



Where's the outrage?

Why health & safety lacks public support

By **Dave Johnson**

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In January, *The New York Times* - PBS series of articles and a broadcast documentary told of thousands of injuries and hundreds of OSHA violations at pipe foundries owned by a little-known but prosperous Alabama business. Days later, Organization Resources Counselors wrote to *The Times*:

"It is baffling to many who devote their professional lives to protecting workers that there is not an ongoing and unrelenting sense of public outrage about the 19 workers who, on average, die every day of every year in America from workplace injuries.

"What is missing," wrote ORC, which advises more than 150 large corporations on safety and health issues, "is a relentless, pervasive social intolerance for the kinds of workplace conditions that your series describes."

Are you baffled?

Let's explore that age-old question: Where's the outrage?

Everyday outrages

We'll start with what should be obvious: Outrageous acts do occur every day in the world of health and safety, as the ORC letter points out.

This is outrageous: Three sprinkler company workers aren't even working - they're on lunch break - when a wobbly 30-foot wall falls apart at a Home Depot construction site in North Carolina. The three are buried beneath 40,000 pounds of concrete. Rescuers spend five hours in a summer afternoon digging out the bodies. Consequences? Five companies are fined a total of \$32,900, slightly more than \$10,000 for each life.

Scan the Internet for news like this and, regrettably, something always turns up. But denial can run deeper than outrage. The stories are distant. They happen somewhere else, to people we don't know.

As the singer Steve Earle said in a recent interview: "We've forgotten about a blue collar segment in America. Those people are completely and totally disenfranchised and completely and totally forgotten."

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Lost in the shuffle

How can 17 million people get lost and forgotten? That's how many manufacturing employees still toil in U.S. factories. Where's that "relentless, pervasive social intolerance" for the dirty, at times deadly work done by millions everyday? Denial is one excuse. Ignorance is another. Even the families of these workers often don't know what they do all day.

"My husband would only say that it was bad. Little did I know how bad it was," wrote the wife of an employee at one of the foundries profiled in the PBS broadcast, in an email to the network. "Many times I have wished that he had never left the position he had, as well as the security of the job. However, after seeing and reading the investigation, I am proud of him for leaving."

There's a lot we don't know - or care to know. Most of us couldn't even tell you if our own home and family are threatened by nearby chemical manufacturing. In one poll, only 25 percent of people living within a one-mile radius of a plant with a high probability of a chemical release occurring were aware that the facility even existed.

If we don't know about threats in our own backyard, why get exercised over noisy, sweaty workplaces locked away in lonely towns like Elmira, New York; Tyler, Texas; and Phillipsburg, New Jersey?

Let's make a deal

Here's an example of our famous short-term memory - and how you can wheel and deal and advertise your way out of outrage. Remember the headlines in the summer of 2000 when Bridgestone Corp.'s Firestone unit had to recall 6.5 million tires linked to fatal accidents, mostly on Ford Explorers? Firestone took a pounding in the press, its credibility down there with Exxon after the Valdez oil spill and Union Carbide after Bhopal. Consumers scrambled for other brands.

But Bridgestone's market share only slipped about two percentage points. What happened? As The Wall Street Journal described: "Once the Firestone recall fell out of the headlines, the public did what it has increasingly been doing: buying whatever was on sale."

What, me worry?

What's missing is intolerance, says ORC. But it's easier to be tolerant when the bad stuff happens to the other guy. You've probably seen research to this effect: "Accidents more likely to happen to the poor."

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Being of lower socioeconomic status increases the risk of dying from "external causes" such as car accidents, fires, poisonings, falls and homicides, especially for men, a new U.S. study shows. Researchers found that men who fell into the lowest 25 percent in terms of socioeconomic status were nearly three times more likely to die of such causes than men in the highest 25 percent.

Walk on by

Even when we see a problem, we don't always do something about it. What did you do the last time you saw an accident on the road? According to California Highway Patrol officers, far too many people just keep going.

One Friday night this past winter, a big rig rolling down Interstate 10 in Southern California ran over an 18-year-old boy who had just been thrown from his car in an accident. Flares were set up and cars slowed to a crawl as drivers gawked. But only one woman got out and gave police a statement.

Only 10 or 15 percent of hit and runs get solved, according to one CHP officer. He blames it on apathy. People just don't want to get involved and report what they witness.

That was then. . .

Organization Resources Counselors is not alone in asking where the outrage has gone.

William Bennett was so put off by the public's collective shrug to President Clinton's follies he wrote a book about it, "The Death of Outrage." Writes Bennett: "Without being judgmental, Americans would never have put an end to slavery, outlawed child labor, emancipated women, or ushered in the civil rights movement."

Add to that wiping out many of the worst workplace safety and health hazards.

But you need to go back nearly 100 years to see that muck being raked. Back when practically everyone wore blue collars and knew first-hand about the dangers of factory work. Articles like William Hand's, "The Law of the Killed and Wounded," a 1908 account of families torn apart when accidents robbed them of the breadwinner, hit close to home.

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Books, articles, research, and photographs all assaulted the sensibilities of an unsuspecting public:

- A "Death Calendar" marking job injuries and fatalities was published in 1906. Striking photos by Lewis Hine showed, in one case, a worker with missing arms surrounded by his four children.
- Hand's 1910 book, "Making Steel and Killing Men," estimated that 1,200 workers out of every 10,000 were killed or seriously injured each year in a Chicago mill.
- Dr. Alice Hamilton, with no legal right to enter a factory, dedicated herself to making the first business case for safety - arguing that reducing exposures to lead, arsenic, turpentine and other toxins was good business practice.

Catastrophe gave the growing outrage a focal point - the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in New York City killed 146 workers because windows were barred and fire escapes and stairways blocked.

Soon states began to pass safety legislation and empower labor commissioners. Still, it would be almost 60 years before Congress created OSHA. And then, in 1970, outrage wasn't the prime issue - job safety was used to woo the blue-collar vote.

Outrage overload

Outrage hasn't disappeared today. It's simply dissipated. Search the Net and it turns up everywhere. Naturally it has its own Web site, www.wherestheoutrage.org.

Everyone's bugged by something, it seems. Check these headlines:

"Outrage over protesters' use of flag"

"Outrage over baby's death in car furnace"

"Indian outrage at MTV's Gandhi lampoon"

"Jewish community outrage of PLO speaker"

"Outrage over long wait for ambulance"

"Outrage grows over asbestos threat"

Or how about this: "A gruesome video on a Web site that shows a kitten being killed and prepared for a meal is causing outrage on the Internet. . ."

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These headlines are teaching us something. Outrage has gone from the collective to the personal. Don't tread on my flag. Don't lampoon my religious icon. Don't make me wait for an ambulance. It's not about what happens to somebody else - Bill and Monica, asbestos victims, abused workers - it's about what offends me.

Who's vulnerable?

Here's another angle to this issue of outrage and worker safety. By and large, we buy into the notion that workers are free to walk away from dangerous jobs.

After *The New York Times* series, a Pepperdine University economics professor wrote a paper, "The Free Market and Job Safety." Describing the articles as a "totally misguided attack on the profit motive," he argued that the foundry workers valued the higher wages paid for their work above the greater dangers of working there.

You'll get no such debate when someone makes a meal out of a kitten, or bakes a baby in a car. No, you'll get outrage.

Outrage under wraps

Still baffled by this case of missing outrage?

We've covered Denial. Distance. Memory loss. Ignorance. Apathy. Demographics. Kittens versus pipefitters. For one last answer, let's turn to Roget's II: The New Thesaurus, Third Edition, which defines outrage as "something that offends one's sense of propriety, fairness, or justice."

Most safety and health pros probably jumped into this line of work - or have kept at it - because their own sense of what's fair and just about treating workers was offended somewhere along the line. They do a pretty good job keeping their outrage under wraps, because few bosses appreciate preachers peering over their shoulders.

It's not public. It's a personal thing. It's as unrelenting as ORC could ask for - motivating pros to keep the pressure on for their entire careers. And it is pervasive, running through the ranks of thousands of professionals, one generation to the next.

The outrage isn't missing. Just look in the mirror.

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