

Public relations

## Pay the piper, but get the right tune

**Public relations firms are yet to develop a credible voice for explaining their clients' good work on sustainability, says Brendan May**

Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated conductor and composer, loved recalling the cynical attitude of his father to his young son's desire to become a musician.

Bernstein Snr had hoped his "Lenny" would be drawn to the safety of the family's beauty parlour supply business and dismissed music as the preserve of Jewish klezmers, a term Leonard Bernstein said meant "something a little bit better than a beggar". Klezmers, he said, were fiddle players who wandered from one bar mitzvah or wedding to the next, picking up a few kopeks here and there. For the young Bernstein's parents, the musical profession lacked nobility.

In the most puritan corporate responsibility circles, the public relations industry is too easily characterised as the klezmer at the wedding.

Wrong as this may be, it is fair to say that the PR world was sluggish to respond to the seismic business changes that came with the advent of corporate responsibility and sustainability in the 1990s.

With some notable exceptions, most communications agencies chose to ignore the changes that were happening around them. In turn, some PR companies themselves became targets, confirming the maxim that "if you're not at the table, you're on the menu". For all the creativity the industry deployed in other disciplines, when it came to corporate responsibility, safe and conservative strategies were chosen instead of bold, iconic gestures.

PR professionals were slow to join the corporate responsibility movement, mistaking it for a bolt-on to add a new angle to a dry story or product. Non-governmental organisations were fodder to lend credibility

to unambitious initiatives. And "crisis management" too often obstructed long-term planning, despite the fact that better plans would have meant fewer crises to manage.

As a result, PR firms cast themselves in the role of business friend, leaving criticism to those outside the corporate tent, notably NGOs. A more useful role might have been that of "critical friend", a function many of the more moderate NGOs now perform themselves.

### Tough brief

Large multinational PR agencies face many challenges, some easier to overcome than others. Any global agency thinking seriously about corporate responsibility must ask itself tough questions:

Should there be no-go client areas? If we refuse to work on a case where a client's actions are perceived to fall short of ethical expectations, what of the right to a fair hearing for all sides? Would failing to take on controversial cases risk impairing the quality of public debate?

Should a PR firm look beyond its own environmental footprint to account for the footprint of campaigns it devises?

How does the industry adapt to new client conflicts that have emerged around issues such as climate change?

Today's commercial battle lines are no longer drawn simply around which product offers better value than another. Themes like climate change, supply chain ethics and health have placed seemingly unrelated brands on ethical collision courses. With companies racing each other to top environmental rankings and ethical investment indices, a supermarket chain is competing with a mobile phone



Getting the message heard is never easy

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operator or oil company as much as with its sector peers.

The industry as a whole has not yet developed an overall point of view on these complex challenges. To become a credible voice at the table we must step up our collective response.

We are well down the path of tackling the easy part of the agenda – reducing our carbon footprint, providing our pro bono expertise to the non-profit sector and giving clients the best advice on how to maximise the communications potential of their CSR efforts. Increasingly our clients will demand the same standards from us that they demand from any other supplier – concrete proof that responsibility is as deeply interwoven in our business practices as it is in theirs.

Our industry has huge power. It engages daily with key decision-makers and, importantly, budget-holders who determine the face of corporate behaviour. They are, sometimes unknowingly, some of the influencers who will determine what our planet will be like in 20 years' time. The challenge for PR firms is to devise, mobilise and activate ever-bolder communications strategies that are in keeping with the urgency of global challenges. We must prove the cynics wrong.

The young Bernstein rejected the safety of the family business and chose music, of the noblest kind. The world was a better place for it. I know from personal experience that PR is a noble profession. But as an industry, we need to do much more to prove it. ■