Too many Emails and too little Time.

Each month we send out the ISHM newsletter and our statistics indicate less than 50% of the members on the mailing list open the newsletter. It is possible that the number could be higher due to a couple of factors but we do not believe it would be a significantly higher number. Our question is……………………What can we include (Besides free tickets to Disneyworld) that would entice folks to open the email??

COC’s and the Five Year Panic

Every five years CSHM’s start the panic of COC documentation. It might make sense to start that process a little earlier. Here might be a good way to assist in getting sufficient COC points.

CSHMs can earn credits toward their certification by reading articles offered by Workplace HR & Safety. CSHMs can earn as many as 2.5 credits per year for reading 25 articles and answering a five-question quiz for each one. Workplace HR & Safety provides a confirmation notice and score for each quiz taken.

For more information, visit http://www.workplacemag.com/continuing_edu.shtml or contact Amy Lehr at alehr@brifingsmediagroup.com 800-793-4209.

ISHM has nothing to do with the content. We are providing this information so you can make your own decisions as to participate or not.

IS Safety a Politically Correct Sport?

Not so long ago Dave Johnson, who is an at large member of the ISHM Board of Directors, started a discussion on his LinkedIn Group. The question centered around the issue of why companies would not talk to reporters about their positive safety results. That morphed into a broader question, “Comments please on 2 ISHN reader statements: “We often go with the management flow to keep our jobs.” “That means always being politically correct.” Is PC pressure real?” I was amazed at the paucity of responses. Perhaps we can revisit this and get a really spirited discussion going. Please send your thoughts and I will compile and publish (we will honor requests for anonymity). This is Dave’s May editorial on the subject. Happy reading!!!

EDITORIAL COMMENTS: Why so mum?
by Dave Johnson
May 3, 2011

No news is good news in safetyland

We do a fine job researching, investigating, uncovering root causes and lamenting work-related disasters. The government often forms commissions (think Deepwater Horizon or the NASA shuttle explosions or the BP Texas City refinery). Corporations in this day and age will create web sites to update customers on its recovery and relief efforts (think GE with the Japanese nuke wreckage or BP with the Gulf Oil spill). CEOs will tell newspapers how post-accident their companies are mending their ways with reinvigorated safety programs (as the new Massey chief did in a recent Wall Street Journal article.) Certain tragedies of grievous proportions come to define a stage in the evolution of workplace safety — the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911 and the world’s worst industrial catastrophe, the Bhopal chemical factory explosion in 1984.

In contrast, positive achievements in workplace health and safety get scant attention. Vertical industries such as the brick industry, the pulp and paper industry and others annually hand out awards to their safest companies. But the news doesn’t travel far beyond the industry’s trade magazines or association newsletters. For years, behavior-based safety consultancies have organized annual user group meetings where hundreds if not thousands of clients enthusiastically discuss and display their safety-boosting, morale boosting successes. But except for perhaps a few case studies, the talk never leaves the meeting room.

VPP: A very positive program

OSHA’s Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) is probably the biggest platform for safety success stories. Several thousand worksites fly the VPP flag, the most widespread public symbol of safety achievement. The annual meeting of the Voluntary Protection Program Participants’ Association (VPPPA) does a superb job of shining the spotlight on line workers, safety committee members, who step to the microphone and proudly explain how their facility became an elite safety performer.

The VPPPA’s annual conference program is chock full of ads from companies proudly pointing to their safety excellence. It becomes part of their brand, their reputation, who they are. But can
you even imagine such advertising in *Fortune* or *Forbes*?

**Why hold back good news?**

Why are companies mum about safety, especially positive stories about their safety efforts?

Fear. Fear runs through safety unlike any other department in an organization, except food safety and the safety of children’s toys. Here’s the connection: A lapse in safety that threatens consumers, workers and especially vulnerable children can make a company look like an ogre. It calls into question the very character and ethics of its leadership. A company with an engineering problem might be called inept, but not callous and uncaring. Other parts of an organization are driven more by greed (profits) than fear. Everything from quality control to accounting to R&D to sales to human resources to marketing — these departments don’t suffer from the negative connotations too easily associated with worker safety. Even security, which can suffer from embarrassing and even lethal lapses, doesn’t seem to be as publicity shy. I know of one magazine that profiles a high-ranking security officer in every issue, on the cover. The same holds for magazines devoted to quality, assembly, packaging, entrepreneurs, CEOs, sales reps. They regularly profile individuals and companies that have got it down right, or have learned lessons and turned it around. Shy about safety Last year ISHN profiled McWane Corporation’s safety turnaround story in its June issue. That’s very much the exception to the rule. I turned to my network of sources for opinions on why this is the case, and boy, did I get taken to school.

- “**Many companies don’t want to risk the bad PR a safety story could bring.**”
- “**Human nature** tells me that if someone is incentivized with tens of thousands in extra bonus money for low injury and illness rates that they might implement a ‘safety’ culture that encourages under-reporting.”
- “**‘OSHA SAFE’ could become a brand icon.** This brand and icon would be very similar to EPA’s now familiar ‘Energy Star’ or the newer ‘Design for the Environment.’ These EPA icons are widely recognized by the public as a brand to assess their consumer products as either energy efficient or composed of the safest chemicals in their class. ‘OSHA can get worker safety into the public eye by encouraging companies to trade the right to use the OSHA Safe logo on their product and marketing by voluntarily meeting certain performance criteria set by OSHA. This would give the public the opportunity to assess at a glance, when comparing products from automobiles to toothpaste, which products are made by companies that have essentially ‘less worker pain and suffering’ built into the product.”
“As long as the only means the public has at its disposal to measure safety success across industry are the traditional metrics of injuries and illnesses, i.e., lagging indexes of ‘failure,’ it’ll be hard to communicate persuasively that there are other legitimate ways to look at safety performance.”

“What the heck would we say if we decided to talk about safety in a consistent and meaningful way? The bottom line is safety doesn’t have the equivalent of the Global Reporting Initiative framework, or sustainability indices investors have become enamored with. So how do we discuss safety in a way that would appeal to multiple audiences? Anecdotes of singular successes and activity-based examples may work with internal or local audiences but these get pretty thin with bigger audiences.”

“Most of the public (it’s not their fault, it’s ours) have no clue as to what we are doing to protect their health and safety. And most do not want to take the time to find out. But go talk to a plant manager or supervisor who has lost a relative who was working at their site. Then their tune changes. Then they care. Then they want to change the status quo. Then they want to talk with senior management of that organization. Why, of course, do we humans have to wait till someone suffers horribly or worse yet dies? Human nature.”

“Most major companies today have very low injury and accident rates and fatalities are typically rare events. This is especially evident when comparing rates of 30 years ago to today. Therefore, they have moved on to other concerns such as sustainability for which there is much more public concern.”

“At the end of the day, the decision to talk (or not) to the press is, unfortunately, I’ll admit, more about avoiding risk to reputation than about whether the company has a potentially good story to tell. The rule with corporations and the press is pretty much the same as it is with companies and the courts or with Congress — don’t volunteer to do an interview (or to testify) unless you have some pretty firm assurances that the positives for the company outweigh the potential negatives.”

So there you have it. Major companies have largely succeeded with safety and want to talk about other things. Companies don’t want to talk about much of anything unless it’s to an audience of analysts or stockholders. That’s why it’s called “private” enterprise. The public doesn’t think and doesn’t care about safety, so safety doesn’t sell papers. Safety is tied to failure measurements, not a good thing for public relations. Promises be damned, the press can’t be trusted.

One final thought: For decades safety and health pros have been lectured about the need to “sell safety” to employees, supers, execs, communities, etc. Motivate, inspire, get buy-in, engagement. Well, you can’t do that with your mouth shut.
(Editor’s Note: Read this month’s cover story to learn how ASSE is developing a more positive language to describe safety activity.)

Dave Johnson
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