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(Un)Safe, (Un)Secure, and (Not)Vital: Marketing a Nuclear Power Plant

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Since al Qaeda terrorists commandeered two jumbo jets into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, New York City has been on high alert. On any given day, residents and tourists alike see armed military personnel patrolling subway stations, notable landmarks and the City's financial district. While visitors to New York City may feel as if they've entered a war zone, the solemn military personnel make many who call New York home feel at least a bit safer since the towers fell.

In the months following the attacks, New York City officials attempted to draw visitors back to the Big Apple. The city was declared safe and secure; tourists were deemed vital to the City's economic recovery. After the initial fear and shock subsided, throngs of Americans from across the country have made their own pilgrimage to the World Trade Center site to honor the victims of the attacks and their families and to denounce the psychological reign of terror brought on by those who engage in violence.

What few visitors to the city realize, however, is that armed military guards standing at attention in Times Square are incapable of protecting the city from arguably the greatest terrorist threat to the region if not the country: the Indian Point nuclear power plant, located on the banks of the Hudson River 35 miles north of Midtown Manhattan.

Since 9/11, a movement to shut down Indian Point has evolved into a massive citizen-driven, bi-partisan effort to protect the region. To date, more than 70 local, regional and national organizations are working with more than 400 elected Republicans and Democrats to rid the area of this unpopular and unneeded nuclear power plant. While experts maintain that the plant is a safety and security risk, Entergy Nuclear Northeast - the owner and operator of the plant - has creatively co-opted city officials' words as its own. "Safe, Secure, Vital" has become the company's disingenuous mantra.



Entergy's Indian Point nuclear power plant sits on New York's Hudson River just 35 miles from Midtown Manhattan.

At the center of the Indian Point debate is a battle of words and images, much of which plays out in the New York metropolitan court of public opinion. With guidance from the global public relations firm Burson-Marsteller,

Entergy has spearheaded an aggressive, misleading and expensive campaign to save the plant from being shut down.

The Fight to Close Indian Point

Due to its proximity to the world's financial center and the severe consequences to public health, the environment and the economy that would result from a major accident or terrorist attack, Indian Point is a nuclear power plant that deserves special attention. Twenty million people live within a 50-mile radius of the plant-the highest population density within 50 miles of any nuclear power plant in the United States. A terrorist attack on either of Indian Point's two reactors or their spent fuel pools, or a large-scale accident, could render much of the tri-state area uninhabitable and indefinitely contaminate the watershed that supplies drinking water to nine million people in the region. That the plant sits atop an active fault line, daily destroys significant amounts of Hudson River aquatic life and has abysmal security, operations and safety records only compounds the arguments for closure.

Leading the drive to shut down Indian Point is my organization, Riverkeeper, a New York environmental watchdog group that works to protect the Hudson River from polluters. Working in conjunction with the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition - an alliance of over 70 environmental, civic, health and public policy groups - Riverkeeper has sustained a hard-hitting campaign against Entergy for over three years.

As is the case with many grassroots movements that oppose a corporate entity, much of the fight is over public opinion. And like many corporations that find themselves under intense public scrutiny, Entergy has turned to a corporate-friendly PR powerhouse to wage its battle: Burson-Marsteller, best known for greenwashing the Union Carbide Bhopal accident in India and for whitewashing human rights violations by totalitarian regimes across the globe. With an expansive war chest, B-M has assisted Entergy in developing a multifaceted disinformation campaign that not only misrepresents the facts but also pits communities against each other and instills economic fears in those who are already suffering from a poor economy.

Entergy's Spin Machine

Entergy and Burson-Marsteller have implemented nearly every type of corporate PR and marketing to curry favor with elected officials and their constituents. They have invested heavily in radio, television and print advertising. They have also spent substantial time and energy creating a chimera of community support, including a phony "grassroots" base, a business coalition and free advertising gimmicks typically associated with grassroots movements such as yard signs, bumper stickers, refrigerator magnets and lapel pins. In addition, Entergy hired New York's 9/11 hero, Rudolph Giuliani, as a paid security consultant, despite his lack of expertise in nuclear power plant security. Most recently, Entergy was awarded the first-ever Edison Electric Institute's Advocacy Excellence Award, begging the question: Who came up with the idea and why has it taken so long to create such an award, considering electricity has been around for over a century?

Just how much money Entergy has invested in public relations is unknown, but their apparent close attention to PR instead of safety and security issues has drawn ire from many elected officials, including Westchester County Executive Andy Spano, in whose county the plant operates. When it was discovered that Indian Point's emergency sirens do not rotate properly, Spano declared, "If [Entergy] can advertise on the Yankee games, they have the money to fix the goddamn sirens."

Indeed, one of the biggest hurdles Riverkeeper and anti-Indian Point advocates have faced in their three-year campaign is Entergy's seemingly limitless budget. As *PR Watch's* John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton wryly note in their 1995 book *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*, "The polluter will always be able to outspend and outgun the environmentalists, and can bring virtually an unlimited amount of propaganda and lobbypower to an issue, simply by writing a larger check or reaching out

to other businesses similarly threatened by reform."

Politicking is also a large part of Entergy's efforts. A 2003 report by Common Cause/NY found that the company spent a grand total of \$3,498,315 on campaign contributions and lobbying on the New York local, New York state and federal levels from 1999 to 2003.

Whether the target audience is community members, local businesses or elected officials, Entergy's message has focused on three ideas: safety, security and energy reliability. Attempting to confuse, if not control, public opinion on the areas where it is most vulnerable, Entergy has run a series of ads that suggest a reality in stark opposition to the assessments made by environmental, security and energy experts:

Safety: A full-page ad in the April 16, 2002 *New York Times* called "Why safety is synonymous with Indian Point Energy Center" features a father walking hand-in-hand with his toddler son, while their Labrador retriever accompanies them on a nature walk. This pastoral image appears as an attempt to divert parents' concerns away from Indian Point's abominable safety record spanning three decades to the beauty of the Hudson Valley.

What Entergy doesn't want the public to know is how many safety problems have plagued the two reactors since they went online in the 1970s. Most recently, Indian Point has had radioactive releases, nine unplanned shut downs in an 18-month period (the national average is less than one per reactor), a fire at Unit 3 and broken emergency sirens. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has given Indian Point's Unit 2 the commission's lowest safety rating for a reactor. Unit 2's "red" rating resulted from a February 2000 release of 20,000 gallons of radioactive coolant into the plant from a ruptured steam generator tube.

Security: Many of Entergy's security ads are testimonials showcasing security guards who make non-committal claims that the plant is safe. As one guard states, "I know because it's my job to make it that way." These ads ignore the fact that a number of current and former Indian Point security guards have turned whistleblowers in an effort to alert public officials of grave security problems at the plant.

Substantiating the whistleblowers' claims is a 2002 Entergy-commissioned report that found only 19 percent of security guards felt they could protect Indian Point from a terrorist attack. Many guards were physically unfit to perform their duties, and many repeatedly failed their annual marksmanship tests.

Energy reliability: Several studies commissioned by Riverkeeper show the region can not only maintain energy reliability without Indian Point's power but also without exorbitant increases in energy bills. But when Entergy realized that the public was not necessarily buying into its claims that the plant is safe and secure, it shifted focus to a much more complicated - and controversial - issue: energy reliability. It sought to transfer the public's safety and security fears to fears of economic and energy security. In a February 2002 ad, Entergy implied that with Indian Point closed, New York could "head for an energy crisis of California proportions." Ironically, the company offered, "We thought you should know the following. So that your opinion on this important issue can be based on fact, not fear." Not only were their claims not based on fact but they also evoked a fear in the public that has yet to be alleviated: loss of electricity and economic hardship.

For some, this economic fear prevents them from supporting the closure of Indian Point. When Entergy discovered that they had identified the one issue that could - through precise public relations - confuse the public and stall the closure of their aged plants, they forged ahead with a comprehensive PR plan. To thwart the growing movement to close Indian Point, Entergy issued threats of rolling blackouts, skyrocketing energy bills and economic uncertainty to a region already suffering from the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

While Riverkeeper has managed to raise money to run ads countering Entergy's deceptive ads and PR, the environmental group's efforts pale in comparison to the number of ads bought by the multi-billion dollar corporation.

Divide & Conquer

In fall 2003, two key components of this new PR tactic were unleashed on the public: a phony "grassroots" campaign and NY AREA, a coalition comprised of "business, labor and community leaders committed to finding clean, low-cost and reliable electricity solutions that foster prosperity for all." Forming a "grassroots" campaign is a common PR tactic used by corporations under attack. This practice of creating fake grassroots organizations is sometimes referred to as "astroturf" campaigning.

Shortly before regional elections in October, Entergy launched a campaign targeting African-American, Latino and low-income communities. Under the rubric of community outreach and grassroots mobilization, the corporation engaged the help of a front group, the Campaign for Affordable Energy, Environmental and Economic Justice. Riverkeeper could find no evidence of the Campaign's existence prior to its work protecting Indian Point. The astroturf group disseminated bilingual brochures, circulated "Keep Indian Point Open" petitions and orchestrated citizen phone calls to local officials who were in highly contested re-election campaigns. One of these phone calls, placed by a confused citizen who was being fed information during the call, prompted an elected official to investigate the issue. This investigation led to a complete disclosure of Entergy's latest scheme to hoodwink the public.

This targeted approach was an attempt to divide communities by race, ethnicity and class. Their new, bilingual brochure was filled with hyperbole and fear-mongering, warning that if Indian Point were to close, residents would face skyrocketing electric bills, loss of power to public and private buildings, and the building of dirty power plants in low-income communities and communities of color.

Westchester County Executive Andy Spano found the campaign so "reprehensible" that he wrote a public letter to Michael Kansler, Entergy Nuclear Northeast's President. "Contrary to your intention, what you have really accomplished is to make the people of Westchester even more concerned about Indian Point. Now, in addition to our concerns about the plant's safety, we can all wonder about Entergy's integrity and ethics. I cannot for the life of me understand how a major company like Entergy would resort to tactics that are so offensive."

Despite the scolding, Entergy has refused to withdraw its "grassroots" campaign.

To counter Entergy's PR campaign, Riverkeeper, the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition, and Communities United for Responsible Energy - one of New York City's largest environmental justice organizations - are providing information about Indian Point and energy reliability to community members. By engaging with the broader community, our alliance is working to bridge the rift that Entergy created with its dubious public relations.

Solidifying the Base

Unfortunately, Entergy's divide and conquer tactics have been somewhat successful. Some who received their misleading literature remain convinced that Indian Point's closure would be devastating to



the region. But we at Riverkeeper believe corporate PR campaigns and "grassroots" movements can be countered with real community organizing. By meeting with people in their neighborhood coffee houses and school auditoriums, advocacy groups like ours - with strong social networks and proven track records - are helping build the anti-Indian Point citizen's movement.

A terrorist attack on the Indian Point nuclear power plant could potentially expose millions of people to deadly radiation poison and cause trillions of dollars of damage. (Map provided by Riverkeeper.)

With over 20 million people living in the area, there are too many lives at stake to not continue educating the public about the risks associated with Indian Point. "Chernobyl on the Hudson? The Health and Economic Impacts of a Terrorist Attack at Indian Point Power Plant" is a Riverkeeper-commissioned study authored by Dr. Edwin Lyman of Union of Concerned Scientists. Lyman concludes that a successful terrorist attack on Indian Point could cause as many as 518,000 long-term deaths from cancer and as many as 44,000 short-term deaths from acute radiation poisoning within the 50-mile radius of Indian Point, depending on weather conditions. In addition to severe health consequences from a worst-case scenario at Indian Point, the study predicts that economic damages within 100 miles could be as great as \$2.1 trillion based on Environmental Protection Agency guidance for population relocation and cleanup.

To learn more about Indian Point and Riverkeeper's campaign to shut it down or to receive a copy of "Chernobyl on the Hudson?", visit Riverkeeper's website http://riverkeeper.org/campaign.php/indian_point [1].

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