The digital age has transformed how the public participates in energy projects. Here’s how you can leverage social media to your advantage and proactively engage your host communities. **BY MARY USOVICZ**

**MAKE OR BREAK SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media has changed the role of public participation (PP) in the planning, permitting and licensing (PPL) process for every energy project in the United States, from the Keystone XL pipeline project to Cape Wind, by allowing opposition to organize faster and elevating the need for community engagement to a new, unprecedented level. Energy companies need to embrace the newfound significance of PP in the PPL process and actively work to coordinate the two parts in a seamless strategy—or run the risk of having projects falter before a shovel ever hits the ground.

To effectively join PP and PPL in the digital age, companies must create a robust plan that incorporates the project-approval strategy with a social media presence and proactive community engagement. Doing so before even announcing a project or applying for a permit can help gauge the temperature of a community both online and off, identify key players and anticipate where opposition will originate. This process will help you control the conversation, diminish opposition and save time and money in the approval process.

Here are some simple—but critical—steps that energy companies should consider taking when developing an integrated PP and PPL plan.

**UNDERSTAND THE HOST COMMUNITY**

First, research and identify the stakeholders and critical issues important to the host community. This must be coordinated with the project’s PPL process so the messaging and strategy are seamless. Embed yourself in the community and learn about it. Conduct a media audit of all relevant sources, both traditional and social. Learn how to talk to residents on their terms and ask questions such as:

- Who are the government officials who will be interested in this project?
- Who are the local leaders who act as the community’s moral compass?
- What are the social or economic issues facing the community?
- What community needs could the project help support?
- Has a similar project been attempted before in the community, and to what result?
- What are the traditional/social media outlets the community uses most, and what are they saying about local, regional and national energy projects?

**MONITORING MADE EASY**

These social media monitoring tools are among the best available, and they provide free versions:

- **Hootsuite** covers multiple social networks, including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, WordPress, Foursquare and Google+. It features weekly analytics reports and team management capabilities (delegating tasks, sending private messages), which can be very useful when there’s more than one person handling social media accounts.

- **Social Mention** monitors over 100 social media sites. It is probably one of the best free listening tools on the market, as it analyzes data in more depth and measures influence in four categories: Strength, Sentiment, Passion and Reach.

- **Addictomatic** focuses on a variety of platforms such as Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, WordPress, Bing News, Delicious, Google, Ask.com and more to get an overall view of a brand. It’s useful for keeping an eye on recent industry developments and brand reputation.

- **TweetReach** is used to monitor how far your tweets travel; it measures the actual impact and implications of social media discussions. —M.U.

**CREATE A PLAN**

Building on your community research, formulate a messaging platform that is reflected across all project communications, and include the following:

**Website/Social Media Presence.**

Create a website as well as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter accounts dedicated specifically to the project. Update these sites regularly to share project information. Meanwhile, monitor social media continuously for chatter about the project to anticipate opposition, questions and concerns. Answer any and all questions—be responsive, provide information and remain calm.
Public Engagement Plan. Offer an open house to meet with residents about the project. Meet with all elected officials and community leaders, and listen to their needs. Respond to them in your project communications with a single, consistent message.

Community Benefits Package. Many communities are struggling with budgetary restrictions. Find amenities the community needs (such as a park, playground or bike trail) or areas that it wants to clean up (such as a brownfield site) and incorporate those into a benefits package offered as part of the permitting process. It will show you are dedicated to the community and will provide incentives for approval.

EXECUTE A COMBINED CAMPAIGN
In the age of social media, the regulatory and approval process for energy projects needs to be run much like a political campaign. Having a “this is the way it is going to be” attitude will lead to bad publicity, delays, cost overruns and possibly the loss of the project. Proper execution of your public engagement strategy is critical. A well-run campaign will:

- Actively listen to the community and its concerns.
- Be open and transparent with information about the project—especially on social media.
- Incorporate the ideas of the community into the plan, if warranted.

- Identify, educate and train project experts so they can deliver positive messages in response to community concerns and opposition. These spokespeople can engage with community groups, social institutions, local environmental groups and local cable access channels.
- Regularly monitor social media platforms to ensure messaging is consistent, questions are answered and tabs are kept on the opposition’s messaging.
- Amplify positive media coverage and use targeted advertising online to promote the project.
- Cultivate recognized leaders as third-party validators and promote their support to your target audiences.

As the world changes, the business of energy needs to change. Managing the conversation is key in any project approval process. PP and PPL must be accounted for as one comprehensive approach. While no plan is foolproof, success is greatly improved by dedicating the right resources to anticipating and finding alternatives to public stakeholder concerns. And remember, when dealing with sensitivities likely to be amplified by social media, education and transparency are of the utmost importance.

A consultant for energy, environmental and infrastructure markets, Mary Usovicz has over 30 years of experience in dealing with public participation.

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