Chapter Eleven: Managing Public Relations

Overview

Chapter Eleven deals with Amish interaction with the outside world and government by exploring:

- Civic involvement in local community organizations;
- Amish attitudes toward government and the use of law;
- Relations with government agencies (federal, state, local);
- Involvement in politics and military service;
- Amish reactions to Social Security and government subsidies;
- Controversies surrounding the movie *Witness*;
- Recent controversies over child labor and puppy mills;
- The development and impact of tourism among the Amish; and
- The ironies of tourism in the context of Amish society.

Key Points

- The Amish cultural gap between the Amish and the outside world had widened at the same time that the Amish are more enmeshed in the economic structures of the world.
- The Amish do participate in some local community organizations such as fire companies but avoid those emphasizing leisure and entertainment. They also contribute to some public service organizations involved with disaster relief.
- Explore the reasons why the Amish are reluctant to participate too closely with government. In some ways they do not have a modern conception of citizenship but take a differential attitude toward government. The Amish pay all typical taxes except Social Security and Workers Compensation which they consider insurance.
• Because their theological principles stress mutual responsibility within the church and because of the principle of separation of church and state the Amish typically turn down all forms of government subsidies.

• Assess the economic contribution or liability of the Amish for the larger society. Consider issues like public schooling, homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, drug abuse, and the receipt of government subsidies. Are the Amish leeches or contributors to the larger socio-economic system? Who are the winners and losers in the equation?

• Explore the controversy surrounding the production of the movie, “Witness.” Should government regulations be more restrictive of such cultural intrusions on minority groups or are such movie-making ventures useful and necessary? Apart from Witness, what other images of the Amish have appeared on public media — TV, advertising, movies, and magazines?

• The rise of Amish shops and businesses have created new conflicts with the law over the role of children which were not problematic on the farm. Amish vocational training typically happens through apprenticeships on the farm or in small shops and businesses. How does “Child Labor” among the Amish differ with large urban industrial settings?

• Consider the rise and impact of tourism in Amish areas. The Amish have a love-hate affair with tourism. Identify how they benefit from tourism as well as its negative impacts on their life. Why have the Amish become entangled with tourism rather than migrating to more rural and secluded parts of the country?

Questions

1. Describe how the Amish can interact with the larger society and yet maintain their own distinctive identity.
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2. Identify and discuss the reasons why the Amish shy away from involvement in government and in politics.

3. On what basis should the government exempt groups like the Amish from the national system of Social Security?

4. Based on your reading of Riddle and your viewing of the movie Witness, describe the ways that Witness was and was not sensitive to Amish values and practices.

5. Develop an argument for why the Amish should be exempt from national child labor laws.

6. Identify and discuss some of the reasons that tourists are attracted to the Amish. What draws people to the Amish?

7. Explain how tourist sites help aid the Amish by keeping tourists away from their homes and farms, thus decreasing tourist disruptions on Amish life.

Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish have only survived because they have been lucky to live in a country with a government that tolerates religious minorities and freedom of conscience.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish have used their religion as an excuse to get exemptions from the government that benefit them economically.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “The government (Federal, State and Local) should treat everyone fair and never make any special legal exemptions for the Amish.”

4. Support or Refute this statement: “If there is a draft, the Amish should have to join the armed forces and fight to protect their freedom like everyone else.”
5. Support or Refute this statement: “Because the Amish were exploited in the movie
   “Witness,” the government should forbid movie production companies to produce any
   more movies on the Amish.”

6. Support or Refute this statement: “The government should forbid Amish children and
   youth under 18 years of age from working in their parent’s shops and businesses.”

7. Support or Refute this statement: “Advertisers should not be permitted to use Amish
   images, objects or photographs in advertisements.”

8. Support or Refute this statement: “Because all Americans should be treated equally,
   there should be no exemptions for the Amish (i.e. social security).

Activities

1. View the movie Witness. Write a critical essay that argues pro or con “The movie
   Witness is a sensitive portrayal of Amish life and values.”

2. Use the Internet to learn more about tourism. Review websites promoting tourism.
   Though e-mail or telephone request tourist brochures/booklets form Amish tourist
   centers. Based on your research, write an essay that argues pro or con, “The tourist
   industry exploits the Amish.”