

Japan is the Focal Point of a Public Relations Crisis for the Nuclear Industry

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Introduction

The combination Japanese tsunami and nuclear meltdown that occurred in early 2011 was a crisis in its own right, but this event also gave rise to a sister crisis that developed in real time alongside events on that island nation. The meltdown in Japan reinvigorated anti-nuclear activists in the United States, who made use of the event to call into question the safety of nuclear power generation on American soil. This document is a brief analysis of the aforementioned sister crisis. It outlines three relationships that crisis practitioners must understand to effectively protect the reputation of the nuclear industry in a post-Fukushima environment.

When it became apparent that one of the major outgrowths of the earthquake and tsunami that recently hit Japan would be a potentially uncontrolled radiation leak at the island nation's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power complex, it's likely those managing the reputations of nuclear plants here in the states saw the writing on the wall.

The situation at the Daiichi plant deteriorated rapidly post-quake (Reuters, 2011), a fact that did not bode well for operators of similar plants on American soil. This went double for facilities susceptible to damage from a shifting of terra firma similar to the one seen in Japan, even if these events are predicted to be more tame by comparison, if they occur at all.

The net effect of all this has been an increased focus on the vulnerability of existing nuclear plants to natural disasters. Americans are asking, "what if this happens in my backyard?" Responses to this question have been numerous, and are coming from a variety of interested parties.

On Wednesday, MSNBC (2011) released a report analyzing a U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission summary that calculates the odds of an earthquake causing catastrophic failure to American nuclear plants. Since the release of this report, politicians have been quick to offer their perceptions of the risks and benefits associated with the generation of nuclear power. For those who had taken issue with a specific facility in the past or were simply anti-nuclear on principle, the meltdown unfolding in Japan has offered them a convenient way to make their case.

The same day the MSNBC report was published, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered a safety review of the Indian Point Nuclear Center (CBS New York, 2011). This is a facility Cuomo has been interested in closing since his time as state attorney general.

Looking northeast into the green mountain state, lawmakers seem more determined than ever to resist the continued operation of their own source of nuclear power: Vermont Yankee. This is a facility for which Entergy Nuclear PR practitioners had just scored a significant victory in the form of a twenty-year license extension granted by the NRC in

the previous week (Ledbetter, 2011). This topic had been controversial enough in Vermont two weeks ago. The ongoing crisis situation seen at Japan's Daiichi nuclear station has added additional fuel to the debate.

Lawmakers in nearby states have also been eager to voice their opinions on the issue of nuclear power generation. Over the past week, the public has heard from elected officials in Massachusetts (Associated Press, 2011) and Connecticut (Shesgreen, 2011), all of whom have varied perspectives on what has happened in Japan, and how it relates to nuclear energy in America.

The problem created by the above events for public relations practitioners in the nuclear industry centers on the birth of a newly invigorated debate over the safety of nuclear power in the United States. Why is this a problem? Because such a debate implies there is some reason to assume the way nuclear energy is harnessed in America is unsafe. Beyond this, practitioners have no control over the flow of information that is setting the agenda in this debate. The event that sparked it is occurring at a Japanese facility thousands of miles away, and the information surrounding it is both incomplete by circumstance and controlled by a foreign government. For this reason, practitioners are being forced into positions that are often more reactive than they would like.

To effectively respond to this public relations dilemma, practitioners need to understand three relationships that determine how the majority of Americans relate to nuclear power generation, and energy policy as a whole. These relationships are:

Risk vs. Benefit: U.S. Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts said Monday that new plants shouldn't be built until they can be designed to guarantee that the nuclear core won't break apart even under the most extreme kinds of stress, like an earthquake. He said without that guarantee, no community would accept a nuclear plant nearby. This is telling. It reveals that, according to Mr. Kerry, the public is willing to accept the benefits associated with large-scale energy production, but unwilling to shoulder the risk associated with such an endeavor.

Logic vs. Emotion: The public demands 100% safety from nuclear facilities. Nuclear facilities are needed due to the vast amounts of energy the public requires to run manufacturing facilities, homes and consumer electronics, among other things. At the same time, 100% safety cannot be guaranteed by nuclear facilities as the human beings who maintain them are fallible. Additionally, the majority of Americans show little interest in the level of energy conservation necessary to negate the need for facilities like nuclear plants. Therefore, the above expectations are illogical and irrational. They are driven by emotion.

Knowledge vs. Ignorance: A Gallop poll taken immediately following the earthquake and nuclear troubles in Japan finds seven in ten Americans say they are now more concerned about a nuclear disaster occurring in the United States (Gallup, 2011). The poll also finds that support for the construction of nuclear power plants rises with education level. It's worth noting that about one in four Americans has a college degree, and even fewer are nuclear physicists. People fear what they don't understand. For this reason, they will view something as complex as nuclear power with some degree of skepticism.

To mount a successful response to the negative press affecting the U.S. nuclear industry that's been generated by recent events in Japan, practitioners must communicate with the public in ways that emphasize the benefits of nuclear power over the risks. They must appeal to the emotional needs of the public (100% safety) at the expense of arguments grounded solely in logic (high energy demand implies acceptance of risks associated with facilities capable of meeting said demand). Finally, practitioners must take into account the limited experience the public has with the mechanics of nuclear power generation, and communicate accordingly.

The nuclear industry needs to make up any ground lost due to the ongoing issues in Japan quickly. Nature abhors a vacuum. If this method of energy production continues to fall out of favor with the public to a significant degree as a result of all this, a different method will step in to take its place. The natural gas industry is already on the way to doing just that (Troeh, 2011).

Resources

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