

by Charlotte Brody and Monica Rohde

ORGANIZING TOOLBOX: ORGANIZING A SUCCESSFUL ACTION

“CMA, THE CANCER STARTS HERE!”

The chant was heard bouncing off the sky scrapers as 240 activists marched upon the Chemical Manufacturers Association headquarters on October 4, 1997. It has become a tradition at CCHW's conventions that an action be part of the agenda. This year, we kicked off Breast Cancer Awareness Month by sending a message to Corporate America, demanding they take responsibility for the cancer caused by the products and pollution they produce.

Sandra Steingraber, author of *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment*, gave a moving speech before we left the hotel. Then, following a huge banner that read, “CMA, The Cancer Starts Here,” 240 people and almost as many yellow and blue balloons, moved by subway to the shiny new suburban skyscraper that houses the Chemical Manufacturers Association and its offshoot, the Chlorine Chemistry Council.

Police officers and specially hired security guards were waiting for us in front of the building. Traffic cones were set up to define where the public sidewalk ended and the building's private property began. Squeezed onto the newly defined public sidewalk, twelve men and women told stories of cancer and chemicals in their community. Childhood leukemia and PCB dumping in New Bedford, Massachusetts; childhood brain cancer and hazardous waste incineration in Rochester, New York; and lung, liver and soft tissue cancers and dioxin exposure in Pensacola, Florida are a few of the stories they told. At the end of each person's story, they turned, pointed at the building and said, “But the cancer starts here.” Each time the crowd responded by pointing and chanting “The Cancer Starts Here!”

After the event was over, participants gave CCHW many complements for putting together a powerful, well-organized action. But people also expressed concern that there was little press coverage and asked why we had gone to an empty building on a Saturday.

The complements and the concerns addressed many of the things you should and shouldn't do when organizing a successful

action. So with thanks to the dozens of people who talked to us about our event, here are some guidelines for organizing an effective action.

1. ESTABLISH CLEAR GOALS FOR YOUR ACTION. MAKE SURE ALL PARTICIPANTS UNDERSTAND AND SHARE THESE GOALS.

Plan your action for the intended audience. The CMA action was designed to be a hands on workshop for convention participants and to call attention to the corporate polluters responsible for harming the environment and health of our communities. The goal for this event was not to attract media attention to a new campaign or to disrupt the workings of the CMA, which was why we held the event on a Saturday afternoon. If your goal is to generate media coverage then your choice of date, time and location must be made with this in mind.



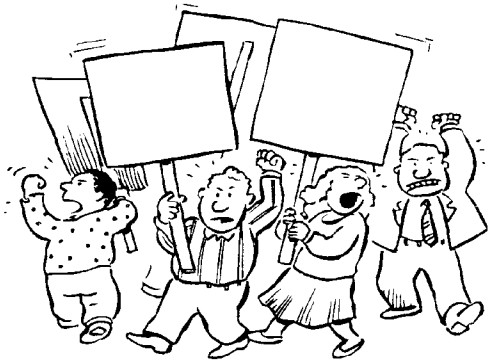
The crowd tells CMA that “The Cancer Starts Here!”

2. DESIGN YOUR ACTION TO EMPOWER PARTICIPANTS. ACTIONS ARE A POWERFUL WAY TO BUILD COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN YOUR EFFORTS.

Actions need to feel powerful for the participants, not just for the camera crews. The people who come are putting a lot of trust in the planners. In return the planners should design an event that respects all participants. Take the needs of participants into consideration when planning logistics. Select, or create, a site where all participants can see and hear. Consider accessibility by public transportation, weather conditions, and the length of the event as you plan it.

3. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE TRAINED, EASY TO IDENTIFY PEACEKEEPERS OR MARSHALS WHO ARE CLEAR ABOUT THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES.

The peacekeepers at our event got 240 people on and off the subway system without a hitch. They patrolled the perimeter of the crowd, kept people out of traffic, and interfaced with police officers who were expecting more trouble than we ever planned to give. The peacekeepers' experience at previous actions, their willingness to take charge and their shared understanding of the action's goals turned a good idea into a great action.



Identify a core group of folks to act as peacekeepers at the event. Peacekeepers are generally responsible for leading the crowd to and from the rally site, serving as liaison between police or security officers and the organizers, and making sure participants stay within legal limits during the event. Conduct a training session for designated peacekeepers prior to the event and make sure roles and responsibilities are understood. Peacekeepers should wear a brightly colored arm band, t-shirt or hat for quick easy identification. Peacekeepers need to be able to respond at a moment's notice and therefore should not be expected to hand out fliers or carry signs.

Well in advance, event organizers should determine whether or not there will be people risking arrest. If the goal is to risk arrest, decide if its a mass act of civil disobedience, or just a select few who break off from the crowd and get arrested. No one should risk arrest without being trained in the principles of non-violent direct action. Similarly, no one should ever be placed in a potential arrest situation without their consent and the advice of a lawyer. If an organized arrest situation is planned, make sure there is a law-



Jim Simmons tells of cancer in his community, in front of the CMA.

yer present at the rally or on call so they can facilitate the legal process. But action organizers should be prepared for participants to become excited by the event and risk arrest without notifying anyone. Organizers need to decide prior to the action how they will respond in such a situation, and make sure that the peacekeepers are aware of this decision.

4. ANTICIPATE SURPRISES AND BE PREPARED FOR EVERY CONTINGENCY.

At the CMA Action, we were not prepared for the security guards hired specifically to keep us from hanging our banner and using the retaining wall as a stage. Had we thought of it, we would have come equipped with an alternative stage and megaphone. Had we brought step stools, we could have held the banner above the crowd and it would have been seen by everyone, including those driving and walking by. Nevertheless, this underscores the importance of having several visual means for getting your message across. We made placards for participants to hold, so our message was still visible.

5. ENCOURAGE BYSTANDERS TO BECOME YOUR ALLIES.

Identify people to distribute flyers to passers-by, explaining what your group is doing and why they should be interested. The flyer or leaflet should also tell them how to get more information on the issue and how to become involved. If your action stops traffic or in any other way interferes with innocent bystanders, your flyer should apologize for the inconvenience and explain the importance of the action's goals.

6. RECYCLE GOOD IDEAS.

The action at the Chemical Manufacturers Association was a hybrid of an idea, which was never implemented, from the National Coalition for Health and Environmental Justice and the Toxic Links Coalition's Cancer Awareness Month toxic tours. We amended the idea to fit our situation and resources. As a result we were inspired, some people participated in their first action, the CMA spent some extra money on security guards, and all of the participants can replicate the action in their own community. ■