

Energy Advocacy – What can Professionals Do?

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Humanity faces very challenging times ahead in balancing our need for abundant and inexpensive energy with the critical mission of environmental protection. Society's current focus on greenhouse gas emissions and climate issues, particularly in developed nations, dominates conversations around the balancing act as we move into the 2020s.

The Problem

Accurate information and informed expert opinion on energy and climate (environment) issues are critical to rational debate and informed policy decisions. An unfortunate product of current information technology / social media is an outpouring of irrational, uninformed commentary – such that the average voter doesn't know what to think. Exacerbating this situation, mainstream media organizations are losing credibility as neutral reporters. To remain viable in the quickly-evolving media landscape, they focus on clicks while cutting budgets for insightful investigative reporting.

The “energy industry” (as if it's some monolith) has been outplayed badly. Corporations built on technical and financial expertise that returns dollars to shareholders are poorly equipped to communicate effectively with the public. They are slowly playing catch-up, but have no credibility in the eyes of many. Industry organizations like CAPP, CEPA and PSAC do some very good work, but struggle to escape being labelled lackeys of evil corporations – and therefore not credible.

Energy professionals – both geoscientists and engineers – understand how the oil and gas industry works. At least as importantly, we are scientifically trained, and can easily spot the lurid misinformation promoted by anti-oil advocates. We can and we must speak out – but we need some guidelines. Here are some ideas.

The Guidelines

1. Speak as a professional. Be mindful of professional ethics, which demand that we be honest and truthful in what we say. Do not slant information or opinions to support a company or an industry.

Realize this means we function at a disadvantage. Advocacy organizations such as the David Suzuki Foundation and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives do not engage many professionals, and certainly do not adhere to professional standards. They feel free to quote scientific information out of context, to make up

their own “facts”, and to artfully manipulate situations to place the oil and gas industry (and other victims) in the worst possible light.

2. You're a scientist – so be scientific. Talk about the facts – and when speaking as a scientist, confine yourself to what you know. Geoscientists are trained from first year on paleoclimate and climate controls – so we have something to say, but most of us are not conversant on the latest climate models or literature.

That said, we energy professionals are very knowledgeable about the time, effort and money required to build things – to put new systems into place, and to meet stringent regulatory and environmental standards. We can bring that perspective to the table to counter anti-industry pronouncements from people that haven't any perspective on actually building things.

After all, it has taken the City of Calgary more than 20 years to build a ring road – and activists want to change the entire energy infrastructure of North America in 10 years? Seriously?

3. Avoid personal (*ad hominem*) attacks on the motivation or intelligence of others. This can be very difficult, and we all fail at times (I certainly do). But it is acceptable to point out misinformation and faulty analyses, as long as you are prepared to do so without personal attacks, and to back up your statements with evidence.
4. Work with technical societies to create strong, factual, scientific messages for all to see and hear. CSPG, CSUR, SPE, CSEG and other societies are focused on creating and disseminating scientific and technical information – and all are making efforts to communicate with the public through outreach programs.

When I do public presentations on behalf of CSUR Outreach, I tell people that I'm not advocating for an industry, for companies, or for particular projects. That advocacy is a job for CAPP, CEPA, PSAC and their associates. I say that I'm here to talk about science and engineering – unvarnished facts about oil and gas resources, seismicity, water resources, emissions, and environmental effects and mitigation. I establish credibility by talking about reality.

Conclusion

Communicating effectively as a professional, with professional standards, is very difficult. We have to work hard to reach the minds of people that don't share the fact- and evidence-based mindset that energy professionals have. But it's critically important to make the effort, as we have essential knowledge to share. And many people, regardless of their training, can distinguish between good science and extreme opinion.

Keep one critical fact in mind – energy and climate are global issues. Humanity demands abundant and inexpensive energy, and that demand trumps all. People in developing countries are building new energy infrastructure employing whatever energy sources will get the job done. Neither Canada nor the United Nations will deter them from eliminating energy poverty – and they must have diverse energy sources, including oil and gas, to do that.

Scientifically, mathematically, practically – the biggest thing Canada can do for the environment is to produce, to the very highest environmental standards, the fossil fuel resources that developing nations will consume.