

COURTAULDS FIBERS

In 1992, The Mobile Press Register published an article that linked a chemical Courtaulds Fibers uses in its manufacturing process with birth defects. The company, which has operated a facility located just outside Mobile since 1952, releases approximately 45 million pounds of carbon disulfide into the atmosphere annually.

Even though Courtaulds emissions met all governmental standards and posed no health threat in the amounts released, the company suddenly had a severe image problem.

This was compounded when 33 employees returned from Atlanta's Emory University with medical examinations reporting that exposure to the chemical had harmed their health. The group immediately filed a class-action lawsuit claiming workment's compensation damages from Courtaulds. A \$50 million amendment to the suit was later filed charging several executives at the company had falsified reports and lied to workers about the dangers of working with the chemical.

In addition, a neighbor filed another suit claiming the chemical had killed several horses on his ranch.

Strategy

When our services were retained, the agency immediately conducted two surveys. One identified the direct and indirect economic impact Courtaulds had on the area and another to measure public opinion. In addition, we targeted the following objectives:

- Dilute the panic generated by the news media.
- Streamline the company's ability to communicate with its employees.
- Establish a two-way communication system with local, state and regional business, political and opinion leaders.
- Create a pro-active communication network with the local media.
- Promote the benefits of Courtaulds' presence in the community.
- And, construct a system which would allow the company to respond quickly and accurately to any future crises.

Program

Our research showed that the company employed 750 workers and represented a \$200 million direct and indirect annual economic impact on the local community.

The opinion survey revealed that only 13 percent of the population had a positive image of the company and more than 31 percent had a negative impression. When asked who was the largest polluter in the region, nearly 20 percent named Courtaulds.

Armed with this research, the agency established an aggressive program to enhance the company's image throughout the community. Some activities included:

- Developing and promoting a speakers bureau to meet face to face with business and civic groups.
- Conduct private meetings between company executives and opinion leaders.
- Establish quarterly meetings between the company and editors of the *Mobile Press Register*.

- Institute a proactive policy that contacts the media on any issue, good or bad.
- Develop and distribute a brochure designed to address specific environmental concerns.
- Streamline the existing employee newsletter to one that can be produced quickly in order to combat negative rumors.
- Involve company executives in community and charitable causes.
- Spearhead an effort to form a community action panel to communicate on a regular basis with community leaders.
- Publicize the company's economic impact and its investment to significantly reduce air emissions.
- Promote the company's new "environmentally friendly" Tencel fiber facility.
- Enhance the company's image through broadcast and print advertising.

Results

Two years after the comprehensive program had been in effect, another opinion survey showed that Courtaulds' positive image had leaped from 13 percent to 55 percent, while its negative impression had decreased from 31 percent to 15 percent. In addition, being named the area's top polluter had fallen from nearly 20 percent to less than 20 percent.