

## **Environmental PR in the UK: who's leading, who's following and who's falling behind in 2008?**

**ALTHOUGH** it's the state of the economy which has dominated most of the headlines in the early part of 2008, environmental issues continue to generate substantial coverage in the British mass media. Take, for example, the mountain of newsprint devoted to Marks & Spencer's plans to charge customers for shopping bags, to address the hideous problem of plastic waste. Virtually a whole edition of the Daily Mail was lovingly devoted to the M&S initiative, which the editors saw as an endorsement of their 'Banish the Bags' campaign. Rival retail chief executives must have spluttered over their cornflakes as they saw page after page of positive publicity devoted to M&S and its leader, Sir Stuart Rose, who was given a whole page in the Mail to tell the world about all of the company's environmental initiatives.

M&S tapped into the British media brilliantly with this story. The fact that it was the Daily Mail, the voice of Middle England, which embraced the story first, rather than, for example, The Independent, was telling. As those clever M&S advertising copy writers might have put it, this wasn't just a trendy environmental story designed to appeal to metropolitan elites; this was a classic British story about an issue which has always been dear to the hearts of the middle class: conservation. Research which we conducted last year within the WPP group showed that the suburban British middle classes over the age of 50 were by far the 'greenest' section of the population, because they took the issue of recycling much more seriously than anyone else.

There is a good lesson in here for every other organisation which wants to get its environmental message across: it's not enough to promote your agenda; you must find a way to make it chime with the hopes, fears and aspirations of the British public. Otherwise you will either be ignored or rejected.

M&S must be considered the UK's leaders in environmental communication, not just because of the brilliant media coverage and positive impact on the company's reputation, but also because they are simultaneously achieving a key business objective. A substantial reduction in plastic shopping bags, or charging customers who do use them, is going to save M&S millions of pounds, a result which will be cheered just as much by The City as environmental campaigners.

If M&S and Sir Stuart Rose are leading in the environmental PR stakes, which other organisations are making the running?

Toyota has to receive an honourable mention for using the tenth anniversary of the launch of the Prius Hybrid, to reinforce its status as the vehicle of choice for environmentally-concerned drivers. The Times recently commented:

*"When it hit the market, environmental issues were not high on the industry's agenda, but now, like Toyota, the Prius's time seems to have come. It has become the most recognisable symbol of carmakers' attempts to embrace green concerns, even if some rivals have been sceptical about the technology."*

Indeed some have been sceptical, but that hasn't stopped the great PR which the Prius has received in the UK for years. And that has led to real results, such as the Prius being exempt from the London Congestion Charge, and having lower parking permit charges in some local authority zones. The Financial Times reported in March that the Prius had even caused a row in the British Cabinet, over whether to replace the current fleet of British ministerial cars with Japanese

hybrids. It will be a major PR coup if Toyota can persuade the UK Government that buying Prius makes more sense than 'buying British'.

Toyota benefits from two aspects of its PR strategy: its duration over a long period and its refusal to rest on its laurels. Consistent repetition of key messages about the Prius for a decade has had the desired effect; and the continuous search for new ways of telling the story have kept it feeling fresh ten years on.

Still on automotive, I would expect to start hearing and seeing a lot more in the UK media about hydrogen vehicles and fuel cell technology (not always the same thing). If they are wise, the chief players in these fields can take advantage of the current confusion and heated debate over biofuels to start making their case heard much more clearly than it has up to now. There are signs this may be happening.

So who's still struggling in the PR stakes in 2008? There is no obvious pattern, but the following two cases spring to mind:

The people running the wind energy business in the UK must be asking themselves how they can get more positive PR, especially at the local level. Every time a wind farm is proposed, there are howls of protest leading to lengthy planning delays and, in some cases, the cancellation of projects. As a result, the enormous potential for wind energy in the UK is not being realised. I suspect the industry is focused on persuading the government to loosen the planning laws in their favour. But changing regulation won't win over hearts and minds in the regions where wind farms can be built – and that will always be an essential component of a successful project. The wind industry needs to construct a much more positive story which can convince the sceptics.

But the problems of the wind industry are small indeed compared to those who now seek to build new coal-fired power stations in the UK (for the first time in two decades). We saw the first round of this battle at the start of 2008, when local planning applications were lodged, leading to an explosion of national media coverage on the issue, most of it negative. When interviewed, the companies behind the applications, mainly the large industry players with interests in diverse energy portfolios, talked about the notion of 'clean coal'. I would be fascinated to conduct a focus group with a representative cross-section of the population to see what reaction they had to this phrase. At first glance, 'clean coal' seems like an oxymoron. We know the companies are (mainly) talking about the potential for retrofitted carbon capture and storage, but they are a very long way from a) explaining to the general public exactly what this obscure technology would involve b) whether that public would find storing CO<sub>2</sub> underground a satisfactory solution, on either environmental or safety grounds. Both have to happen before 'clean coal' is given the go-ahead.

As always, the media will become a key battleground in the industry's attempts to make its complex and difficult case heard. We can expect to see much more on this subject in our media over the next 18 months.

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