

For businesses to be successful in the future, they need to communicate their green achievements to increasingly switched-on consumers. **Paul Davison** gives tips on ways to shout about your environmental credentials in the digital age

How to get the point across

The world is changing, and finally people are starting to notice. Not only are the physical effects of climate change on the world's news agenda – but environmental awareness is having an increasing influence on the way we choose to live and work.

For consumers, environmental awareness is unprecedented, with increasing priority given to products and services with the lowest possible environmental and social impact. In the commercial world, sustainable performance is rapidly becoming a prerequisite for doing business – so much so that industry is taking the lead in improving environmental performance, particularly in the area of carbon management.

Commenting on the changing expectations of the retail industry, Mike Barry, head of CSR at Marks & Spencer, said: "We've made a significant commitment to reducing our environmental impact, and that has to be picked up by our supply chain. They know that, if they want to be pursuing business with us in the future, they have got to come on the journey with us."

And this is the point. Good environmental performance in business was once a nice-to-have of the FTSE 100. But, due to growing consumer awareness of environmental issues, all businesses – whether directly or indirectly

affected by consumer purchasing – are now increasingly required to demonstrate their environmental credentials. It does not matter what sector you work in or how far up the supply chain your business is: pressure from your customers, and your customers' customers, to address environmental performance is growing.

Regardless of what some may believe, we have not been here before – this is not a green fad. The reality check of almost weekly climate change stories in the media will keep this level of awareness front of mind for business and consumers. The other big change is the availability of information and social networking via the internet, so gaining information and passing it on has never been easier or faster. This is fundamental to effective environmental communications management.

There is arguably a better awareness of environmental issues among today's consumers than ever before. Unpredictable weather, including increased flooding, milder winters and the breaking of weather-related records all lead consumers to appreciate that something is changing and, importantly, that we need to do something about it.

But consumer awareness of environmental issues must not be confused with detailed understand-

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ing. For most consumers, the environment covers a wide range of issues from global warming to litter and other nuisances. The recent move towards banning plastic bags is a classic example. The environmental impact of a plastic bag is actually quite small when compared with food miles or retail refrigeration. But you do not see people boycotting frozen foods.

The energy used in refrigeration is a relatively well hidden issue, with an impact that is only just starting to appear in consumer consciousness. But plastic bags are used by everyone, and litter the planet. And they result in emotive images such as those in the *Daily Mail* recently, showing a turtle with a plastic bag around its neck.

The plastic-bag crusade illustrates a number of points we need to bear in mind. Consumers respond to issues quickly when they have an emotive power to move them. And, importantly, the resulting practical impact on consumers is relatively limited. But, while current consumer understanding of environmental issues

and impacts may be superficial, what the shift in attitudes towards plastic bags does demonstrate is the potential power of consumer purchasing behaviour. Environmentally conscious consumers are not basing their buying decisions purely on price, but also on a deeper engagement with environmentally responsible brands.

There is no doubt that changes in consumer behaviour are impacting upon business, and that good environmental performance is becoming a priority for each part of the supply chain. However, whereas it has traditionally been government that has led the changes to better environmental performance through legislation and regulation, businesses are now taking the lead.

Businesses have to be aware that consumers are also cynical, and are well aware of the commercial motives of many green campaigns. Accusations of unsubstantiated environmental claims, or green-wash, are growing, with the Advertising Standards Authority upholding more complaints against advertising that can't live up to its green claims.

Communication is key

For most businesses, environmental issues are now mainstream. Understanding the issues and managing them is seen as normal as, say,



managing HR. Given the availability of information via the internet, it is better to start with an open and frank approach to these issues, ideally with an objective arbiter to provide context for change. We are seeing the start of this with organisations such as the Carbon Trust providing information for consumers and encouraging business to adopt better Carbon Management systems.

The reaction to carbon off-setting is a good example of this. The easy fix of simply measuring your carbon outputs and offsetting it was spotlighted quickly as potential greenwash. So, drawing attention to the need for proper carbon management systems and leaving offsetting as a final resort is a more informed and helpful outcome.

This is just as well because consumers will become increasingly aware of the need for effective carbon management as understanding of climate change improves, and those businesses who have just stuck to off-setting will be seen as failing in their responsibilities. The issues are complex, and the communications options vast, but there are three fundamental principles that should be considered.

First, get the technical issues clearly evaluated and understood with effective management in place – even if some of the actions will take some time to be implemented.

Second, make sure all staff are informed. Effective internal communication helps employees understand the relevance of environmental issues and their commercial importance – i.e. what's good for the environment is good for business. Without the staff onboard, genuine engagement and commercial behaviour change will be inefficient, costly and time consuming.

Finally, get the external messages simplified and delivered in a format and style that engages with all stakeholders. This cannot be done with an environmental or CSR report alone, but requires an integrated communications programme that results in understandable engagement.

Successful brands of the 21st Century will be those that not only manage their environmental impacts but those that communicate it effectively as well. In the age of greater environmental awareness and widespread use of the internet, a new dialogue can be generated.

This provides a genuine opportunity to communicate change and

identify what is important to stakeholders, including consumers. The important thing is to get the balance right, between responding to what consumers want, and doing those things that are right for the environment. Responsible retailers are looking to improve efficiency of refrigeration, even if it's not on most consumers' radar.

In the old days, one of the fastest ways of getting messages through to a community was by word of mouth. Today, with the internet, we have a world community facing an uncertain future because of climate change, and the word-of-mouth communication route through social networking will play an increasing and profound role in the new society that we are starting to see emerge. Although some corporate affairs departments still see this as a risk, it should be seen as an opportunity.

Of course, it is new. And some initial attempts to communicate through social networks come across as little more than the com-

munications equivalent of daddy dancing at the disco – ungainly and, to be honest, a little embarrassing. But we need to get it right because, if we cannot communicate effectively through all media, our messages could be lost.

There is no going back. We must deal with these issues, and fast. In the past, we were dependent on environmental groups to draw our attention to the issues. In the future, through social networking online, almost anyone could draw attention to an issue. Although this is a potential threat, if you get the communications right, it could provide the most important opportunity to face your business in the next 20 years. That's got to be good for business and good for the environment.

So, not only could social networking and the internet save Cadbury's Wispa, it may well just turn out to save the planet as well.

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