

PR and sustainability briefing Part 4: Silence that speaks volumes

Posted by [Brendan May](#) [1] on Sep 1, 2011

The public relations industry has to develop a proper ethical approach, argues Brendan May

In most sectors, vaguely enlightened companies respond to at least some of the surveys they are sent about their sustainability performance. Of course, it is not possible to complete them all. But on the whole, when a credible organisation sends out a sustainability survey, it can expect a reasonable response.

With this in mind, Ethical Corporation dispatched a PR industry survey to accompany this month's briefing. The PR industry cannot claim not to know about Ethical Corporation. They are never off the phone plugging their clients to the editor and bagging conference slots or offering up the columns they will ghost write for their clients. Which makes the response to this survey all the more amusing, albeit depressing.

Ethical Corporation sent 103 surveys to people at the top PR firms in the world. Responses? One.

This should not really come as a surprise. The PR industry remains almost unique in its sluggishness to embrace the sustainability agenda.

Companies don't know what their carbon footprint is. They don't have sustainable procurement policies. They don't report on their impacts, set targets or run employee programmes to green up the workplace. They don't require standards of suppliers, although their clients will increasingly demand standards of them. They might buy offsets, but they don't address their biggest impact – air travel.

Tail wagging the dog

In general, PR firms' clients raise sustainability with them, not the other way round. It is a bizarre situation in which the industry that should be warning its clients of developing trends is playing a fruitless game of catch-up to find out what is going on. That a client should pay thousands of pounds a month to educate its own advisers is a perverse reality.

There will have been four reactions in the PR firms when Ethical Corporation's survey arrived.

Indifference. For all the media wizardry they deploy for their clients, PR people are their own worst marketeers. Many won't have realised this was an opportunity, not a threat.

Panic. In some agencies, the survey will have been bounced around from one recipient to another. No one will have been in charge, and eventually the survey will have crawled into its last inbox where it is still sleeping as this briefing goes to press.

Over-confidence. In some cases, a smart person may have spotted the opportunity to land some "key messages" about their agency's good work and done their best to complete the survey and provide some case studies. Sadly, those at the top will have vetoed responding to anything that asked something as outrageous as whether or not they turn down business on environmental grounds.

Arrogance. "We don't do surveys like that." Fair enough, perhaps. But most of your clients do. Wake up.

In fairness, WPP, which owns many of the best-known PR firms in the world, has long attempted something of the corporate responsibility reporting now commonplace among multinationals.

Anyone reading WPP's annual sustainability reports would easily be impressed, if not wowed, by their efforts.

But it still falls way short of good enough. WPP owns Cohn & Wolfe, infamous apologist for Asia Pulp & Paper. Unfortunately this makes it hard to take WPP's assertions on sustainability seriously.

Burson Marsteller, part of the WPP family, was the only agency to respond to the survey. Its client case study was on the Marine Stewardship Council and the role it played in advising Unilever to establish it – in 1995. Good work, but to cite 16-year-old client engagement borders on the desperate.

But at least WPP has done something. Most other giant communications groups barely have policies beyond bribery, ethics and corruption. If they have environmental policies, they will be bottom of the ladder, such as ISO 14001. Even Asia Pulp & Paper could get that one.

The PR industry is soundly asleep on sustainability. It has few public champions pointing out the inevitable seismic change to come. To be ahead of the game means making the serious commercial decisions that companies such as Unilever, Nestlé and countless others are making.

If you don't change, we won't work with you. That's what they have told their palm oil suppliers. It's what supermarkets have told unsustainable tuna brands. The PR industry needs to develop a point of view, very quickly. It will no longer do to preach about sustainability on their websites (as they all do) while taking dirty money from tarnished brands.

Brendan May is founder of the Robertsbridge Group, former chief executive of the Marine Stewardship Council, and UK chairman of the Rainforest Alliance. He is a contributing editor to Ethical Corporation.

Links:

[1] <http://www.ethicalcorp.com/users/brendan-may>