Here's a scenario played out time and again by citizens all across the country:

The governor is holding a "town meeting" at a local restaurant. Activists battling state government over a medical waste incinerator in their neighborhood attend the "town meeting" to confront the governor. They hope to advance their issue, get media attention, and pin down the governor on broken promises and misleading or untrue statements.

The citizens do a terrific job of standard "organizing." They turn out about 40 people on a rainy weekday morning. They have placards from previous demonstrations, pass them out, picket and chant outside the restaurant. They cut a deal with the governor's staff and the restaurant, allowing them to bring their placards inside; they promise no chanting inside. (This creates a visual event for the TV cameras.) They had called the press ahead of time, and media turnout is healthy. So far, so good.

Unfortunately, this is where the activists' planning stops. Once inside, they confront the governor, but he dodges every question. He lies, he denies previous statements and commitments, he defers issues to others, he uses the power of his office to intimidate, he cuts off certain topics in the interest of "equal time for other issues." The citizens have done a good job of filtering into the crowd, so the "next question" comes from a member of their group. Unfortunately, instead of pressing the governor on the same subject, the next person changes the topic, allowing the governor to give another superficial answer and move on. On the evening news, the citizens look marginal and foolish.

When the activists leave, they hold hands, sing a song and say a prayer before dispersing, but they have lost one and they can feel it. They did everything by the book, and still they lost. It will be harder to get people out to demonstrate next time, and to recruit new activists. The day's work has done nothing to advance their issue and the governor probably feels confident that he can continue to ignore citizens' rights as he pushes the incinerator to completion.

What could citizens have done better?

KEEP YOUR FOCUS. These activists failed to keep their focus tight. As a result, the governor was able to give superficial answers on 10 aspects of the issue. Instead of following up on one issue, the citizens were too eager to jump to something else. One could almost hear them thinking, "He wiggled out of that one -- I'll nail him with this other issue!"

Politicians plan "themes" for their public appearances; activists should do likewise. They should think out the message they want to convey to the public by confronting the governor. Public officials are professionals in the art of confrontation. If you don't plan your attack well, skillful politicians will turn your words back on you, making you appear a shrill extremist, and painting themselves as victims.

Plan how you want the story to look in the media, then work backward. If you're confronting the governor, pick a specific issue, one easily understood by anyone unfamiliar with the details of your battle (these people are your real audience). Pick an issue that reveals clearly why your point of view makes sense and is the best option.

Think about the response you'll get; plan to counter that response. Meet in advance and role-play. Have someone be the "governor" and have him or her spout the excuses you expect to hear. These drills are invaluable. They double your effectiveness.

In the restaurant scenario, the citizens come off as fuzzy and emotional; the governor appears fair and reasonable. If they had planned and practiced the exchange, the citizens could have hammered the governor on a specific point and, while still being polite, would have revealed that the governor was waffling.

RECORD EVERYTHING. The one real power citizens hold over elected officials is the power to make them accountable for their words and actions. If you can show politicians have lied, politicians become responsive.

This means keeping files of newspaper stories and correspondence from officials and being able to pull out anything on a moment's notice. One of the most effective tools is a chronology, such as those prepared by Terri Swearingen of Chester, W.V., one of the activists trying to shut down the huge WTI hazardous waste incinerator. Terri writes down the details of events as they unfold, in the order that they happened, and she notes her sources of information (a reference to a document or a news story). These chronologies draw a concise picture of the WTI fight. They can be handed to the press; original sources are referenced; and Terri's debating skills are much sharper after she has written one.

The other key to holding officials accountable is to keep a video camera in their faces all the time. Vern Hurst of STOP IT in Nova, Ohio tapes everything, and public officials know it. Public officials are not quite sure who Vern is, but they know the man dressed in black is always taping them, so they're careful around him. A video camera is guaranteed to make politicians 50 percent more honest.

Once you've assembled detailed records, use them. Citizens can score on officials, confronting them with a history of broken promises and shifting positions.

A criterion in selecting your "theme of the day" should be your written and taped records of a public official's position on the issue. Take copies of press reports with you to the governor's "town meeting."

In every encounter with a public official, be polite and calm. Nothing aids a sleazy politician more than a citizen on the brink of emotional frenzy. This can be difficult because we are fighting for our homes and families and many politicians are willing to sell us out. There is sometimes value in being aggressive, angry and emotional, but always know what we're doing and why.

PAY ATTENTION TO PROCESS. As we saw in the restaurant, the citizens were right and had the facts, but the governor controlled the process. If this is a PUBLIC meeting, or a PUBLIC hearing, the process should be one that promotes real public participation.

Government and industry learned long ago that winning public debate is not a matter of having the right answers, it's controlling the questions. The questions define the universe within which an issue is discussed. If you ask the right questions, any answer will further your cause. Citizens need to control the agenda and challenge the basic assumptions behind the questions officials and industry are posing.

Too often, public hearings are nothing more than staged events to give the illusion that citizens' opinions are valued and taken seriously.

A typical public hearing opens with a presentation by the industry. They are given 45 minutes or an hour to explain the benefits of the proposed incinerator, pulp mill or waste dump. Industry often uses this time to present details and statistics that merely confuse everyone. The idea is to convince people that the issue is too complicated for ordinary citizens to debate.

After the industry presentation, the public gets the microphone for questions and comments. Often, each citizen is limited to two or three minutes, "in the interest of fairness." In many cases, industry representatives are given time to respond to each citizen's comment, further reducing citizens' time.
In the worst cases, public hearings are held at times and places where most of the public can't attend.

If you have a citizens' group working on the issue, that group should have the same amount of time that industry has, to present their point of view.

If you have no organized citizens' group but can line up a speaker (perhaps an independent expert or someone from a state or national environmental group), that person should be given time equal to industry's. Don't let the deck be stacked against the public.

And don't wait until the last minute. As soon as you learn of a public hearing, call whoever is running it, ask about the format, and tell them you want equal time. This time should be in addition to, not instead of, time for comments from the floor. If the public official complains that this will make the public hearing too long, suggest that industry's time be halved and the remainder be given to the citizens.

If officials won't cooperate, get on the phone to the media and create controversy over the unfair process before the hearing. It's illegitimate and misleading to call it a public hearing if the public can't have a say in deciding the process.

If, by the night of the public hearing, your viewpoint has not received equal time, you might consider shutting down the hearing. In at least one instance, activists who could not get a fair hearing from the EPA held a rally outside the doors of the public hearing room and the hearing did not take place. In Casmalia, Calif., and in East Liverpool, Ohio, citizens held a rally INSIDE the public hearing room and the hearing did not take place. Consider singing "America the Beautiful" loudly without stopping.

If the public is not given some way to say "no" to a proposal, then "public participation" is a sham.

CHALLENGE BASIC ASSUMPTIONS: While listening to an opponent, ask yourself: What is the basic assumption behind this person's argument?

Water polluters usually assume that the environment can assimilate a certain level of pollution, or that there is an "acceptable" amount of human disease and death from pollution, or that this industry cannot survive if it is not allowed to pollute.

When it's your turn, don't challenge facts, challenge assumptions. (Industry would love to have you debate only the facts and questions they wish to debate.)

Challenge industry's right to dump ANYTHING dangerous into public water (or air or soil). Defy industry's claim that it has a right to harm one-in-a-million people. Insist that SUSTAINABILITY be brought to the fore. Make government and industry fully consider ALTERNATIVES. Turn the debate to the PRINCIPLES OF PRECAUTIONARY ACTION and CLEAN PRODUCTION; this will create a more honest debate on rights and responsibilities and WHO GETS TO DECIDE IN A DEMOCRACY. Soon you'll be discussing zero discharge and pollution prevention.

REMEMBER WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS. This is a question you should ask yourself every time you speak in public. If you're going to a public meeting to take on the governor, your target isn't the governor, it's your fellow citizens. Few public officials make decisions based on "the right thing to do." They make the decisions they are pressured into making.

Taking on public officials is only a tool for reaching out to your fellow citizens, showing them that they too can make government accountable. The tool works best when used by many hands.

--Mark Floegel

Descriptor terms: citizen activism; environmental justice; tactics; media strategies; incineration; chronologies; public hearings; public participation; mark floegel; zero discharge; pollution prevention; precautionary principle; clean production; sustainability; risk assessment;