

Riley Mathewson: 5 steps for winning in the court of public opinion

It's a fact of life that local government authorities become embroiled in messy legal actions even though they've done everything by the book.

Even when you win in the court of law it's still possible to lose in the court of public opinion; think heritage listings, retaining walls, overlooking and objections to approvals for special community activities.

While the legal profession has the important role of determining and resolving the rights and wrongs of a matter, the community is forming opinions about the organisation and people involved. How you present your case in the public domain therefore directly influences attitudes and support – long after the judgement is given and the parties retire from 'field of battle'.

Following are some basics for managing the 'court of public opinion':

- Brief your internal and external communications advisers as early as possible.

- Good communications come from teamwork between lawyers and communicators
- Project your message – consider courthouse media conferences, media briefings and proactive media statements
- Keep it simple. Repackage legalese into plain English and keep stakeholders up-to-date
- Focus on transparency, honesty, empathy and, if appropriate, contrition

Notwithstanding legal restrictions, the simple rule is – tell it first, tell it all and tell it yourself.

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