



TELLING OUR STORY

What is the ROI of a good public image?

This question is at the heart of a historic new partnership forming in the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Seaway maritime industry. At an inaugural meeting held in Monroe, Michigan on July 20, the American Great Lakes Ports Association, the Lake Carriers' Association, the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation and Fednav Ltd. came together to form the Great Lakes-Seaway Public Affairs Corporation. This not-for-profit entity will be the governing body of a new regional public information and education initiative for the maritime industry.

The need for a regional public affairs program became obvious in 2009. "Great Lakes, Great Peril," "Major Shipping Route Fosters a Plague of Sea Life," "Environmental Blockade Threatens Seaway" and other negative headlines were found in the region's newspapers almost weekly. Two major newspapers called for closure of the Seaway on their editorial pages. With a drumbeat of negative news, elected officials began to distance themselves from our causes.

A 2010 public opinion survey conducted by the Chicago polling firm Penn Schoen Berland revealed both opportunities and threats. Respondents suspected that the maritime industry plays an important role in the region's economy, however, they could not say how. The poll also revealed a lack of trust in our industry on environmental matters and support for additional government regulations on the industry.

How did our industry get into this situation? For far too long, many in the Great Lakes/Seaway maritime industry felt they could operate below the radar. Ducking criticism was the industry's primary response. Attacks went unanswered; misinformation went uncorrected. This left an information vacuum that was filled by detractors, who were actively defining our industry to the public.

In response, a group of industry leaders stood up the Marine Delivers public affairs program in 2010. At the heart of that pro-

gram was a determination to take charge of the industry's public image. Three key messages became the focus: 1) the Great Lakes maritime industry is important to the economy and jobs; 2) marine transport has positive environmental attributes, including superior fuel efficiency and low greenhouse gas emissions; 3) marine transport is the safest way to move freight.

To make these points effectively, we needed good data. Unfortunately, available data was inconsistent or out of date. To remedy the situation and build a foundation of reliable information, we commissioned four studies. The first was an economic impact analysis of the entire bi-national Great

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Lakes navigation system (2011). The second was an environmental benefits study comparing Great Lakes marine transport to other surface modes (2013). The third was a safety profile of the industry (2014). The fourth is an investment survey, which will quantify capital investments made in the navigation system by both the public and private sectors (to be completed this year).

Marine Delivers was more than studies. Program staff regularly engaged journalists throughout the region to provide them with information and access to industry leaders for expert commentary. Whether issuing press releases, sending tweets, drafting speeches or planning special events, our public affairs professionals worked to get our key messages out to the public.

In an early 2014 reorganization, the Ma-

rine Delivers program was subsumed into the Chamber of Marine Commerce (CMC). Under this new structure, the CMC will continue to champion a positive public image for the industry. The new Great Lakes-Seaway Public Affairs Corporation will complement these efforts—as well as the many efforts being made by individual port authorities, vessel operators, trade associations and other industry stakeholders.

Public education can pay off. The North American rail industry has been pursuing an aggressive multi-year public affairs program called Freight Rail Works. Through print, television, radio and other media, this program pushes key messages such as the economic importance of railroads and the modal efficiency of rail compared to truck transport. The program works to explain how everyday products are delivered by rail and how rail improves the quality of life.

So, what is the ROI of a good public image? In the case of the rail industry, it's been favorable regulations and support for industry infrastructure. During the Obama presidency, the federal government has invested more than \$600 million in the nation's freight rail system. A favorable public image makes those investments viable. The Great Lakes/Seaway maritime industry is equally dependent on government (federal, state and local) for workable regulations and investment in navigation infrastructure.

While we may never field a public information program as robust as the rail industry, it is clear that Great Lakes/Seaway industry leaders are no longer willing to be complacent. We know what a bad public image looks like and we don't want to return to 2009.

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