

Despite its name, *Waste 101* resists a narrow focus and tackles many of the non-air-related issues driving today's industry, including waste, water, and remediation. This month's column has broad application to all environmental fields.

by **Cindy Smiley**

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Lessons Learned

This column was inspired by observations at a recent public meeting sponsored by a state environmental agency, with the hope that it will provide useful advice to fellow environmental professionals who find themselves in these settings in the immediate or distant future. While these suggestions may seem intuitively obvious to some, they may not even cross the minds of others. In either case, if these suggestions enable a meeting organizer to conduct a public meeting without annoying, antagonizing, or bewildering the audience members, that should be regarded as a success for everyone involved.

Setting the Stage

Federal and state environmental laws may authorize or mandate public meetings for a variety of reasons, such as taking public comments on proposed environmental permits or taking public comments on proposed rules. The meetings may begin with presentations by an applicant or by agency staff members, followed by oral (and sometimes written) comments by meeting attendees. Often, the meetings are digitally recorded or transcribed by court reporters. If the environmental agency will be preparing a "response to comments" document,

the quality of the recording (or accuracy of the transcription) will be very important to the agency's ability to collect and respond to every comment it receives during the event.

Potential Pitfalls

1 Logistics. Was the meeting time and place correctly stated on the public notice? Are there signs leading the attendees to the correct room within the meeting location? Are there enough chairs for everyone? How's the room temperature? How's the lighting in the room?



from Public Meetings

Helpful Hint: If possible, having light snacks and drinks/water available before and after the meeting may provide a significant boost to the meeting attendees.

- 2 Introductions.** At the outset, provide an overview of the meeting schedule and objectives. Introduce each representative of the agency or applicant that may speak or play a role during the meeting, giving their first and last names, their affiliations, and their role in the environmental proceeding.

Helpful Hint: Provide nametags or name signs for all representatives of the agency, the applicant, and the environmental consultants who are participating in the meeting.

- 3 Visual Displays.** Will someone be projecting a presentation on a screen or wall? If so, is the screen or wall visible to the audience? Can the audience read and decipher the contents of the presentation?

Helpful Hint: Quickly breezing through a presentation on a wall that's not visible to the audience does not inspire much confidence in the presenter or their message. Instead, there will be a lot of muttering about how insensitive and oblivious they are to the audience members.

- 4 Audible Messages.** Is there a microphone available for all speakers? Is the volume turned up so that everyone can hear the voices? Do the speakers use the microphone and make an effort to communicate in a clear, articulate and intelligible manner? If the speaker is answering a question posed by someone else, do they first repeat the question and then provide the answer?

Helpful Hint: Standing up and looking at the audience when speaking makes a much better impression than making a presentation while slouched at a table in the front of a room.

- 5 Basic Manners.** Although we may think that using only our first names in business settings is a friendly, informal way of communicating, sometimes it has the effect of appearing evasive,

if not anonymous, at times when we really need to be identified and remembered. Use your first and last names when introducing yourself and have your business card available to provide upon request.

Helpful Hint: Dress appropriately for the event. Your attire sends a message regarding your respect for the proceeding, and wearing shorts and sandals may indicate a wish to be on the beach, rather than listening to the important messages being conveyed at the meeting.

- 6 Communicate in Plain Language.** Realize that we are fluent in a fairly technical environmental dialect, and the acronyms and terms that we use so freely may sound like a foreign language to the audience members. When the public asks a question, attempt to answer it without any acronyms at all, and be responsive to the question asked.

Helpful Hint: Answering a simple question from the public with a rambling discourse will likely cause more grumbling than awe in the audience.

- 7 Wrapping Up.** At the close of the meeting, be sure that the next steps in the process are clearly explained, in layman's terms. Provide the audience with information on how long the next steps may take and how soon the upcoming events may occur.

End on a Positive Note

Whenever possible, end the meeting with a positive attitude. Express appreciation for the time and efforts of all of the attendees and participants. In many cases, this forum provides a concerned citizen's only source of information. A citizen's experience at a public meeting may form a lasting impression about the subject matter and how it was handled. The interactions with and impressions of the environmental professionals participating in the meeting, whether positive or negative, intentional or accidental, may prove to be important to the overall success of the proceedings. **em**