groups approach campaigns more as one would approach a hobby or game than with the honesty and intensity one would expect. To develop and initiate a grass-roots campaign with the expectation to lose is a gross abuse of the public's trust, time and energy. In fact, it is nothing short of what Food & Water identifies as ACTIVIST MALPRACTICE.

The public has certain expectations from grass-roots activists, and honesty is certainly at the top of the list. Not just accuracy regarding facts and figures, but also an honesty about campaigns and expectations. For example, if the public is told to call an elected official, there is a certain expectation that the group requesting such a call has adequately identified a strategic target and has a sufficient plan to secure a victory. Likewise, if a group initiating an action knows that the desired outcome is impossible, this fact must be honestly communicated to the public.

But now stop and ask yourself how many times you've received an update from a group that asked you to make a phone call or write a letter that subsequently announced a victory based on your efforts. I mean a real victory. For example, if you asked for something to be banned or stopped, it was really banned or stopped, not just labeled or delayed. It probably hasn't happened much, if it's happened at all.

It's not that the activists or the groups they represent are deliberately misleading the public. I believe it's more about activists being negligent in picking strategic targets and, perhaps, a disconnection from the real world problems that folks in the grass-roots trenches experience. Activist leaders, particularly those with a legislative focus, tend to treat the struggles more as some kind of game than an essential struggle for the health and well-being of the public and the environment. Why else would groups so readily trade real reform for hollow, watered-down compromises that do little except bolster reputations and give the false impression of victory?

Sadly, I also believe that many in the food safety and environmental movement approach campaigns with the expectation of losing. With so many struggles taking place in the legislative arena where we all know that polluting corporate interests are clearly in control, how can we expect to win? But instead of admitting that this arena is so skewed against us, many keep going back, almost like they're conditioned to lose, instead of identifying other arenas that give the advantage to grassroots activism. If a Democratic President cannot get his own health care legislation through a Democratic-controlled Congress, how can environmentalists expect to have that same Congress ban carcinogenic pesticides, label BGH-treated milk, and extend a helping hand to small, sustainable farms? Pinch yourselves, it's not going to happen. And we better start creating the alternative paths that will allow us to secure the victories the public is expecting.

Defining Activist Malpractice

Activist malpractice is currently best exhibited by the legislative campaigns to stop BGH and ban dangerous pesticides. Both have chosen to focus in the legislative arena and, not surprisingly, both are losing miserably. What makes these campaigns prime candidates for a malpractice charge, however, is that leaders of both campaigns have acknowledged that their efforts have a 0% chance of securing a victory. Yes, 0%.

Take the anti-BGH campaign. Most of the coordinated activities have been directed at federal legislation and the Food & Drug Administration. First, the large coalition of farm, environmental, food safety and animal welfare groups began by pushing for legislation to ban the introduction of BGH. Despite months of energy and who knows how much money, the effort failed and--surprise, surprise--a compromise was reached that, instead of

banning BGH, Congress passed a 90 day moratorium on its sale. Thus, campaign leaders stimulated grass-roots action and expectations for a ban on BGH but could only deliver a 90 day moratorium. Is there any better evidence to prove that we should avoid working on federal legislation? And to think some groups thought this was a victory.

Now the focus of the anti-BGH campaign is again on legislation. This time it centers on legislation to label all dairy products produced through the use of BGH. Again, there is a large coalition of groups working to stimulate calls to Congress and grass-roots activity around the bill.

The problem? When I called the leaders of the effort to pass legislation to label BGH-treated dairy products and asked them to guess on the probability that the legislation would pass, they all said "zero." When I then asked why they were putting so much effort into it, one responded by saying it was "good practice." Practice? For what, losing?

If the chances for passing the BGH labeling bill are zero, why aren't people told this from the beginning? To the contrary, all the literature requesting "urgent" calls to Congress regarding this bill gives false hopes about its passage. To me, this represents a certain contempt for grass-roots activism and the public. If we are striving for an honest culture and real reform in our country, shouldn't we begin by being honest with our constituents and supporters? If Food & Water sends out an action alert, you can bet that we've done our homework and there is a very, very good chance of a victory--if there's not, we'll tell you.

Ironically, the same thing is happening in the legislatively-oriented pesticide campaign. A huge coalition of groups are calling on grass-roots leaders to stimulate calls supporting the "Waxman bill." Besides the serious drawbacks of the bill itself--it calls for a flimsy five to eight year PHASEOUT of carcinogenic pesticides--the chances of Congress actually passing it are zero (see box below). Again, I called several leaders of this legislative effort and, without hesitation, everyone said that there is "no way" that the Waxman Bill will pass anytime soon. In fact, despite having some of the largest and most well-financed organizations supporting this effort, there are only about 30 co-sponsors of the bill in the Housepout of 435.

These actions represent activist malpractice. These campaigns and initiatives mislead the public and, perhaps worse, give false expectations. The result will be an increasingly cynical public that becomes even more reluctant to get involved in the essential work for social and environmental justice. In other words, we all lose from activist malpractice, even if we're not directly involved in these campaigns.

We don't need focus groups and polls to tell us that the public is deeply concerned about the real problems that confront us. But instead of the same old legislative strategies and the same old defeats, activist leaders need to find the creative energy to go farther, inspire the public, secure a victory in a manner that is possible and, by all means, BE HONEST.

Food & Water does not relish the task of criticizing our peers, but we refuse to be accomplices in efforts that we believe are misleading and ineffective. Besides, someone has to speak up and offer constructive criticism. The public doesn't need any more "practice" calling Congress, leading activist groups need more creative and effective strategies to secure the victories the public so rightfully expects.

by Michael Colby[1]

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THE PHASEOUT: WASHINGTON'S DIRTY LITTLE SECRET

If you knew that your health was seriously threatened by a dangerous substance, the rational response would be to immediately remove the substance from your environment. However, if you were like many people involved in Washington, D.C. politics, you'd attempt to phase out the substance over the course of many years, continuing to endanger yourself in the meantime. Say hello to Washington's most dangerous legislative gimmick: the "phaseout."

Riding on the wave of mounting public pressure for action on dangerous pesticides, a coalition of mainstream Washington environmental groups are [in the fall of 1993] proposing a seven-year phaseout of carcinogenic [cancer-causing] pesticides. This irresponsible action completely ignores the failed legislative history of the phaseout... and accepts the callous notion, put forth often by chemical company executives, that human lives may be sacrificed in order to satisfy industrial greed.

The fact that carcinogenic pesticides kill people is not being debated: almost everyone from the chemical manufacturers to grass-roots activists agrees on this point. Instead, the debate centers on how our society should respond once aware that an industrial product is killing people. The choice is between regulation and prevention....

[The environmentalists'] proposal for a seven-year phaseout of chemicals that are killing people right now is akin to asking fire-fighters to wait a week before putting out a fire in a building full of people--in short, it's outrageous.

This is Washington environmental politics at its worst. A close look at the history of the phaseout reveals that the likelihood of a phaseout occurring on schedule, or at all for that matter, is extremely small. Thus, these environmental groups have decided on a compromise that could result in thousands of preventable deaths of American citizens during a phaseout period that, more likely than not, will turn out to be a cruel hoax.

Unfortunately, they seem to have fallen prey to the cynical practice of concocting and supporting "hollow laws." According to William Greider's best-selling book, WHO WILL TELL THE PEOPLE: THE BETRAYAL OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY, hollow laws involve "promises the government makes to the people which it does not necessarily intend to keep." Historically the phaseout has been central to this legislative charade....

As Arturo Rodriguez, the head of the United Farm Workers Union, says, "Phaseout is not an acceptable solution because of the fact that our people are dying right now. How can we sit back and say that it's fine for people to continue dying? How can we be so crass as to even think that?"

--Excerpted from: Michael Colby, "The Phaseout: Washington's Dirty Little Secret," SAFE FOOD NEWS (Fall 1993).

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