



# Selling Others on Tree Programs

**TREE CITY USA®  
BULLETIN**

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*Like any other public program, trees and tree management in your community must pass through the filter of public opinion. It is public opinion that expresses the will of the people. Only with favorable public opinion will a tree program be able to compete successfully against the myriad other demands for dollars and volunteers' time. Getting others on board with tree programs is essential if community forestry is to reach its full potential.*

**W**hy is it that in every part of the country there are some communities with beautiful, healthy urban forests and outstanding programs of tree planting and maintenance, while just down the road there will be a nearly identical community with no systematic, continuous tree program and with trees that are neglected and possibly even a liability?

Since the inception of Tree City USA in 1976, program managers have had the opportunity to observe this phenomenon. Here are three of their conclusions:

1. There is usually no difference in the people living in the two kinds of communities; that is, people universally like trees and the benefits they bring.
2. Communities with the most active tree programs have a better understanding of what it takes to gain public support among residents, municipal officials, and local businesses.
3. There is usually at least one citizen "spark plug" or tree champion in the more successful communities. These individuals provide leadership and are particularly savvy about public relations.

The art and science of public relations can be learned and practiced by anyone. In fact, it should be at the very core of tree board activities. This bulletin highlights nine steps that can be used to better understand public relations and to convince others of the need for tree programs. By following these steps, it is possible to enjoy more favorable public opinion, gain support for your programs, and broaden your volunteer base to strengthen your tree board and carry out its activities.



The ability to communicate and win support for tree programs is as important as the technical knowledge behind arboricultural practices.

# Nine Steps to Effective Public Relations

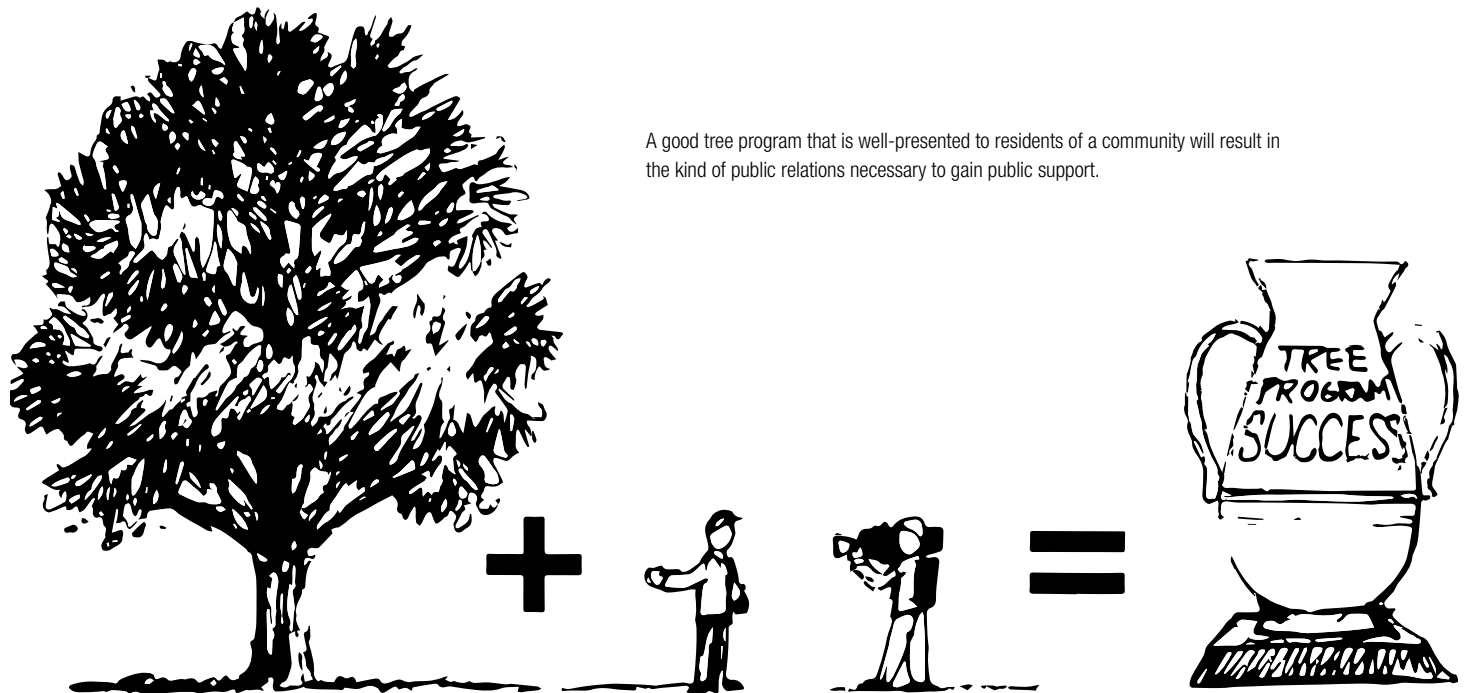
## 1 Understand That Public Relations Is a Prerequisite of Success

Only through good public relations is it possible to convince others of the importance of tree programs or most other worthy ideas. Abraham Lincoln put it this way:

*Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.*

Public sentiment, as Lincoln called it, is the force that will compel elected officials to provide a budget necessary to plant and maintain trees in public areas. It is the image that will convince competent citizens to join a tree board or participate in a neighborhood planting project. Public sentiment will keep merchants from demanding that trees and other vegetation be removed from property in front of their stores, and it will encourage utilities to prune trees. It is even the social approval necessary to allow private tree care entrepreneurs to enjoy a profitable business.

The first step toward better public relations is to understand that while technical correctness and economics are important in any cause — including tree programs — public support is the most basic foundation on which all else is built.



A good tree program that is well-presented to residents of a community will result in the kind of public relations necessary to gain public support.

## *What Is the Practice of Public Relations?*

There are hundreds of definitions of public relations, but at the heart of the practice, the goal is to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. To arrive at this happy result, efforts must be planned to influence public opinion through good character, responsible performance, and two-way communication.

# 2

## Every Action Makes an Impression; Use This to Work for You, Not Against You

Every member of a tree board and every employee in the parks department or a tree care company makes an impression that ultimately affects the public image of the organization. This is as inescapable as your shadow on a sunny day. Will the actions of these people help promote your cause or work against it? In one study, it was found that when a store loses a customer, 68 percent of the time it is because of the attitude of an employee. Worse yet, 96 percent of unhappy customers elect not to complain, which would provide an opportunity to fix the problem, but they do share their disgruntled attitude with at least 10 other people.

Telephone manners, dealing with visitors at a fair booth, and dress standards are examples of how we make good or bad impressions on others. Similarly, a utility that alerts homeowners ahead of time that crews will be in the area makes a better impression than if the neighbors learn of pruning or removal operations by hearing the chain saws at work.

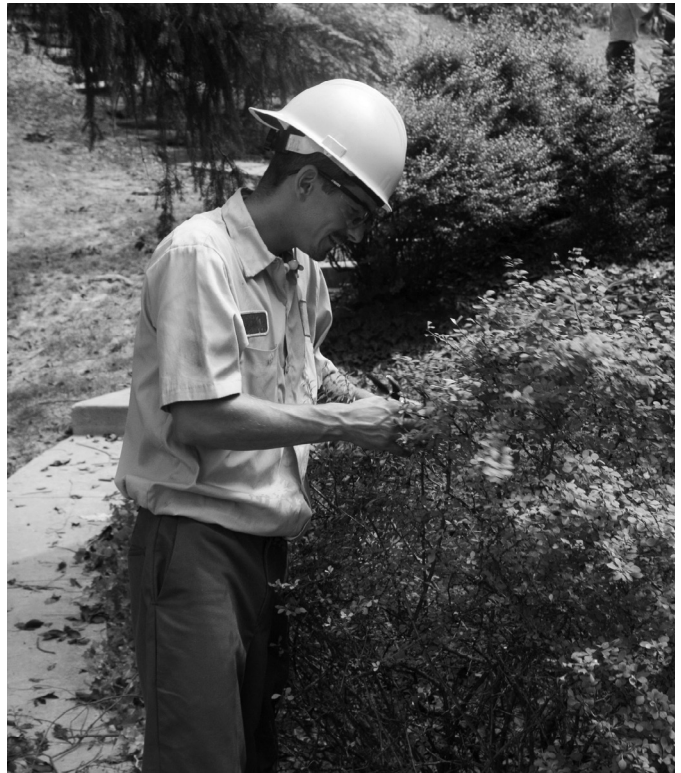
There are two keys to ensuring everyone makes a good impression. The first is a set of policies that guide actions, such as alerting homeowners to tree work. The other is making sure all individuals in your organization know the policies and understand the effects of the impressions they make. This means everyone, not just those people who are normally considered to be in public contact positions. A training session at least once a year is the best approach to accomplishing this.



Every person in an organization has a duty to help build a good public image.

# 3

## Make Ethics a Part of Every Action



Sound, ethical performance and practices are the necessary foundation for any successful public relations program.

Credibility is essential for influencing others; it consists of two traits and how these are perceived by others: authoritativeness and trustworthiness. Authoritativeness simply means you know what you are talking about. It reflects technical knowledge. Trustworthiness means that the people you are trying to influence see you as being honest and dependable. In turn, this requires impeccable ethics in all that you do.

A tree board that allows a member's business establishment to remove trees from the city right-of-way while denying removal permits to other business owners would quickly lose credibility in the community. So would a tree care company that overcharges the elderly or tops trees.

Ethical behavior must be a given if there is to be any hope of convincing others to adopt good tree care practices or support a community forestry program.

# Nine Steps to Effective Public Relations (continued)

## 4

### Stop Using the Term 'The Public'

*A public is a group of individuals with a common interest who can be expected to generally react the same way toward a given idea, product, or issue.*

No single concept will improve communication about tree programs more than to start thinking in terms of publics. There are many publics related to any issue. For example, in a campaign to stop the practice of topping in a community, here are some publics to consider:

- Homeowners
- Real estate sales people
- Business owners
- Media personnel
- Tree care companies
- Grounds maintenance personnel and owners/managers

By dividing the public into the above groups, communication can be more effective because:

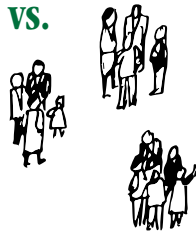
- ✓ It helps you understand your target public better.
- ✓ You can select means of reaching the specific public with more efficiency (a rifle approach vs. a shotgun approach to communicating).
- ✓ The message can be tailored to the specific public.
- ✓ Timing can be considered so that you first contact publics who should have the information before others do.
- ✓ There is less likelihood you will create an offended public by overlooking a group important to your issue.

Considering publics before planning an information campaign is more than an exercise in semantics; it is an entirely different way of looking at communication. It is a step toward strategy, and strategy is exactly what is needed to sell others on tree programs.

**One Big Crowd**



vs.



**Small Groups**

A public is a group of individuals with a common interest who can be expected to generally react the same way toward a given idea, product, or issue.

## 5

### Be on the Offensive

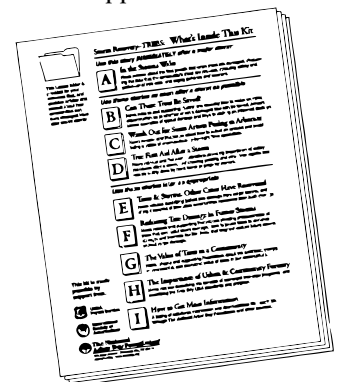
Not many football games are won by always being on defense. The same is true in promoting tree programs. Being on the defense means waiting to communicate about tree care until a hazard tree falls and hurts someone or sidewalk replacement becomes an issue in city council. Being on the offense means making sure there is a continual stream of favorable publicity about trees going to residents of your community. It also means making sure your organization is in the spotlight and well-known for the good work it does. Being on the offense also means proactively providing education about trees through every means possible.

Some of the ways communities with successful tree programs stay on the offense include:

- Regular newspaper articles
- Public workshops
- Radio and TV public service announcements
- Guided walks
- Display of Tree City USA flags
- Tree-planting activities
- Fair booths
- TV programs
- Newsletters
- Utility bill inserts
- Arboretums
- Tree giveaways
- School programs

Ensuring favorable publicity is like making a deposit into a "bank of goodwill," knowing that the day will probably come when a withdrawal — negative publicity — will be made. But even a negative event like an ice storm or wildfire can be turned into an opportunity to be on the offense. For example, by having an information kit ready in advance of when a storm strikes, you can promptly provide stories to reporters about proper pruning, how to select an arborist, and other topics pertinent to the emergency. The articles are almost sure to be used by the media, and you will provide a service to the community that will be appreciated.

Providing media with information such as that contained in the Arbor Day Foundation's Storm Recovery Kit can turn negative publicity into a positive opportunity to get helpful information about emergency tree care to community residents. Access the kit at [arborday.org/stormrecovery](http://arborday.org/stormrecovery).



# 6

## Plan for Good Public Relations

Annual planning for public relations is a must.



None of what is suggested in this bulletin just happens on its own. It requires planning. By whatever name — public relations, public education, outreach, etc. — every tree board should consider this in an annual planning session just as it probably does tree planting, pruning, or other tree-related activities. You can do a plan in four steps:

- Step 1:** **Decide what is most important to get across** to your publics in the year ahead. Then set communication goals and objectives based on what is needed most in your community.
- Step 2:** **Identify the publics involved** in each issue.
- Step 3:** **Develop a strategy** for getting the messages identified in Step 1 to the publics listed in Step 2. Be sure to include a time schedule and who should take the lead in carrying out each project.
- Step 4:** **Carry out the communication projects,** monitor and evaluate success or failure, and make adjustments or future plans accordingly.

# 7

## Involve Your Publics Honestly and Effectively

Success of local tree programs is usually in direct proportion with the amount of citizen involvement.

### When planning:

Ask for citizen input but only if you are sincerely open to suggestions. In other words, don't ask if you have already decided what action will be taken. When planning a downtown tree planting, you will have more support if the business owners can help plan species selection and placement than if you simply announce what is going to take place. Similarly, residents will be grateful if involved in planning replacements when large trees are taken down to end conflicts with power lines.

### When doing:

Extend public involvement beyond Arbor Day ceremonies to include other projects, such as conducting workshops or pruning street trees. Think of what partnerships might be created, for example, between a tree board and the local Master Gardeners group.



The success of tree programs depends on involving others in both planning and implementation.

# Nine Steps to Effective Public Relations (continued)

## 8

### How to Have an Influence – in a Big Way

The people we have in mind in this step are the gatekeepers of the mass media. All tree programs benefit when favorable publicity or educational information appears in the local newspaper or on radio or TV. Aside from advertising, which is expensive, the best opportunity is through news items. Trees in the community present plenty of opportunities, but whether you do a news release or contact a reporter to request a story, keep in mind that your story will have a better chance of being used if it is truly news.

#### Elements of news:

- **Timely:** either something that just happened, is about to happen, or is of seasonal interest
- **Human interest:** conflict, progress, animals, an appeal for help, sex, suspense, youth or old age, sympathy, or something unusual
- **Proximity:** must be of interest to the readers, listeners, or viewers of the media you approach
- **Prominence:** features well-known people
- **Consequence:** something that affects the audience

When you do get the attention of a reporter, follow these rules to ensure a more accurate story and help build a good relationship for the future:

- ✓ Return calls promptly.
- ✓ Answer all questions or get the answers from someone who knows them.
- ✓ Be accurate. Don't guess, and admit it when you don't know something.
- ✓ Help the reporter get facts straight. Provide a handout with technical information and/or a directory of people's names and titles when appropriate.
- ✓ Be honest. Even when a mistake is made, admit it. The bad publicity will blow over much faster than if denials or stonewalling techniques are attempted.
- ✓ If you can't comment or provide information, explain why (such as pending litigation, lack of authority, etc.).
- ✓ Stay cheerful and positive, even if the reporter tries to anger you or put you into a defensive position.
- ✓ Know ahead of time what key points you want in the story. Present them early in an interview, and possibly have them in writing to provide to the reporter.

It also helps to develop good rapport with reporters and editors. Don't wait until a story breaks to get acquainted with the news people in your area and let them know of your expertise. Provide them with a business card or information file about your program and complete contact information. And when they do use something you have provided, be sure to send a thank-you note.



Understanding the needs of reporters and knowing what makes news will help get tree-related stories used in the mass media.



## Communicate – Persuasively

Contact is not communication. Communication is getting the information into the mind of your intended receivers, without distortion, and hopefully in a persuasive or convincing manner. There are many techniques of persuasive communication. A good start toward learning these is to search out books on the topic and learn from the years of research that have resulted from studies of propaganda, advertising, marketing, and related fields. Some techniques are quite simple, such as exposing and countering the arguments of opposing views before the other side has had a chance to present them. Others are more complex and may require surveys or focus groups to learn more about your target publics before you start a campaign. The point is, if you want to sell others on tree programs, you need to do some homework on this important topic of persuasive communication.



Using techniques of persuasive communication is more important than simply providing information or making contact with people.

# Education and Public Relations – Category A of Growth Award Activities

Tree City USA communities that go beyond the four basic standards can be recognized for their improved or expanded tree programs with a Tree City USA Growth Award. The award requires that 10 points be earned through activities listed under four categories: Education and Public Relations, Partnerships, Planning and Management, and Planting and Maintenance. The 13 activities listed in Category A are a veritable list of ways that can also help others see the value of tree programs. You can help create support for your programs and at the same time earn recognition with a Growth Award by considering any of these activities in the coming year. These are:

- ✓ New or improved publications (2 points)
- ✓ A new way of getting literature to those who should have it (2 points)
- ✓ Developing a walking tour to view outstanding trees, or creating other interpretive programs (3 points)
- ✓ Local awards program (3 points)
- ✓ A communitywide tree event (4 points)
- ✓ A successful, ongoing publicity campaign (5 points)
- ✓ A specific event designed to gain publicity for community forestry (3 points)
- ✓ Youth education (4 points)
- ✓ Continuing education for tree workers, including public relations training (6 points)
- ✓ Continuing education for managers and tree board members, including public relations training (6 points)
- ✓ Tree worker safety program (5 points)
- ✓ Conducting tree care workshops for lay publics (4 points)
- ✓ Conducting arborist workshops for professionals (5 points)



**TREE CITY USA®**

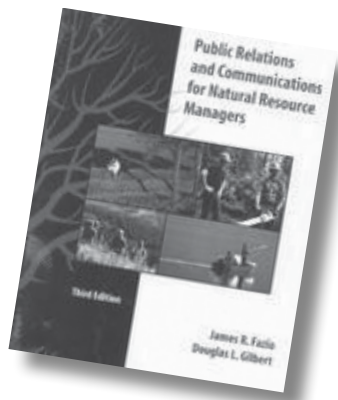
For more information about Growth Awards, contact your state forester's office or the Arbor Day Foundation.

# Other Sources of Information

## Books:

### ***Public Relations and Communications for Natural Resource Managers (Third edition)***

by James R. Fazio. Available for \$49.95 from Woodland Press, 310 N. Main St., Moscow, ID 83843 (208-882-4767). No shipping/handling charge if *Tree City USA Bulletin* is mentioned.



The nine steps to effective public relations are based on this 420-page book that provides much more information about how to implement each one. It also has chapters on using radio, TV, exhibits, print media, and other communication channels, as well as emergency information services, special events, biopolitics, and others. The book is intended to help anyone who works with trees or other natural resources do a better job of promoting their programs to the publics they serve and on whose support they depend.

### ***The Simple Act of Planting a Tree***

by Andy and Katie Lipkis. Available for \$20 from TreePeople, 12601 Mulholland Dr., Beverly Hills, CA 90210 (818-753-4600).

This 242-page book contains excellent sections on planning events and includes checklists that will help you remember all the myriad details. As the title states, it is also about tree planting and covers the biological or physical aspects of the subject as well as the human dimension.

## **The Public Relations Society of America**

For anyone interested in pursuing the practice of public relations as a career or significant part of a job, publications and services of The Public Relations Society of America provides valuable help. Membership and attendance at regional and national conferences and meetings is also an excellent way to learn how to become more proficient. For information, visit [prsa.org](http://prsa.org) or write to PRSA, 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003.

## **Tree City USA Bulletin ORDER FORM**

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Other Tree City USA Bulletins that may be helpful to you are listed below. For a complete list of issues, please visit [arborday.org](http://arborday.org).

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10. Plant Trees for America!	2.	_____
12. What City Foresters Do	3.	_____
18. Tree City USA Growth Award	4.	_____
22. Tree City USA: Foundation for Better Management	5.	_____
29. How to Plan for Management	6.	_____
33. How to Interpret Trees	7.	_____
34. How to Fund Community Forestry	8.	_____
36. How to Work with Volunteers Effectively	9.	_____
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Complete Bulletin Set with binders .....	\$109.95	\$ _____
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## **THE TREE CITY USA PROGRAM IS SPONSORED BY THE**

**Arbor Day Foundation in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and National Association of State Foresters. To achieve the national recognition of being named as a Tree City USA, a town or city must meet four standards:**

- Standard 1: A Tree Board or Department
- Standard 2: A Tree Care Ordinance
- Standard 3: A Community Forestry Program with an Annual Budget of at Least \$2 Per Capita
- Standard 4: An Arbor Day Observance and Proclamation

Each recognized community receives a Tree City USA flag, plaque, and community entrance signs. Towns and cities of every size can qualify. Tree City USA application forms are available from your state forester, the Arbor Day Foundation at [arborday.org/treecity](http://arborday.org/treecity), or your state forestry agency.

