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Armed with scare tactics and social media, professional pipeline protesters are requiring the energy industry to use advanced communication to silence their claims.



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The following is the second of a two-part series. [Click here for the first part.](#)

As evidenced by the overwhelming opposition to the Dakota Access and Keystone pipelines, pipeline protests around the nation are beginning to spiral out of control. Up against professional protestors that have proven their ability to stop a project in its tracks, the energy industry is finding that it now must be armed with modern-day tools to effectively quash social unrest.

Professional protestors will continue to proliferate, leaving a trail of delayed or denied oil and gas projects in its wake, said Jim Sisco, president and founder of ENODO Global, a consulting firm specializing in risk analysis and population-centric engagement, to Rigzone.

“Companies can avoid these conflicts if they get in front of them, but many don’t want to make the investment up front. Mentally, historically, philosophically – the mindset has always been to go ahead with the project and deal with the fallout if it happens, but hopefully it does not,” he said. “But hope is a poor planning tool.”

Many citizens protest because they lack basic information about a project, he said. To counter this issue, pipeline companies and operators need to proactively share their plans and engage with the public before getting started. This enables companies to address public concerns, control misinformation and mitigate protests before they get out of hand.

“It is fear that drives protests. Fear evolves from not knowing,” Sisco said. “Companies do not have strategic communication plans that effectively articulate project goals and objectives and how they are going to accomplish them. If they did, and messaged them on social media, it would counter or drown out the activists. Show me one company that is proactively engaging in or that can manage in the social media environment and I would argue there are none.”

Finding Solutions from a War

As a former intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy during the 2009 Operation Enduring Freedom mission, Sisco was charged with integrating U.S. Special Forces into communities in Afghanistan. For the troops to be accepted, they had to find a common denominator with the Afghan people and earn their trust.

He helped create a process to determine a community’s identity and basic needs, which enabled units to connect with people on a grassroots level. After coming to understand that the majority of Afghans identified themselves as farmers and struggled with failing crops, Sisco leveraged agricultural development specialists to introduce low-cost, agrarian-based projects, which increased agricultural yields by 350 percent.

That success was followed by a 10-fold reduction in roadside bombs in some of the most insecure districts of the restrictive Kandahar province, he said.

Over a relatively short period of time, U.S. troops were accepted by the local Afghan communities and allowed to carry out their mission.

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“Companies that invest and have good relations with communities are more successful in the long run. That’s the bottom line,” he said.

Modern Day Tactics

Social risk, when properly understood, can be measured, forecasted and mitigated, Sisco said.

“Until a company understands how they are impacted by social risk, they will continue to look at things through the traditional lens.”

That lens includes standard practices that are no longer sufficient to stamp out conflict, Sisco said. He explained: Business intelligence is largely driven by geopolitical factors and tends to be geared toward formal institutions and business elites. Security measures focus on protecting assets and personnel, sometimes creating physical and psychological barriers between a company and communities. Public relations strategies tend to be reactive in nature, and corporate social responsibility programs often overlook the true needs of a community and can actually cause a rift between a company and local people.

Rather, comprehensive social risk analysis is crucial for projects to be completed on time and within budget. This includes the real-time monitoring of the sentiment of a community through social media channels, being equally savvy with social media to communicate transparently with the public, and having a communications strategy in place to diffuse protests before they escalate.

By using a risk management model that combines components of social alignment and real-time data collection and analytics, Sisco said pipeline companies and operators can stay ahead of social crises before they develop.

Expanding Into Universities

Many are hopping on board with Sisco’s approach, and so has Texas A&M University. The first known online course of its kind – an Introduction to Population-Centric Social Risk Analysis – was launched in June 2017 on the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) website. It was developed by ENODO Global and TEEX as part of the institution’s Law Enforcement & Security Training division.

“This course introduces social risk and techniques to recognize the factors that propagate instability within communities and across societies,” explains the course description. “By understanding these concepts, you are equipped with the knowledge to make sense of the unpredictable nature of today’s dynamic societies and employ proactive strategies to engage different segments of the population.”

The goal of the course is to curb social tensions that escalate into violence, project delays that lead to business failures and the radicalization of groups that can result in political instability.

A Slow Conversion

While energy companies must prepare to mitigate and counter large-scale protests with the same techniques employed by their opposition, they also must proactively communicate to the population that renewable energy, which comprises just 2 percent of

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the world’s power today, is not a goal that can be achieved overnight.

The 2009 acclaimed documentary film “Switch”, which features Scott Tinker, the director of the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas at Austin and State Geologist for Texas, takes an objective look at the global energy scene. Tinker explains that oil and gas are important energy resources that essentially touch the lives of everyone – from gasoline for transportation to heating homes to plastic materials and any item a person might purchase that must be delivered to a store or to one’s home.

Globally speaking, for oil and coal to decrease to just half of the world’s energy supply in the next 40 years, the production of natural gas will have to roughly double; nuclear reactors must increase three-fold; and renewable energy, including wind, solar and biofuels, will have to multiply by five, Tinker explained.

The process is a slow one. For example, it took France approximately 30 years to get roughly 80 percent of its electricity from nuclear energy, and Denmark took approximately 35 years to get 20 percent of its electricity from wind.

In the meantime, rather than purchasing plastic picket signs and driving or flying across the country to protest oil and gas projects, people could make an actual impact on energy consumption by being smarter about energy: turning lights off in homes and offices, insulating homes, repairing leaks and purchasing energy-efficient appliances. “We need to change the way we think about energy, so we can change the way we use it,” Tinker said to Rigzone. “There’s a tremendous role that each of us plays in efficiency.”

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