

Green-Star and Public Outreach – What’s Involved?

The Key is Communication on Environmental Issues!

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When we think of community relations at a concrete plant, we usually think of supporting the local neighborhood or town – donations to charitable organizations, support for local youth sports teams, participating in local events, maintaining good relationships and communications with the neighbors, etc. At the concrete plant it can also mean decals or logos indicating community support on truck mixer barrels, plant tours or assisting in local charitable construction projects. All of these activities are vitally important to the local community and the plant and its employees, helps to foster a harmonious relationship with the community and should certainly be continued to the maximum extent a plant is comfortable with.

The NRMCA Green-Star program requires that a facility maintain a “public outreach” program as part of its Environmental Management System (EMS) in order to achieve Green-Star certification. But what exactly is meant by public outreach and is it the same as the common picture of community relations outlined in the first paragraph? For example, would hosting plant tours and supporting local charitable organizations suffice for a Green-Star public outreach program?

The NRMCA Green-Star Certification Program Guidelines require that in order to be Green-Star certified, a concrete plant must have developed and implemented for at least one full cycle an EMS which includes, among other key facets, a public outreach program (Section 5.1.C.7). This requirement is stated as the requirement of:

A public outreach program, with which the facility can interact with the community on issues of environmental relevance to a degree deemed appropriate to the facility in question.



There are several key considerations to this requirement.

First, there is the concept of the “community.” While there are many definitions of what constitutes a community, from the Green-Star perspective it should include all who interact with the concrete plant. For example, this would likely include immediate neighbors, members of the local town or city, customers, stakeholders, vendors, employees, employee family members – nearly anyone who visits the concrete plant or is otherwise affected by the activities that occur there. As can be seen, the concept of “community” can be quite broad. And it’s important to realize that for plants that might be isolated (e.g., within a large quarry with few neighbors), there is still a “community” to consider, such as employees and their families, shareholders, etc.

Second, “a facility must interact with the community.” Interaction in this case means that there is a line of open, interactive communication between the concrete plant and the community.

Third, the interaction be “on issues of environmental relevance.” This could include issues such as the presence and implementation of the EMS itself and its key facets, a plant’s overall environmental compliance level and permitting status (generally public knowledge anyway), ongoing efforts to improve, and sensitivity to potentially legitimate environmental issues raised by the community (e.g., noise complaints, dust complaints, etc.). This facet of the requirement is key!

Lastly, the program must be present “to a degree deemed appropriate to the facility in question.” Obviously, a concrete plant located in the middle of a quarry in a rural area has very different community issues than one located in the middle of an urban area. While the method of interacting with the community may be quite different in these two settings, the need for a clear channel of interactive communication with the public is still required. In this case, the choice of what that means would be up to

the facility, based on its particular needs and circumstances.

So, how to determine what sort of community relation activities might qualify for the public outreach program requirement of Green-Star? Three key questions could be utilized to evaluate any activity for its acceptability. As an example, let's use support (in the form of sponsorship) of a youth baseball team as an example.

- Who does the program interact with? The community in general, or just a small segment of it? If targeted at only one segment, are there other programs directed toward other segments of the community? In this case, the support may be visible to those involved with the youth baseball team, who hear about it, have children that participate, coaches, spectators, family members, etc. - a reasonably fair cross-section of the community. Since this support effort seems to be accessible to a large cross-section of the community, youth baseball appears to pass this test, although somewhat marginally.
- What is the form of the interaction? In the case of the youth baseball team, interaction is somewhat limited. Children wear the name of the concrete plant on their shirts, and many in the community will notice and be thankful of the sponsorship, but how do they interact in turn with the concrete plant (short of purchasing concrete, writing thank you letters for sponsorship, etc.). In the example of the youth baseball team, the interaction appears limited, but is still somewhat present via plant recognition.

- Is the interaction on issues of environmental relevance? In what way does the interaction communicate the environmental program or vision of the concrete plant and allow the community to interact with the plant regarding that environmental program or vision? In the case of the youth baseball team, it seems fairly clear that team sponsorship likely provides little interaction on issues of environmental relevance. So, the youth baseball team sponsorship appears to fail on this question.

While the sponsorship of a youth baseball team, like so many other excellent examples of community support, should be supported and continued, it doesn't seem to pass this specific requirement of Green-Star certification.

What sort of activities might be appropriate public outreach?


- Regular plant – community liaison meetings to specifically discuss environmental activities at plant.
- A newsletter that is free and distributed to members of the community outlining the environmental goals and vision of the concrete plant, and which includes an opportunity for public questions and response.
- Participation in local environmental fairs, where members of the public can learn more about the environmental program of the concrete plant, ask questions and provide feedback.
- An “environmental open house” (or a clear representation of the environmental program during a typical community open house) during which members of the community are invited to the concrete plant, tour the plant and learn more about plant operations and environmental programs, ask questions and provide feedback.

- A Web site for the concrete plant which details the plant's environmental program and vision, and which provides a comment / question area for members of the community to ask questions and receive answers from a plant representative on environmental issues.
- Any similar program which enables the public to learn more about the concrete plant's environmental programs, ask questions and have them answered by a knowledgeable plant representative (it is highly recommended that all contacts with the community, such as questions and answers, be documented as part of EMS support material). The key is environmental issues!

As can be seen, public outreach can be an intimidating concept for many, who may not have the most cordial relationship with their neighbors or community. However, the Green-Star program is directed toward continual environmental improvement, which is itself a noteworthy story and one that may go a long way towards enhancing a plant's relationship with its community. In other words, Green-Star may help address many of the public's concerns.

Public outreach doesn't need to be difficult or elaborate, but it does need to involve two-way communication on environmental issues. It's a key component of Green-Star certification, and along with a program of more traditional community support (such as supporting youth baseball!), provides a concrete way for a plant to show it cares about the community. ■

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