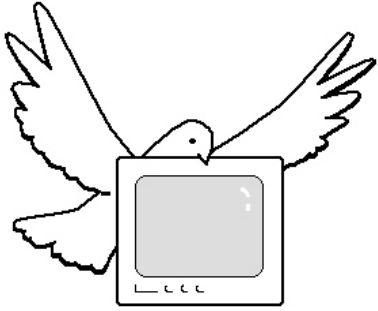


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***"Managing Activism: A Guide to Dealing with Activists and Pressure Groups"***

<http://www.prwatch.org/prwissues/2002Q2/managing.html>  
Managing Activism: PR Advice for "Neutralizing" Democracy  
Book Review by John Stauber

When I first picked up Denise Deegan's book, "Managing Activism: A Guide to Dealing with Activists and Pressure Groups", I imagined a roomful of uniformed pest applicators at the Orkin company, sitting on benches like military aviators before a bombing mission, being briefed on the best tools available for eradicating cockroaches. I was a spy for the roaches--the pesty "activists" that Deegan works to "manage." Roaches don't generally read the "how to" manuals written by their would-be exterminators, but activists certainly should.

As someone who has spent the last decade investigating the seamy side of the "perceptions management" industry, I wish I could tell you that this book is a gold mine of revelation, but for me it is not. Still, I recommend that my fellow citizens read this book. It is written in classroom text-like fashion, and the author is careful to put the best face on her profession and not include advice that might offend the atypical reader. Nevertheless, it can help people working for democratic social change to understand the often successful ways in which we are targeted for defeat, especially the "good cop/bad cop" tactic for dividing and conquering activists through "partnering" and co-optation by industry. For activists, Deegan's book provides a primer on how to recognize these traps and hopefully avoid them.

Managing Activism is written for PR practitioners whose clients engage in risky businesses (fossil fuels, pesticides, genetically engineered foods, nuclear waste, toxic dumps, animal testing) and who therefore become the targets of "activist groups" including "environmentalists, workers' rights activists, animal rights groups and human rights campaigners." Don't expect much sympathy for the activists. Deegan is a battle-hardened PR veteran and a committed soldier in the war against activists who "in an increasingly pluralistic society" present what she calls "a growing threat to organizations of all shapes and sizes. And because activists employ a wide range of aggressive tactics such as generating bad publicity, seeking government and legislative intervention, encouraging boycotts, etc., they can cause severe disruption, including damage to reputation, sales, profitability, employee satisfaction and, of course, share price."

The picture that Deegan paints is undoubtedly a chilling scenario if you are an executive or major share holder in companies like Monsanto or DuPont that have long histories of worldwide trade in everything from nuclear weapon components to pesticides and genetically modified crops. What's a besieged CEO to do? "Fortunately, if dealt with in the right manner, activists have been shown to change their approach from aggressively confrontational to cooperative," Deegan promises. "Learning to manage activists involves learning about activists. Who are they? What do they want? What will they do to achieve their objectives? And most importantly, what is the best way to deal with them?" Deegan's recommendations are similar to the advice which comes from Peter Sandman, E. Bruce Harrison, James Lukaszewski, Paul Gilding and other "crisis management" experts whom Sheldon Rampton and I cover in our work for PR Watch. Unfortunately, this entire area of PR--how to defeat activism--is insufficiently scrutinized by the citizens who need most to be aware of it, the activists themselves. Until we "cockroaches" understand the strategies of the "exterminators," the PR roach hotels built by corporate crisis management practitioners will continue to entrap movements for democracy, ecological sustainability, fair trade, human rights, social justice, and all those other extreme threats to the corporate bottom-line. Social activists like to believe that we are too committed to our causes, too worldly and aware to be sweet-talked into unwitting submission by sitting down and partnering with the enemy. As Deegan reiterates, however, industry continues to regard this sort of "dialogue" as its most effective method for managing activists.

Deegan's book tries to put the best face on the practice of "managing activism," which may explain why she avoids mentioning the Washington-based PR firm of Mongoven, Biscoe and Duchin (MBD), one of the worldwide leaders in this particular PR subspecialty. As we have documented previously, MBD grew out of the successful effort by one of its founders, Jack Mongoven, to defeat the large religious-lead boycott campaign aimed at the Nestlé corporation for its deadly promotion of infant formula in the third world. In activist lore this boycott is touted as a major victory, but in the corporate world it is understood that industry really won the day by pulling the rug out from the campaign. By making selective concessions to the activists, Nestlé succeeded in negotiating an end to the boycott. Later, activists were dismayed to discover that its infant formula marketing practices are continuing with only token changes.

Third world children continue to die, but today their plight receives little attention, and activists have found that a boycott, once terminated, is not easily turned back on. MBD is a sort of spy operation. Its dozens of employees relentlessly compile dossiers on activists of all sizes and shapes the world over, advising industry how to defeat them. Their favorite method is a "divide and conquer" strategy heavily dependent on co-optation: First identify the "radicals" who are unwilling to compromise and who are demanding fundamental changes to redress the problem at hand. Then, identify the "realists"--typically, organizations

with significant budgets and staffs working in the same relative area of public concern as the radicals. Then, approach these realists, often through a friendly third party, start a dialogue and eventually cut a deal, a "win win" solution that marginalizes and excludes the radicals and their demands. Next, go with the realists to the "idealists" who have learned about the problem through the work of the radicals. Convince the idealists that a "win-win" solution endorsed by the realists is best for the community as a whole. Once this has been accomplished, the "radicals" can be shut out as extremists, the PR fix is in, and the deal can be touted in the media to make the corporation and its "moderate" nonprofit partners look heroic for solving the problem. Result: industry may have to make some small or temporary concessions, but the fundamental concerns raised by the "radicals" are swept aside.

This, in a nutshell, is the strategy that Deegan recommends in what she calls "one of the first books to offer a 'how to . . . ' format to help people cope with the threat of activism." I especially recommend her chapters on "relationship building, negotiation and conflict resolution" and "media relations." Reading these chapters should help drive home the realization that activist efforts are being deliberately targeted for defeat by corporate funding, partnership and co-optation. These may seem like unusual weapons, but PR crisis managers have taken to heart the advice of military strategist Carl Von Clausewitz: "We see then that there are many ways to one's object in War; that the complete subjugation of the enemy is not essential in every case."

Activist readers should remember that Deegan's book only offers part of the story, the sanitized version. It does not go into all the real-world ways in which nasty, smear attacks against activists are waged and funded by the same corporations and industries offering the outstretched hand of partnership. For the "rest of the story," also read *Secrets and Lies: The Anatomy of an Anti-Environmental PR Campaign*, by Nicky Hager and Bob Burton. *Secrets and Lies* is included in Deegan's "recommended reading" list. Based on a mother lode of leaked documents, its revelations of anti-environmental dirty tricks in New Zealand proved so shocking to citizens there that its publication contributed to the political downfall of the head of state.