

# Social media and environmental campaigning: Brand lessons from Barbie

Posted by [Rachel Stine](#) [1] on Aug 5, 2011

Rachel Stine reports on how Greenpeace has used social media to put pressure on big brands over allegations of environmentally irresponsible sourcing

Only seven months into the year, Barbie has already accomplished an impressive number of personal and career goals in 2011. In addition to partying it up in Malibu, the eleven-and-a-half-inch plastic doll has started a new career as an architect, launched a clothing line at Uniqlo, reunited with her soulmate and fellow doll Ken Carson, and also, according to Greenpeace, taken on a new hobby: killing rainforests.

Concentrating on the plastic blonde beauty, the leading environmental campaign group launched a social-media-heavy campaign on June 7, 2011 against toy companies Mattel, Disney, Hasbro and Lego for sourcing packaging materials from endangered Indonesian rainforests through controversial supplier Asia Pulp & Paper [APP].

The advocacy group has primarily relied upon social media to publicise the toy companies' environmental damage and encourage the general public to contribute to the campaign.

## The power of new media

The relative success of Greenpeace's campaign during its first two months reveals the potential of social media in ethical campaigns. Furthermore, the toy companies' responses to this campaign offer lessons for others on how to address to such ethical confrontations.

Although Greenpeace is lobbying against multiple toy companies, its main campaign is aimed at Mattel and has used Barbie's boy toy Ken as its spokesperson. Greenpeace initiated the campaign in early June by releasing a spoof [YouTube video](#) [2]. The spoof plays on Mattel's current advertising campaign which involves Ken winning Barbie back after seven years apart.

In the YouTube video, Ken discovers Barbie's deforestation habits in Indonesia and dramatically ends their recently renewed relationship. Ten days after it was first uploaded, the YouTube clip was viewed over a million times in multiple languages, according to Greenpeace in July 2011.

The day after the video's release, Greenpeace spread Ken's anguish further by hanging a giant banner on Mattel's El Segundo headquarters which showed Ken's frowning face declaring, "Barbie, It's Over. I Don't Date Girls That Are Into Deforestation."

## Facebook and Twitter front and centre

In addition to these initial promotions, Greenpeace's biggest campaign maneuver was its use of Facebook and Twitter to incorporate the public in its attack against the toy companies. Greenpeace directed users on the social media sites to confront Mattel via Barbie's pages and also send e-mails directly to Bob Eckert, Mattel's CEO.

The resulting influx of hundreds comments on Barbie's [Facebook page](#) [3] caused Mattel to shut off comments for days and delete any mention of rainforests. Within days, almost 200,000 e-mails complaining about producing toy packaging from rainforest materials were sent to Mattel's offices, according to Greenpeace.

"[O]ur campaign to stop toy packaging from wrecking Indonesia's rainforests is all about challenging a company's most valuable asset - their brands. In the case of Mattel, who we proved was using

rainforest fiber in their Barbie packaging, we relabeled Barbie as a rainforest destroyer - as we felt this was the exact opposite to what Mattel would want," says Ian Duff, Greenpeace's forest campaigner in the UK.

Greenpeace also sponsored social media pages for the heartbroken Ken, so users could lend their support and follow the latest campaign updates and news. Ken's Greenpeace Twitter page, [ken\\_talks](#) [4], includes tweets such as, "Yes, love is blind - I guess mine was blind to Barbie's appetite for rainforest destruction!"

Greenpeace International's main Facebook page dedicated to lashing out against Barbie has over 900,000 likes and has included a contest for users to design a "Rainforest Destroyer look" for the doll.

## Company responses

The pumped up publicity and the public's considerable contributions to the campaign show how social media can be used to effectively promote a call for action.

On the surface, social media offers campaigns potential access to gargantuan numbers of users. But coupled with that access is the little effort required for users to act on behalf of a cause on social media sites.

Pummeled with criticism from Greenpeace and the public, the toy companies' responded to the campaign in varying ways, while APP has denied any role in cutting down rainforests in Indonesia.

Thus far, Lego has taken the most active response by announcing the day after the launch of the campaign that the company will no longer buy packaging from any supplier that contributes to deforestation and therefore will no longer purchase from APP.

Before the campaign was launched, Lego was in the midst of developing a new policy to minimize the impact of its packaging on forests, says Helle Sofie Kaspersen, vice president for Lego's corporate governance and sustainability.

With the new policy already in the works, Lego was able to respond quickly to the Greenpeace campaign by announcing its new policy early. The new policy aims to reduce total packaging, use as much recycled materials as possible and use only Forest Stewardship Council sources for the needed virgin fiber, and will be implemented in the near future, says the company.

Mattel, Hasbro, and Disney, however, have been criticised by campaign groups and their followers using social media for failing to adequately addressing Greenpeace's concerns.

After initially referring to Greenpeace's campaign as "an inflammatory approach", Mattel published a press release stating that the toy company has instructed its suppliers to no longer source from APP. Mattel also publicised that it will develop a sustainability policy which will require suppliers to commit to sustainable forestry management practices.

## No instant agreement

Although Greenpeace acknowledged Mattel's response as a decent start, the environmental organization claimed that the firm's press release was vague and lacked timelines for the company to implement the promised changes.

Hasbro has directed their suppliers to stop using APP, but is relying on its sustainability announcements from 2010 to address the problem and has not established any new policies.

Unless Hasbro develops a new policy with firm timelines, Greenpeace believes that Hasbro toys are still at risk for being packaged in rainforest materials.

In mid-July, Disney issued a statement declaring that the company is assessing the challenges of its

complex supply chain, and acknowledged that deforestation is an urgent issue in Indonesia. The statement highlighted aspects of Disney's current environmental policy and its intention to expand its paper policy; however, it did not mention the company's involvement with APP.

Greenpeace has not acknowledged Disney's statement at present.

Mattel and Hasbro have not responded to Ethical Corporation's request for comment at the time of publication, while Disney declined to comment beyond its press release.

APP has attempted to repudiate Greenpeace's report with a press release that aimed to invalidate the environmentalists' allegations.

In the release, Aida Greenbury, APP's managing director of sustainability, said that Greenpeace's report contained "false and misleading claims" about APP's practices and sustainability commitments.

APP recently released a new commercial centering on its "reforestation" efforts to create a "greener Indonesia". The commercial is airing across Western media, including on Sky television, which partners with WWF to help stop deforestation. WWF's attempts to work with APP to stop deforestation in the past have failed.

### **Lessons for other firms**

In light of the campaigning against the toy companies and APP, all companies have the opportunity to learn a few lessons as to how to respond to social media ethics campaigns.

When faced with a campaign, a company should first respond quickly by communicating with the campaigning organization and examining the claims against them, advises Scott Poynton, executive director and founder of [The Forest Trust](#) [5], an NGO which works with large firms such as Nestlé to prevent deforestation in the supply chain.

"Keeping below the radar and taking a long time to respond seems to suggest that the organization is either a) guilty or b) not responding properly to the situation," agrees James Lythe, who works in crisis management for security and risk monitoring firm Control Risks.

According to Scott Poynton, being open to the campaigners message is key. Fighting with campaigners, by exchanging incriminating press releases or through another means, will only add to damaging publicity and, if the campaign allegations are true, allow poor practices to continue within the company.

When communicating with campaigners, companies should strive to seek information from the organization rather than approaching talks in attack and defend mode, stresses Poynton.

Assuming that well-known and respected campaigners are extremists and treating them as such is a mistake, in his opinion. Rather, companies should approach campaigners like customers, especially because of the organizations' ability to influence consumers, and address their concerns accordingly.

Though an ethical campaign can initially shower a company with bad publicity, by effectively responding to the claims a company can ultimately win back favorable publicity.

"Every crisis has the opportunity to benefit a company if they respond well to it," says Lythe of Control Risks.

Furthermore, campaign organizations that genuinely seek change will often work with the offending company to improve management practices.

"Greenpeace has a long history of ongoing constructive engagement with companies that it previously campaigned on," says Duff on behalf of Greenpeace. He points to the environmentalist organization's work with Nestlé.

## Past successes count

Originally, Greenpeace campaigned to stop the chocolate company from sourcing material from Golden Agri-Resources [GAR], the palm oil arm of Sinar Mas. As a result of the campaign, Nestlé established a new no deforestation policy, and consults Greenpeace regularly. The incident also contributed to GAR developing a new forest conservation policy.

Kaspersen of Lego says that Greenpeace's knowledge and expertise in environmental matters worked as a valuable tool as the toy company developed its new packaging policy.

Yet Seb Hempstead, the Vice President for Brandwatch in North America, warns of companies falling prey to short-lived campaigns embedded in social media. "I'm often surprised when we see how some stories die away very quickly online, like anything else these campaigns are competing for our attention alongside many other distractions on the web," he says. According to him, overreacting to a fading online campaign may escalate the issue further. That said, Greenpeace and other campaigners have targeted APP for around a decade, and seem set to continue.

Although the campaign began with a bang, Greenpeace may need to sustain the momentum of the campaign if it hopes to keep the pressure on the toy companies.

At present, the environmental organization has lowered the public profile of the Barbie campaign. There have not been any new developments in the attack against the doll during recent weeks, and Greenpeace's `ken_talks` tweets have dwindled in frequency.

Deforestation criticisms on Barbie's Facebook page have trickled down to a few per day, far outnumbered by fans admiring on the doll's fashion and personal life.

## Tiger death

On July 25, Greenpeace attacked APP by publicising the death of an endangered Sumatran tiger after being caught in an animal trap for six days on the edge of an area allegedly being logged by APP in Indonesia. Making further use of online media, Greenpeace released the news on its blog and included video footage of the tiger caught in the trap before it died during a rescue attempt.

The actor Stephen Fry, who has more than 2.8 million Twitter followers, then tweeted a recent [open letter](#) [6] to APP, written by consultant and Ethical Corporation columnist Brendan May. Many others followed suit.

A few days after the incident, APP publicised its successful capture, relocation and release of another Sumatran tiger. The tiger was removed from "an area where humans and tigers come into conflict" and relocated to Sembilang National Park, according to APP's [Rainforest Realities](#) [7] website.

However, Greenpeace claimed that the area where the tiger was captured is also where APP has cleared considerable tracts of rainforest for timber. The environmental organization criticised APP's promoted efforts, stating that the recent conflicts between humans and the endangered species have been caused by APP cutting down the tigers' habitat in Indonesia.

Greenpeace has also criticised APP's new "reforestation" series of advertisements when they were released in print and on television during Greenpeace's campaign this summer.

As for the toy companies, Greenpeace's latest stunt involved activists dressed as Santa Claus and Mr. Monopoly crashing Hasbro's Christmas toy preview in London on July 13, 2011.

Greenpeace continues to publish regular updates and news on its campaign against the involvement of APP and toy companies in rainforest destruction on its website at [greenpeace.org](http://greenpeace.org).

Though the campaign is expected to continue, its promotion seems to have taken a back seat to

Greenpeace's more recent campaigns, including its new "Detox" campaign against Nike and Adidas which launched in mid-July.

Greenpeace remains insistent that the toy companies stop using rainforest fiber in their packaging, and expects the companies to cease buying from APP and develop much stronger sustainability policies, says Duff, of the campaign group.

While some of the companies have started to meet those requirements, Greenpeace will quickly escalate the campaign again if the toy companies resume using rainforest materials, he says.

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.ethicalcorp.com/users/rachel-stine>

[2] <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/campaigns/forests/asia-pacific/barbie/>

[3] <http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/barbie>

[4] [http://twitter.com/#!/ken\\_talks](http://twitter.com/#!/ken_talks)

[5] <http://www.tft-forests.org>

[6] <http://maydayblog.com/a-frank-and-open-letter-to-asia-pulp-paper>

[7] <http://www.rainforestrealities.com>