A Guide to Stakeholder Relations

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“I get by with a little help from my friends,” sang the Beatles on their seminal 1967 record, Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. That was 45 years ago, but the sentiment is just as relevant today — perhaps most of all in the business world, where threats can emerge and grow faster than ever before. Enter the practice of stakeholder relations.

At Envirornics, we define stakeholder relations as the practice of forging mutually beneficial connections with third-party groups and individuals that have a “stake” in common interest. In this white paper, we will cover what this involves, why it’s so important, and how Envirornics helps our clients do it well.

The Five Ws of Stakeholder Relations

What is it?
Stakeholder relations builds third-party networks that can develop credible, united voices about issues, products, and/or services that are important to your organization. On its own, a single voice can fall flat for many reasons, from a lack of credibility to a lack of volume. The result can be a failure to elevate the profile of an issue, sway opinion, or drive action. On the other hand, a chorus of voices can harmoniously crescendo, reaching desired audiences with the right message at the right time.

Who should do it?
The short answer: everyone! Whether your company operates in the financial sector or in health care, or you are a not-for-profit association, there are key groups with whom your organization could align to help influence your position on a given issue or need. Examples of potential stakeholders include:

- Business Associations
- Industry Associations
- Regulatory Groups
- Governments
- Academia
- Universities
- Environmental Groups
- Consumer Groups
- Advocacy Groups
- Medical / Health Associations
- Hospitals
- Community Groups
Where should it be done?
Depending on the scope of your organization, stakeholder relationships can be developed at all levels: nationally, regionally, and locally. Whether it's to advocate for public policy on a big issue or manage reputational risk, it is always beneficial to have allies in your corner.

When to get started?
Chances are you wouldn’t ask someone you just met to be a job reference, or help you out on moving day. Similarly, developing close relationships with key stakeholders doesn’t happen overnight. In fact, there are a number of steps required before an introductory meeting can even occur (see Steps 1-4 below). You should expect that it will take time to educate a stakeholder on your position, establish common ground and build trust and rapport. This often involves being the first to add value. “Dig your well before you’re thirsty” goes the old saying. Start digging.

Why do it?
There are many instances where partnering with third-party organizations can be advantageous. For example, an allied stakeholder can:
- Help educate decision-makers and their influencers.
- Add credibility to your lobby effort.
- Demonstrate widespread support for your position.
- Neutralize the position of your competitors or opponents.
- Generate third-party opinion/ambassadorship.
- Attract other, likeminded organizations.
- Leverage/coordinate resources (e.g., joint planning, implementation, correspondence, news releases, etc.).
- Fuel momentum.

The Four Steps to Stakeholder Relations

1. Identify Stakeholders
The first stage in stakeholder relations involves researching individuals and third-party organizations that may be relevant. For example, there may be groups that are directly affected by an initiative (positively or negatively), have influence or power over its success, and have an interest in its successful or unsuccessful conclusion. In addition to searching traditional media and industry reports, conducting an audit of the online conversations occurring in the digital space is an effective way to uncover individuals or organizations that may fly under the radar but are nevertheless influential. It’s important to cast the net broadly in this stage.
2. **Study Stakeholders**

Once potential stakeholders have been identified, do your homework. Start with online research to identify an organization’s mission, their points of intersection with your objectives, the condition of their own reputation, their level of activity and public profile, their key points of contact, etc. In addition to online intelligence, it’s also valuable to network with others through phone and in-person meetings to gain insight that may not live online.

3. **Prioritize Stakeholders**

Having achieved a better understanding of the stakeholder ecosystem, the next step is to prioritize the players. There are a number of criteria for ranking or categorizing stakeholders, and some of the common groupings we use at Environics are:

- **Relevance** – Do they share your interests and goals?
- **Visibility** – Are they active publicly, and in the right circles?
- **Credibility** – Do they have a strong reputation and legitimacy?
- **Influence** – Do they have the ear of your audience, and your audience’s influencers and decision-makers?
- **Reach** – Are they active in the jurisdictions that matter to you – i.e., nationally, regionally, locally?

4. **Contact Stakeholders**

Once your stakeholders have been identified, researched and prioritized, the final step is to make contact to explore their interest in a potential collaboration. This step begins by using the intelligence you have gathered to identify points of intersection that you can use to build opportunities that will demonstrate a win/win proposition for both organizations. From there, identify the best person within the organization to target, and the most appropriate person from your organization to make the call. Note: it’s sometimes advantageous to make connections with more than one individual in an organization.

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**Case Study**

**Challenge**
An expert organization in orthopaedic care wanted to highlight the need for improved patient access to orthopaedic surgery in Canada, and the need for reduced wait times for hip and knee replacements.

**Solution**
To raise the profile of this issue and motivate the right action, Environics helped build relationships for the client with two key stakeholders: the Canadian Orthopaedic Association (COA) and The Arthritis Society (TAS), by designing a national awareness campaign under the banner, *Canada In Motion* – with COA and TAS as the lead voices.
The campaign grabbed attention and drove action, first by defining the problem, and second by introducing the solution.

Here’s how the problem was defined:
- Commissioning the first-ever health economics study on the issue, which revealed hip and knee replacement wait times were costing the nation $17.1 billion a year.
- Fielding a poll of Canadians to identify how they felt about long orthopaedic wait times.
- Conducting interviews with 12 opinion-leading orthopaedic surgeons to better understand the challenges around this issue.

Here’s how the solution was introduced:
- A *Canada In Motion* white paper authored by the COA and TAS provided concrete recommendations for government and the medical community on how to move forward.
- Seven news conferences held across the country unveiled the research findings and introduced the solutions from COS and TAS.
  - A mountain of wheelchairs at each news conference represented the number of people waiting for hip and knee replacement surgery in that province, creating a “must get” visual for media.
- Government meetings were organized for the COA and TAS at provincial and federal levels.

**Results**
- More than 80 million on-message media impressions, including a front-page article in Canada’s national newspaper, The Globe and Mail, on the day the COA and TAS met with the Federal Deputy Health Minister.
- Government meetings across the country.
- Campaign messaging appearing in the words and text of politicians (including the Ontario Government’s Throne Speech).
- Orthopaedic care became one of the government’s five wait time priorities.

**Conclusion**

Cultivating a roster of supportive, like-minded, credible organizations is both a hedge against risk and an opportunity to disseminate support from multiple sources. In today’s fast-paced, hyper-connected communications environment, these allies are more important than ever. Online and offline research and listening activities can identify both high-profile and backroom influencers, as well as potential allies and opponents. By establishing common ground and creating win-win opportunities, organizations can develop valuable support and accelerate the advancement of their goals. Starting the process early, before there is an urgent need for stakeholder support, is key.

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