

Fluorocarbons and Ozone Depletion

Problem/Situation

Scientific allegations that fluorocarbons released from aerosol spray cans were a threat to the earth's ozone layer had become a cause celebre in the media and government. Despite the fact that there was no real scientific proof of the charges, and that it would be years before facts could be assembled, the media fastened on the threat of increased skin cancer and the doomsday aspects of the story. Public concern and fear about the future caused fluorocarbon users to look to alternatives. Hill and Knowlton was asked by Du Pont to help calm fears, get better reporting of the issues, and gain up to two or three years before the government took action to ban fluorocarbons.

Actions

- An intensive monitoring, analysis, and action program was established to react to federal, state, and local government actions to ban fluorocarbons.
- A complete scientific backgrounder was developed and distributed to science writers nationwide.
- Efforts to assuage fears of customers were undertaken. This included development of a personal letter from the chairman of the board to client chief executive officers explaining the situation; our follow-up consisted of newsletters repeating the assurances and reporting on new research findings. A scientist and marketing person were trained for visits to Du Pont's largest customers to outline the situation and explain research efforts.
- A quick-response network was set up to deal with new allegations and to report new scientific findings.
- Platforms were sought and speakers prepared to report the latest findings and to explain the situation.
- All spokespersons were given radio/TV and speech training as well as preparation for newspaper interviews.

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- A nationwide series of media briefings for editorial boards and science writers was developed in major communications centers.
- An intensive media and scientific monitoring program was set up and implemented on an international basis.
- A science newsletter was established to keep some 3,000 academic scientists aware of new developments.
- Employee support was sought through informational and motivational programs, frequent stories in employee publications, and discussions at employee meetings.
- Communications were established with environmental and other activist groups.
- Surveys were executed on a regular basis to measure public opinion, the effects of Du Pont's messages, and changes in public attitudes.

Results

- Du Pont gained much needed time to find scientific answers to the allegations and to develop alternatives to fluorocarbons.
- The government postponed any immediate actions against the use of fluorocarbons.
- Public opinion against purchasing fluorocarbon aerosols was kept to a minimum.
- More accurate reporting of the scientific issues occurred in the nation's press, with a resultant change in editorial positions in many newspapers.

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