

LA TIMES



PR inLA: [Just wait for it...](#)

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Tracking - and anticipating - public attitudes are fundamentals to public relations.

But, with quicker access to information via Google, Twitter and other online resources, are attitudes changing faster? And, if they are, is the conventional wisdom to "go with the flow" and adapt your strategies as soon as the shifts occur?

Or, do you take the "long view" and promote a steady, more constant message or program with the understanding (hope?) that opinions will eventually come back to the point where they started?

It's like that history lesson - do you win the battle but lose the war?

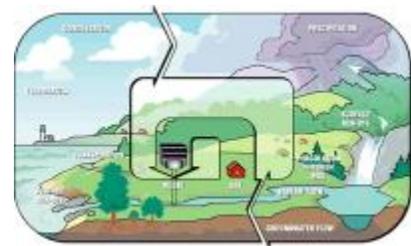
It's also like driving Los Angeles freeways. (OK, it's like war). You can hold steady at 65 mph - in a lane other than the "fast lane" -and let all the others whip by you at 80. If you've done this before, you know that eventually, you'll catch up with the speeders because traffic moves in groups. The "blockage" formed by the next "group" of motorists will cause the speeders to slow down and allow you to catch up - at your nice even pace of 65. You may have lost the temporary battle, but you won the war.

But if you drive in LA, it's hard not to speed when given the chance.

So, are we then "tempted" to speed up and change our PR habits because everyone around us is moving faster? Or, is the better action to create a message and stick with it through the rough spots, knowing the war will be won?

Check out what has happened in cities around California when it comes to using treated wastewater and turning it into safe drinking water.

Almost 10 years ago, this idea was dead in the water (sorry for the pun). A Los Angeles City Council candidate (he didn't win) wanted an edge (publicity grab?) and coined the phrase "toilet to tap" in his singular campaign platform to block a proposed wastewater treatment experiment by the city. Although the science backed the city's idea and state regulations would prevent any direct use of treated



wastewater in the city's water system, "Toilet to Tap" did the trick. It was easy to say. The phrase created an ugly image and, bam, the idea was killed. The city was ill prepared for the public anger created by a simple phrase, and never got the chance to recover from the initial blows.

But rather than totally abandon the concept, other public agencies stuck to their guns and proceeded with the same plan. The science and the process were improving. And, it also helped that California's water future was becoming more and more dire.

The first agency to succeed in changing public opinion on "treated wastewater" as a drinking water solution was the [Orange County Water District](#).

This summer, it was the City of San Diego's turn to demonstrate how a proposed water supply solution, bolstered by a consistent message and unwavering strategy, allowed an idea to reach its proper destination.

As chronicled by a San Diego Union Tribune [writer](#), not only was there no public opposition to the decision to proceed with a "toilet to tap" plant, the city received support from some very notable and high-powered environmental organizations, among others.

For sure, success for Orange County and San Diego was attributed to other important public relations tactics - primarily in coalition building and, in the case of Orange County, significant public outreach. And, for sure, they had the benefit of evaluating past failures and making adjustments.

More importantly, in my opinion, was that public agencies did not change course for the early, easy wins. Even with the speed of information at supersonic levels over the Internet, and the risk of public opinion getting out of control because a few well-placed antagonistic comments, these public agencies demonstrated the value of holding onto the long view.

Does this mean you can't make adjustments? Of course not. But as these examples have proven, public opinion can shift back to your favor - if you allow it.