

Print Publication: *Corporate Environmental Strategy: The Journal of Environmental Leadership*

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## **Title: Fortifying Your Environmental Communication**

So, what good has your company done for our planet lately? You can be sure that your stakeholders want to hear your answer to this question – if not now, then soon. Love Canal, Bhopal, Three Mile Island and other incidents have permanently changed the way Americans view industry and technology – giving rise to new expectations and demands. Today the public wants to know...to participate...to tell industry what it can and cannot do to our environment. But the greening of corporate America is more than a trend – it's a hallmark of a new era. In poll after poll, the majority of consumers are reporting that environmental concerns influence their buying behavior and the way they evaluate a company. This fact is not lost on industry leaders. A dramatic sure in corporate environmental citizenship is underway.

This corporate environmental awareness has forged a permanent place for environmental communication – a specialized form of communications that can include community dialogue, public information, marketing/advertising and general corporate communications. It serves as an integrated method of educating and informing the public on the progress or environmental attributes of your company and products. And, it is critical to sustaining harmonious relations between your business and the public.

Required is a multi-lateral communication effort between industry and private citizens. Simply, the bottom line is this: how and when you communicate about your company's environmental activities today will greatly influence whether or not you'll have a reason to communicate tomorrow.

Today's company must be proactive in an effort to build relationships with a variety of players – the consumer, the community, the employee, the vendor, the media and many more. Yet, to step willingly into the limelight has its risks – and knowing when to make the move can be baffling. How does a company recognize its readiness to go public with its environmental record, actions and/or a product's environmental qualities? There may not be a formulaic answer to this question, but there are a number of indicators and actions that can help assure passage through the environmental spotlight.

### **The Environment and Public Perception**

The environment is decidedly different than most public issues. This difference stems from the understanding that 'the Environment' is both a scientific topic and a personal value. This dual aspect makes the issue extremely sensitive and a minefield to navigate. As a technical 'topic,' the environment is typically discussed in scientific terms. But facts can always be disputed depending on data – just witness the global warming debate. As a

‘value,’ the environment can become immersed in passion or outrage. Just talk to an angry environmentalist, or chat with one of your employees who has blossomed after participating in a company Earth Day program, and you will understand the depth of feeling about environmental concerns.

The way the public views environmental issues has ramifications for your company’s discourse on the environment. It is critical both to consider and respect the prevailing public sentiment and to know how it aligns with your company’s own commitment and vision. These considerations will do much to aid your decision about when to come forward with environmental information. Below are some general principals to help make environmental communications a positive step for your company.

### **When is the Right Time to Speak Out on Environmental Issues?**

During the 1990, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day, BBDO, a national advertising agency in charge of promoting the festivities was unable to recruit any corporate sponsors. Though many businesses were planning Earth Day activities, none wanted to take a high profile on the issue. Comments like, ‘but we’re not pure enough, green enough...’ filled the telephone lines. Even Pepsi Cola, who was actively involved in a major recycling program at the time, turned down the opportunity. Understandably, many companies feel unsure. How environmentally pure do you have to be in order to speak out on the issue? To talk about your company’s activities in an annual report? Companies certainly do not have to wear a ‘Green Halo’ in order to address the public, but a certain foundation must be in place.

#### **1) Internal integrity and commitment are paramount to successful environmental communications.**

Environmental activities must be driven by a company-wide commitment. Environmental action tends to start like a small spark in one division. The key is to have that environmental enthusiasm and effort spread throughout the whole company. The entire focus of the company need not turn green (as in the case of the Body Shop, where employees are given a half day each week to do environmental and social work), but there ought to be consistency of awareness and effort throughout the company’s departments.

If, as in many cases, environmental initiatives begin with the grassroots support of enthusiastic employees, they must thereafter be adopted by the executive suite. Only then will the circle be complete and the company’s actions be deemed a true part of the corporate culture by those outside the company’s walls. Corporate environmental actions are easily dismissed by the public when they are not PART of the overall, dedicated, coordinated program. Stand-alone efforts tend to have the greatest vulnerabilities concerning public scrutiny.

When the CEO grabs hold of environmental issues, it is usually reflected in a written set of policies, which are distributed to employees, stockholders and other interested parties.

This helps develop a long-term company vision and guard against one-time environmental efforts.

A leading example is Deja, Inc., maker of the world's first recycled shoe. Deja is positioning itself out front in the industry by building an environmental ethic into its corporate mission from its nascence, and committing profits to conservation of endangered species and other natural resources as well as integrating an environmental focus throughout its entire corporate culture.

The Deja policy explicitly outlined in a formal 15 point statement, shows the inextricable link between environmental standards and Deja's overall mission: 'We believe that viable, long-term economic growth for individuals, businesses, and societies, should occur only within the ecological bounds and limitations set by nature. At Deja, Inc., we are totally committed to integrating the principles of sustainable development throughout all aspects of our management and operations...'

A clear and substantive written policy statement is important – the media and others will frequently ask whether your company has specific standards which govern its operations. Make sure that your policy is a true reflection of your company's commitment and efforts or else it will be seen as shallow and insincere – ripe for public attack. Though established companies may not have the advantage of a fresh start, any company can set new sights and be respected for their corporate shift.

**2) A company should allocate the time and resources to thoroughly investigate the issues and the validity of its claim.**

When the marketing department alone is steering and coordinating an environmental program, major communications fatalities can occur, as in the classic case of Hefty Photo degradable garbage bags. Despite its good intentions and solid science, Mobil Corporation earned itself an environmental black eye with the premature and overly detailed advertising about its biodegradable garbage bags. Unfortunately, dark, dry landfill conditions did not mimic the damp and sunlit conditions of the lab where the product was invented and tested. The company endured a highly publicized and embarrassing retreat after being sued in seven states for deceptive advertising. This was certainly a case of to-quick-to-the-marketplace and inexperienced environmental communications. It's unclear whether the snafu would have occurred if the effort had been more deliberative and unified within the company. The premature condition of the 'biodegradable' issue was somehow missed in the marketing department's over-zealousness and isolation.

**3) An environmental culture needs to take root throughout the company.**

Typically, when a company is awakening into environmental issues, the marketing department will take the lead on aspects concerning environmental product qualities, special events, planning, and communications. The issue must be born somewhere in the company, and the marketing department is as good as anyplace, just so long as it grows

roots company-wide. A good example is the Good Housekeeping Institute, a division of Hearst Publishing. As America's 'consumer guidance counselor,' The Good Housekeeping Institute naturally was a potential resource for environmentally confused consumers to turn to for advice on environmental issues. The Institute questioned whether it wanted to take a major responsibility and lead on environmental issues. It decided to take its time investigating the topic instead of rushing in to lead consumers on an extremely complex and undefined journey. It did, however, begin to actively define its own role with the environment, investigate new environmental products, add a 'GreenWatch' (environmental products review) section to the magazine, and initiate the Good Housekeeping EarthKeeping Awards. Their actions were multi-faceted and are ongoing.

What started at *Good Housekeeping* was quickly picked up by other divisions of Hearst. *Countryside Magazine* initiated a major program, the Countryside Land Trust Fund which promotes the values of land preservation. Starting with advertising revenues of \$250,000 from the magazine, the Land Trust program culminated in a collaborative effort with the Walden Ponds Project (an environmental group working to save threatened lands at Walden Pond in Massachusetts from development), The Trust for Public Lands, state authorities, celebrities and Hearst management. The idea started as a small project but kept growing, engaging more and more departments throughout Hearst. This is how most companies' environmental journeys begin – one step at a time. Hearst's efforts have been subsequently rewarded by public praise and considerable public relations benefits.

#### **4) Aim toward building a track record, which shows substance and continuity.**

If your company doesn't have a sterling environmental past, you need not refrain from talking about your notable current efforts. But special measures must be taken to avoid a backlash of public criticism. Many companies follow the Chemical Manufacturers Association motto: 'Don't trust us, track us.' Because industry as a whole has wavering credibility with the public, environmental accomplishments are frequently viewed with great skepticism. Always remember that industry must prove itself.

Once a company develops enough of a track record, it becomes safer to venture out and communicate with the various stakeholders on the issue. The public is not interested in a flash-in-the-pan action, but rather a well paced (and you choose the pace), on-going process. A track record of numerous, on-going environmental efforts helps to emphasize to the public that you are serious and genuinely committed to environmental quality. By creating a track record, although the steps may be small ones, a company is able to gain positive attention by talking about a variety of projects. The company, through its actions, shows that it has taken the environmental issue to heart. Examples may be varied: the redesign of packaging, sponsorship of an environmental event, voluntary river or beach clean-ups, and so on. The combined impact of these efforts makes a powerful statement about your commitment.

The Dow Chemical Corporation has been noted for its ability to establish goals, communicate the intent and then follow up with action. This is the only way a skeptical public will listen.

In 1984, Dow was forced to report air emissions to a Congressional environmental subcommittee. In the process, the company discovered that, despite spending millions of dollars in pollution control technologies, it was still responsible for some ten million pounds of toxic pollution annually.

Based on that information, Dow began a focused effort to further reduce emissions. In 1986, it established a proactive program called 'Waste Reduction Always Pays' (WRAP) and created a database to track emissions and measure progress.

By sharing ideas and contributing extra time and effort, Dow employees did what many believed to be impossible: they reduced air emissions by more than 50 percent compared to 1985 base levels. Dow has subsequently announced their commitment to achieve an additional 50 percent reduction of air, land and water discharges compared to 1988 base levels. In bottom-line figures, the WRAP program has saved the company more than \$10.5 million dollars. Dow made sure that its efforts were continuous, and assessable.

#### **5) Efforts which are related to your company's issues help to build credibility.**

Choose projects, which relate to your company and its product or service. This helps a corporation's efforts look well-thought-out and not as if they are 'just something we did so we can get some points.' Many companies waste valuable opportunities and dollars by choosing to do something that is totally unrelated to their specific business or situation. Past failures in communication efforts are often related to choosing activities that are inappropriate or trying to make too much out of too little. Public hearts are won by announcing that you planted 50,000 trees if that is the only activity in which you are engaged. Such an effort should be commendable, but in the public's perception, no quantity of trees planted can outweigh the damage accrued over decades of polluting. Be varied and try to focus your efforts on the areas where your company has the most impact.

For instance, if your issues or products pertain to water, then it is best to focus your efforts similarly in order to gain the most mileage. In this way the public can make a logical connection between what a company says and does.

McDonald's has done its best to focus and communicate on its issue of solid waste. As the source of a tremendous amount of visible solid waste they became the center of a major debate over their 'clamshell' packaging. Not only had the packaging been manufactured by a process using CFCs, but the foam packaging never biodegrades. Both of these points alarmed the public. Prompted by public concern, McDonald's set out to find alternatives. Their idea: work with the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) to seek solutions to this difficult issue. Despite the foam packaging industry's work toward

establishing a closed-loop recycling system and a CFC phase-out, the public still did not like the idea that foam packaging would be part of the equation.

McDonald's agreed to follow EDF's lead eliminating foam packaging by 90 percent and replacing it with a composite recycled wax paper packaging. While the jury is still out on this alternative solution, the fact that McDonald's was willing to take responsibility for their own specific area of impact underscored their commitment to dialogue with the public and to act upon what they heard.

**6) Make sure everyone in the company knows what efforts are being made where they are announced to the public.**

The advent of the media age gives us instant access to one another, from one end of the country to the far corners of the world. Word gets around fast – so fast, that it can outpace the company's own internal communications systems. Many employees have nary a clue as to what the marketing or communications groups are telling the public. These employees are casually asked by friends or business associates about the interesting environmental program they read about in the newspaper. The response is often a blank stare, raising the question – 'How important can an environmental program be, if company members don't even know about it?'

Companies would do well to follow the lead of Kraft USA and Eastman Chemical Company who survey their employees to measure awareness of corporate environmental activities. Surveys are an effective way to monitor your environmental culture and to measure the progress of internal communications. A desirable goal is to have 90 percent of your employees informed about both your environmental liabilities and efforts.

**Continuous Dialogue**

Generally speaking, there's much to be gained by communicating your environmental achievements. But, bear in mind that, as far as the public is concerned, these communications set a precedent for continuous dialogue. This means that the public will expect you to communicate about all environmentally relevant issues, whether they reflect well on your company, or not.

Although this degree of exchange may not always feel comfortable for you – your company must move toward an open-door policy. You can maintain control of an active outreach program that keeps you – as much as possible – leading the conversation. In order to lead an ongoing dialogue with the public, it is important that you be in a good position to gauge your environmental soundness.

## CHECKLIST

### *Publicizing Environmental Efforts*

- Commit to open-door policy
- Integrate with overall company plan
- Spread awareness of program throughout the company
- Be consistent with other company activities
- Establish solid outreach plan
- Prepare backup materials for information requests