

A quality job: the US community relations profession

• UK Community affairs managers can take heart from the news that community relations is developing into a thriving profession in America, according Melody McLaren who reports from a recent conference of The Center for Corporate Community Relations at Boston College.

The Center hosted its 1995 Leaders Conference in New Orleans 8 - 10 May which attracted approximately 150 community relations professionals, drawn largely from US companies, for three days of presentations, workshops and networking. Key themes included business trends, public policy issues and social and demographic trends affecting community relations; research on the bottomline value of community relations; community programme development and evaluation; and strategies for selling community relations internally to senior management.

Profile of the CCI profession

Center Director, Ed Burke, launched the 1995 *Profile of the Community Relations Profession*, the latest instalment in a longitudinal study of the community relations field which The Center has been conducting since 1987. The 1995 Profile features data from 642 community relations professionals covering five major areas, as follows.

Career path variables, including educational background, use of time, length of time with the company and

in community relations - key findings include:

- in spite of corporate downsizing, there has been only a slight decline in the number of fulltime community relations professionals since 1993;
- more community relations professionals (22.3%) are now working in community relations or community affairs departments, suggesting a growing presence in the corporate environment;
- the largest proportion of time (30%) is spent on managing corporate contributions, with the rest spent on programme administration, PR, government relations, corporate communications and volunteering programmes.

Trends in community relations programmes, including job responsibilities, requests for assistance, staffing and budgets - key findings include:

- a slight increase in budgets is anticipated, with priority given to increased staffing rather than funding new programmes;
- while there has been a slight increase in the proportion of women in the profession to 63.4%, the "feminization" of the field appears to have levelled off.

Job satisfaction among community relations professionals, with overall job satisfaction (measured on a 7 point Likert scale) increased from 4.8 (1993) to 5.3 (1995), with improvements noted in pay satisfaction, job feedback, ability to finish a job and job variety.

Salaries, with demographic breakdowns by gender, ethnic group, education, title and geographical region:

- salaries increased from 1993 to a mean average of US\$63,490 (approximately £40,698) in 1995, with African Americans receiving the highest average, \$68,321 (£43,795);
- women received 73% of the base pay of men but positive correlations between age salaries and length of service with the company and in community relations all favour men and therefore account to some extent for the disparity in salaries.

Evaluation of training programmes and professional development. At present there appears to be no traditional academic programme which provides corporations with professionals trained in community relations, although some MBA programmes are beginning to focus on social issues in management and corporate social responsibility. As a result, most community relations professionals rely upon seminars and workshops to acquire expertise and

skills. Two thirds of the respondents said they had attended an educational institute or seminar within the last 12 months, with The Center's courses ranked most helpful among the programmes offered by various organisations.

Over the past ten years, The Center has developed a range of courses to help community relations professionals develop skills in strategic and operational planning; research, measurement, evaluation and benchmarking; building strategic alliances with advocacy groups and communicating with key stakeholders, in addition to its flagship Institute on Corporate Community Relations.

To date the courses have attracted over 1,500 participants from the US, Puerto Rico, Canada, Latin America, South Africa and Japan. Certificates in Community Relations (awarded to those completing 10 credits) have been awarded to 126 alumni. Nine Certificate courses were run over the past year, all of which were oversubscribed. In addition, there is a growing demand for customised corporate training programmes.

In the UK, Business in the Community and Ashridge Management College jointly offer *Managing Corporate Community Involvement*, an annual course which is an approximate equivalent of The Center's Institute. In light of the growing popularity of training programmes for US

community relations professionals, BITC and Ashridge are now conducting a consultation with its UK alumni to ascertain the demand for additional training and development programmes.

Sharing best practice

Conference panel discussions enabled companies to share best practice on a number of operational issues: "glocalization" (thinking globally acting locally); internal and external PR strategies; operating community relations programmes on shoestring budgets; building external alliances with stakeholders; and business planning.

Another round of company-led workshops focused on social issues of interest such as violence prevention, community and economic development, technology and education, diversity, ageing and the environment.

Research

The UK was represented by Brian Palmer, BP's Head of Community Relations, who delivered a keynote luncheon address on measuring corporate reputation; and Melody McLaren, presenting on behalf of Business in the Community and its CCI Research Forum, provided an overview of UK research and previewed the forthcoming PRIMA Europe report on human resource benefits of community involvement.

Caleb Schutz, Chair of The Center's Research Committee, who is currently leading the *Measuring Corporate Citizenship* project examining the bottom-line benefits of community relations, discussed the methodological challenges of US research.

Additional topics for discussion (aside from the tornadoes and floods which were battering New Orleans that week) included the impact of downsizing on community relations programmes, particularly on volunteering and diversity programmes, the progressive decentralization of community activities from head offices to operational sites; the rise of "virtual communities" and the role of Community relations in the Information Age.

Standards of Excellence

This past year The Center published its *Standards of Excellence in Community Relations* to provide guidelines and benchmarking activities for developing community involvement programmes. The Standards were developed by a committee of community relations professionals following several years of research and collaboration by Center members and staff.

A Self Assessment and Planning Tool has also been developed to help companies implement the Standards, which are now being introduced to

companies via regional forum meetings. Associate Center Director, Nancy Goldberg, utilised this framework in a "how to" session on demonstrating the value of the community relations function, integrating community relations into corporate culture and increasing management support and commitment.

Establishing quality standards in community involvement is a longstanding issue which Business in the Community is now addressing through its *Investors In the Community* working group. With the initial support of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation grant, BITC has brought together a small group of specialists from companies, consultancies and TECs to determine how best to define, measure and promote quality in corporate community involvement.

Clearly The Center for Corporate Community Relations has taken a lead in addressing the growing US need for professional development through information exchange, networking, training and research. The challenge for their UK counterparts will be to meet similar requirements as they emerge on this side of the Atlantic.

For more information on The Center and its programmes, contact Ed Burke (Director) or Nancy Goldberg (Associate Director), The Center for Corporate Community Relations at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 021673835, tel 00 1 617 552 4545, fax 00 1 617 552 8499. Melody McLaren is Head of Information at Business in the Community