

Back up words with action

Good publicity needs to be rooted in meaningful action in order for companies to really make an impact

Good corporate social responsibility needs good PR (and vice versa).

The 'greenwash' backlash of the 1990s scared many CSR practitioners away from PR. Companies' environmental credentials were exposed as little more than spin. Over-enthusiastic promotion fell short of reality. Corporate responsibility moved away from headline-friendly approaches, avoiding the parapet altogether rather than risking sticking its head above it. It retreated into complex reporting, assurance and management systems.

But today a company's success is measured against the quality of its relationships. Shareholders listen to consumers, consumers listen to employees, future employees listen to NGOs.

Creatively engaging stakeholders enables companies to realise the full benefits of being a good corporate citizen. Talking to customers about what you are doing increases customer loyalty. Talking to employees inspires employee motivation. It also means you get to hear valuable feedback.

Activity cannot be classified as 'just CSR' or 'just PR'. If it is genuine, it is both. Both need to be embedded within the company as part of its corporate brand personality and strategy for the future – combining at the planning stage to ensure maximum effect.

Something that might seem like clever publicity at the time can quickly backfire if it is not rooted in a meaningful approach to managing a company's impacts. For example, ExxonMobil promotes its green credentials but spends hundreds of thousands of dollars on funding organisations that seek to cast doubt on the scientific consensus on climate change. Daimler Chrysler was one of the sponsors of Live Earth but lobbied against more stringent EU energy efficiency measures.

Ninety per cent of people still say that companies fall short of their corporate social responsibility promises. Clearly there is still a disconnect somewhere. By working together, CSR and PR can close that credibility gap.

Take the social report. It is often the



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main way a company communicates these issues but it is usually designed to wow the experts, not to inspire employees. About three-quarters of the public say they would believe the word of an employee over that of a company advert. If employees get involved and tell their friends, they become the perfect advocates for your company. Internal communications is so important for corporate reputation – but it is often an afterthought.

Marks & Spencer's 'Plan A' is an example of a company that has combined the two disciplines to great effect. The '100-point plan to tackle some of the biggest challenges facing our business and our world' is about changing behaviour rather than just managing the consequences. By consulting NGOs from the beginning and using employee champions, M&S keeps consumers regularly updated.

The leading companies are using CSR for value creation: addressing soc-

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ial and environmental challenges and increasing profits. Toyota invested in green technology when environmental issues were first raised. Now, it has overtaken GM as the world's leading car manufacturer. Cafédirect led the way in demonstrating the commercial viability of fairly treating developing country growers. Many have since jumped on the Fairtrade bandwagon.

The UK is facing challenging issues. Our teenagers are the worst behaved in Europe, almost half of UK adults have difficulties with numbers, and although the nation's wealth is increasing, the happiness of our people is not.

In-depth engagement with these issues means companies really can make changes in society. Adding creative communications to a serious approach to responsibility can make a lasting impact on society and business alike.

Jayanti Durai is head of corporate responsibility at Munro & Forster