

Sybron Chemicals Inc.: Risk Communication Response

The company embarked on a crash course in environmental self-improvement and community relations.

The company decided that its survival depended on changing from “keeping things at arm’s length” to being an actively involved, “caring neighbor,” according to the vice president of human relations. Since the release, the company has spent more than \$500,000 on community relations activities (not including staff time) and, in addition, nearly \$250,000 per year on environmental improvements, according to its own estimates.

Becoming a caring neighbor has included installing a sophisticated telecommunications system, the Prompt Inquiry and Notification System (PINS),¹ which can automatically dial Sybron neighbors in the event of an emergency. In the inquiry mode PINS works like a sophisticated answering machine and plays recorded messages about the plant’s status to those who call into the plant. Callers can also leave messages requesting further information. Thus, if people in the community smell fumes, they can call PINS instead of the police, the fire department, or regulatory agencies.

In addition, the company has conducted two surveys that solicited the community’s perception of the company; developed a Neighborhood Involvement Committee that meets monthly; instituted a quarterly newsletter for the community; and concluded a plant tour and open house. Sybron also has developed a variety of informal ties with reporters, local officials, and state representatives. The plant’s most innovative effort is a program to train volunteers from the surrounding community to identify specific odors from the plant so they can report them more accurately to the company.

Although the plant has never had an event considered sufficiently threatening to activate the PINS notification system, it has had accidental releases that have tested the usefulness of the inquiry system. For example, in the fall of 1990, under weather conditions similar to the night of the ethyl acrylate release, a plant worker violated SOPs [standard operating procedures], resulting in a styrene release. However, this time there were no evacuations, TV cameras, or calls for a shutdown. Plant managers credited the PINS system, which allowed the plant to provide information and respond to concerns quickly.

Discussion Questions

- How did Sybron Chemicals react when the community began to call for a shutdown of the company?
- What was good about the way that Sybron reacted? Why?
- What was bad about the way that Sybron reacted? Why?
- Make a list of some important factors that you think communicators should take into account when they devise risk communication plans.

¹PINS is the trademark name for the Prompt Inquiry and Notification System. All rights reserved by the Environmental Affairs Institute Inc. Source: Excerpted with permission from Chess, Caron; Alex Saville; Michal Tamuz; et al., “The Organizational Links Between Risk Communication and Risk Management: The Case of Sybron Chemicals Inc.” *Risk Analysis* 12, no. 3 (1992): 432–33. © 1992 by Society for Risk Analysis.