

Maintaining an Image While Building Trust

Scott Lorenz Andresen has been involved with communications for 20 years. After working many jobs as a news editor and production manager, Andresen currently works as the Communications and Community Relations Manager at Duke Energy's Catawba nuclear station. Andresen works to develop and implement communication plans and messages both internally and externally. Andresen serves as the media spokesperson in cases of crisis, such as when radioactive water is released from the plant; he must prepare answers for the reporters. He stresses many in the public relations field do not understand when to stop talking to the media, but his experience as a journalist himself has given him the edge in anticipating what questions reporters will ask. Andresen works to maintain Duke Energy's image of safety, responsibility and trust and loves the unexpected challenges he faces every day.

1. When did you first become professionally involved in communications?

I say I've been in it for 20 years because I was a journalist in college and after college. To me that's communications. If you want to be technical, I came into the corporate world in 2004. So 10 years.

2. I saw on your LinkedIn profile you have done a lot of work as a writer and editor. How did that translate into media relations and developing communication plans?

I think it helped tremendously because when I moved into the media relations role, I knew what the journalists were looking for and what they would ask because I was one for so many years. At one of my previous companies, if an issue came up, I would write up all the questions I think would be asked. That way, we could prepare for those questions. It gave me insight into what the reporters were going after.

3. What particular skills have contributed to your successes in communications?

I think my number one skill is interpersonal relationships. I've always had a lot of friends growing up and I can relate to people easily. I try to find that common bond. You can quickly understand other people—be it college, military, or the state you grew up in. I try to find that common bond there, which has helped my career. You can still have a collegial relationship with a reporter even though you're both doing a job.

4. What are some daily challenges you face as a Communications and Community Relations Manager?

Everyday it's something new. You go into work with an idea of what you're going to do that day, and inevitably it's something different than you thought it was going to be. We had a release of tritiated [radioactive] water one day and my whole day was shot. I had to come up with messages because I knew we would get questions from reporters that day. At any time something could come up and you just have to be ready and be flexible. Every day is a challenge, but it's a good challenge, because I feel I'm always learning.

5. What significant issues have you had to manage since working at Duke Energy, or even before you started working at Duke?

We had two water releases last year. I managed both of those. Generally there are not a lot of issues at Catawba; it's a well-run plant. At my previous job there were a bunch of crises I would deal with on the issues and crises team. We had an employee shooting. We had an employee shoot three managers and himself. That was an issue I dealt with. That was the worst crisis anyone could deal with because that's a loss of life and it's very tragic. Another most impactful crisis professionally was when I worked at San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station in California. We had a radioactive leak in a steam generator and had to shut the plant down. I was dealing with L.A. media and international media. I was also dealing with the community. Californians like renewable energy and were very anti. It was very draining dealing with it for a year but [they were] great experiences, which I believe helped me get this job. Side note: that plant [San Onofre] is being shut down permanently.

6. What is the first part of the planning process when you become aware of a new issue that needs to be addressed?

The first part is you need to know who to contact and research the issue. You need to know more about the issue than the reporters and media. The media will figure things out rather quickly. When Onofre happened, I had to contact anybody I knew down there to find out what's going on and who can I talk to about this issue and just dive into it. The same time I was doing that I was writing down what the first questions were I would be asked by reporters. As the issue progresses, the media is going to delve down into the topic more, so I need to become an expert at it. Research, what questions will I be asked, and anticipation of what the media will go after next.

7. Are there ways to anticipate certain issues before they arise?

There is, especially at a nuclear facility. You can anticipate a Fukushima scenario. They're constantly drilling on scenarios and I'm constantly media training on different issues: how would we react, what would we say, and we practice as a reporter and a media rep. The goal is to have some plan in place that kind of gives you a high level view of what you would do. That's part of crisis planning—what's the worst that could happen, how do we prepare for it and what would we say?

8. When you are developing messages for different stakeholders, such as the media or employees within Duke, does the message you send to each differ?

It does differ. The message you give employees are similar to the media, but they're going to be talking to their neighbors, so the messages you give them are going to be, not touchy-feely—neighbors have relationships so everyone knows where everyone works. When something happens at Duke, you want employees to know what's going on and [send] assurance messages to know everything is okay. The coal ash is a big example. We gave our employees a PDF of "When Your Neighbor Asks." Those talking points are put in a more neighborly context than what we give the media. With the media, you have to get down into the meat of the subject where you wouldn't with our neighbors. Neighbors' interests just want to know everything's okay and if it's going to hurt them. The media are looking at it from a different perspective. You want the message to be parallel, but the media is going to ask more poignant questions than neighbors. We do give our employees messages so they can assure their neighbors everything is good.

9. Is there a specific image of Duke Energy that you help maintain through communication with its publics?

The image is that safety is always our number one priority. That is always the message we want to tell the public and our neighbors. We take safety seriously in everything. It doesn't matter what the topic is, the image of safety is our number one priority. We want to be seen as a responsible corporation. In the coal ash stories, we've taken responsibility and our CEO stated we will make this right. Safety, responsibility and trust. We don't want to lose the public's trust.

10. What precautions must you take when communicating with the media?

A lot of people like to talk. I like to talk—that's why I'm in the business. With the media, you don't want to keep talking. You want to answer their questions and not be evasive. A lot of people get in trouble by just keeping talking. They don't like that pregnant pause, and if they [the media] keep looking at you, you're going to keep talking. The biggest key is you own the topic. If a reporter asks a question about it, I don't owe the media anything. I'll tell the message that I think the public needs to know, but I don't necessarily have to answer the question they're asking, because I own the message. Just because they ask a question, you don't have to answer it. You want to please them and make sure they're given information, but you aren't obligated to answer it.

11. What is the most rewarding part of being a Communications and Community Relations Manager?

Two weeks ago we had a homeschooling event I put together at Catawba. We brought about one hundred home-school parents and kids onsite. To see the parents and kids reactions from learning was very rewarding. I got a lot of emails from parents thanking me for being interested in homeschooling. The paycheck is nice, but at the end of the day you have to be passionate about what you're doing. I'm meeting new people all the time and I'm learning every day. The minute you stop learning, that's not good is the way I look at it. I'm helping people, and I think all of those together are very rewarding. It's an interesting job with something new every day. The challenge is the reward.

12. Is there anything else you would like to say about your field of work?

No matter what field you're in, the PR or communications, if it [the work] is not challenging, you're going to get bored. I always want to be challenged. The day I go into work and I know everything, it's time for me to go. That has yet to happen for me. I've been in the utility business for 10 years and that has not happened yet. That's why I enjoy this field. It's a challenge every day. I'm constantly learning, and to me that's fun.

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