

Priming the Town Pump

(Case 1012)

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The Case:

Your firm worked long and hard visiting the public works engineer and staff in the City of Elm Grove, some 150 miles from your office, to demonstrate your interest and the firm's capabilities with regard to the design of a new wastewater treatment plant that was expected to be announced in a few months.

You knew of this planned project because your receptionist's brother lives in Elm Grove and is friendly with one of the operators at the present treatment plant. As a result of that lead, you assigned one of your engineers that lives the closest to Elm Grove to attend the monthly city council meetings and spend a little time getting to know who the key players were in the public works arena.

Once the project looked as though it might become a reality, you concentrated on making your qualifications known. You realized that it might be an uphill battle, since there were already two firms in or very close to Elm Grove who had done work on public works design projects for the city over the past five to ten years. In addition, you found out through your engineer that the public works engineer, Stan Uprite, and his two project managers ran a tight ship and had provided excellent services to the community since the director had been hired some 18 years ago.

As it turned out, your firm was responsive to the SOQ for the project, was short-listed as one of four firms (including the two local firms), submitted a thorough and somewhat innovative proposal highlighting your experience in the selection of customized treatment plant equipment, and was selected for the project.

During design of the project, your project engineer, Florence (Flo) Moore, specified a series of pumps manufactured by an excellent, but little known, company called Excelsior Pumps. When the city's project manager, Dee Taylor, reviewed the specifications for the project, she questioned the cost of the pumps and whether the anticipated maintenance-free warranty would actually hold up under use. As an alternative, she strongly recommended using a standard series of pumps manufactured in the adjoining state by Pumpco, at a purchase price approximately \$20,000 below the cost of the Excelsior pump series.

Even though the long-term advantages and life-cycle savings resulting from use of the Excelsior pumps were pointed out and documented from several previous projects completed by your firm, Ms. Taylor still insisted that Pumpco should be

the supplier, especially since the initial cost was lower and the city was currently in a belt-tightening mode. Since the issue grew to the point where it had the potential of damaging the relationship between your firm and the city, you finally decided with Flo Moore to specify the Pumpco equipment in the bid documents.

It is now three years after completion of the project and the Elm Grove Gazette has just called for you on the telephone and left a message to inform you that the treatment plant pumps have failed again for the third time in 11 months, and to ask what statement you would like to make about the situation. They are especially interested in your comments regarding who was responsible for selection of the pumps.

What do you do?

Alternate Approaches and Survey Results for “Priming the Town Pump” (Case 1012)

1. Call and tell the Gazette reporter that you have not been aware of the problems with the pumps in Elm Grove since your office is some distance away, and that you cannot comment.
Percentage of votes agreeing: 1%
2. Call the reporter and say that the choice of pumps was made by the city and your firm since the initial cost was less and there was no information to suggest that the long term use of the pumps would be a problem.
Percentage of votes agreeing: 3%
3. Call the Gazette reporter and tell them the truth: your firm had originally recommended Excelsior pumps because of their excellent reputation, your experience with the product, and their maintenance-free warranty. Nonetheless, the city’s project manager, Dee Taylor, rejected the recommendation in favor of the cheaper Pumpco product. Now it appears that the difference in initial cost has more than been eaten up by maintenance costs on the Pumpco product over the last 11 months.
Percentage of votes agreeing: 8%
4. Call Dee Taylor (the city’s project manager), to determine what the facts really are, including whether the pumps are just inferior and cannot operate efficiently with use, whether the manufacturer’s recommended maintenance schedule has been adhered to, and whether the manufacturer has agreed to rectify the situation, technically and financially. Then call the Gazette reporter to inform them of the facts you have just learned.
Percentage of votes agreeing: 31%
5. Instead of calling the reporter, call Dee Taylor at the city and strongly recommend that she go the Elm Grove Gazette and explain the process which was used in selecting the pumps. Tell her that the city should take

responsibility for the bad pumps because they had been presented data about the more costly Excelsior pumps and they had decided to go with the low cost alternative.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 3%

6. Determine from Dee Taylor if Pumpco is going to rectify the problem, then call the Gazette reporter and suggest that they contact the city's public works director, Stan Uprite, for an official statement to that effect.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 7%

7. Call the reporter and indicate that you cannot make a statement without looking into the matter further. Then call the city's Director of Public Works, Stan Uprite, and tell him that the city should submit a written statement about the situation to the Gazette, and that your legal counsel insists that you review and revise the letter as necessary to accurately reflect your firm's position before the letter is sent.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 13%

8. Do not call the reporter. Instead, send a letter to the city indicating what you have heard about the pump problem. State that you want to have the record clear that your firm is not at fault for having allowed the city to change your original pump manufacturer recommendations. Indicate it is the responsibility of the city to require Pumpco to honor its warranty, or if for some reason the warranty no longer applies, to make the required repairs and absorb the associated costs, chalking up the experience to a good lesson learned.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 4%

9. Do not return the reporter's call. Instead, arrange a meeting for you and Flo Moore with Dee Taylor (the city's project manager), the public works director and the city attorney to discuss the situation. In the meeting stress that the decision was made to specify the Pumpco product for what appeared to the city's representative to be good reason at the time, and even though you did not feel it to be as good a product as the Excelsior pumps, you did not reject the Pumpco product, since they had a decent reputation and an acceptable warranty. Be sure to get an agreement that the city will not involve your firm in the media.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 21%

10. Call back and tell the Gazette reporter to contact the Elm Grove Director of Public Works, Stan Uprite, for a statement. Do not offer any information on your own.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 2%

11. Do not return the reporter's call. News gets old rapidly and reporters have story deadlines to meet. They are only interested in getting statements from

people as soon as possible and are rarely willing to wait a few days or more. Besides, by talking to the reporter, you run the risk that they may not understand the technical details and will end up misquoting you or using portions of your statement out of context (you never get a chance to review and edit the material before it is printed).

Percentage of votes agreeing: 1%

Forum Comments from Respondents

1. If the city avoids addressing the question and I am contacted again by the Elm Grove Gazette, I would tell them the exact process used in selecting the pumps, including the belt tightening mode of the city at the time the decision was made. I would not BLAME anyone; I would just state what I had recommended and why the cheaper pumps were selected by the city. I probably would not work in Elm Grove again, but worse things have happened.
2. "Recall" that the selection of the pumps was an "economy" item at the time. Don't overtly shift the blame on the city. Let the newspaper draw that conclusion themselves and be relieved that you aren't pressing the point.
3. I would answer any direct questions the reporter asks about our firm's involvement with the city's pumps, but I would seek the approval of our firm's lawyers before issuing any statements to the press.
4. Remember that you are not obliged to talk to the press. Your first obligation is to the client - the newspaper story is probably inaccurate or incomplete. If you were to respond to the Gazette's inquiry, you would probably be misquoted or your answer taken out of context. Refer them back to the client's representative at the city.
5. It is highly unlikely that more than one pump would fail at one time, which probably means that the system would not shut down completely and that a temporary pump could be set up quickly until the failed pump was repaired or replaced. (In fact, the plant should have been designed to provide for a single pump failure.) Thus, the issue is one of inconvenience vs. failure and environmental incident. I would explain this reasoning to the Gazette reporter and tell them that the higher cost (quality?) pumps were originally selected by my firm but, because the city was looking to cut costs, you, jointly with the city project manager, chose to go with a lower cost pump realizing that this decision imposed some risk.
6. Selection of the pump is a dead issue. As the design engineer you agreed to the city's request and therefore bought into the decision. You should contact Dee Taylor to determine the exact status of the pumps and then contact Pumpco to discuss their next action to rectify the situation. Also discuss with the city your desire to see the situation rectified and suggest an

engineering contract to fix the problem or replace the pumps. The city knows who requested these pumps and to keep pushing the issue is detrimental to the relationship and the ultimate fix.

7. Call the reporter and indicate that you need to investigate the story further before you can make a statement. Schedule a meeting with Flo Moore, Dee Taylor, Stan Uprite and possibly a representative from Pumpco. Focus on how the problem is to be solved. If Pumpco admits fault but believes they can rectify the situation, agree to give the Gazette a statement pointing out how Pumpco is standing by their product, and the problem will be resolved. If Pumpco does not cooperate and your company can afford to "eat" some costs, offer to pay part or all of the cost to convert to Excelsior pumps. Try to work out a deal with Excelsior to give the pumps for a special one-time buy emphasizing the potential for your future business with them. Give the Gazette a statement that the pumps are being replaced by your company (and the city) with a more expensive Excelsior pump that may hold up better for the city's particular application.
8. You should call the reporter (avoiding her call will look as if you are avoiding the situation and have something to hide) and tell them you can't respond to their questions at this time because you do not have all of the facts. Meet with the city to determine the facts in the case and quietly remind the city of your role in the pump purchasing decision. Then develop a public relations strategy with Stan Uprite. The city should be the party to communicate with the media, but probably through jointly-developed statements. This approach addresses the important concerns of figuring out what the problem is and resolving it, not deceiving the news media (and, thus, the public), and preserving your working relationship with the city.
9. Do not return the reporter's call. Before acting, advise those concerned within your firm of the potential PR problems, while verifying adequate documentation of the company's position about the choice of pumps. As soon as the appropriate personnel within your company are up to speed, approach the city's project manager (do not go over anyone's head) and offer, as a goodwill gesture, to help investigate the implementation of a solution to the crisis. Tactfully remind the city of your company's position regarding the choice of pumps, while avoiding saying "I told you so." The focus must be on solving the problem. If the problem is faulty equipment, assist the city in obtaining satisfaction from the pump manufacturer. Your company is clearly not responsible for the problem, so there is plenty of room to be magnanimous and try to deliver total quality service to the customer.
10. If at all possible, the media should be avoided altogether. Having this story published will hurt someone's credibility. A very similar situation came up in my hometown with the pump on the city fire truck, and soon everyone was

angry at each other. While this is a matter of public record and interest, it won't hurt anyone if it does not get published. If put off long enough, the Gazette will soon get tired of chasing the story.

11. All too often there is a tendency for the engineer (and others as well) to protect him/herself and the firm by telling the truth, but taken out of context of the situation, in order to turn the focus on someone else. Although there is certainly nothing unethical about telling the truth, it is important to determine whether the item of truth is germane to the issue at hand or is merely a self-serving device to avoid responsibility or involvement in solving the situation.