

Change must begin here

Agencies need to make sure their own ethical policies are sound before promoting those of their clients

The PR industry's unique skill lies in building, maintaining, enhancing and often rescuing the reputation of its clients. And corporate responsibility has become seen as one of the most effective tools in supporting these efforts.

Be it an ethical transgression, environmental excess, abuse of employee relations or supply chain scandal, PR professionals increasingly counsel their clients to embrace ever bolder corporate responsibility strategies to build trust with stakeholders. These stakeholders now make up pretty much the entire spectrum of the audience that any company needs to address: investors, NGOs, media, legislators and, of course, customers.

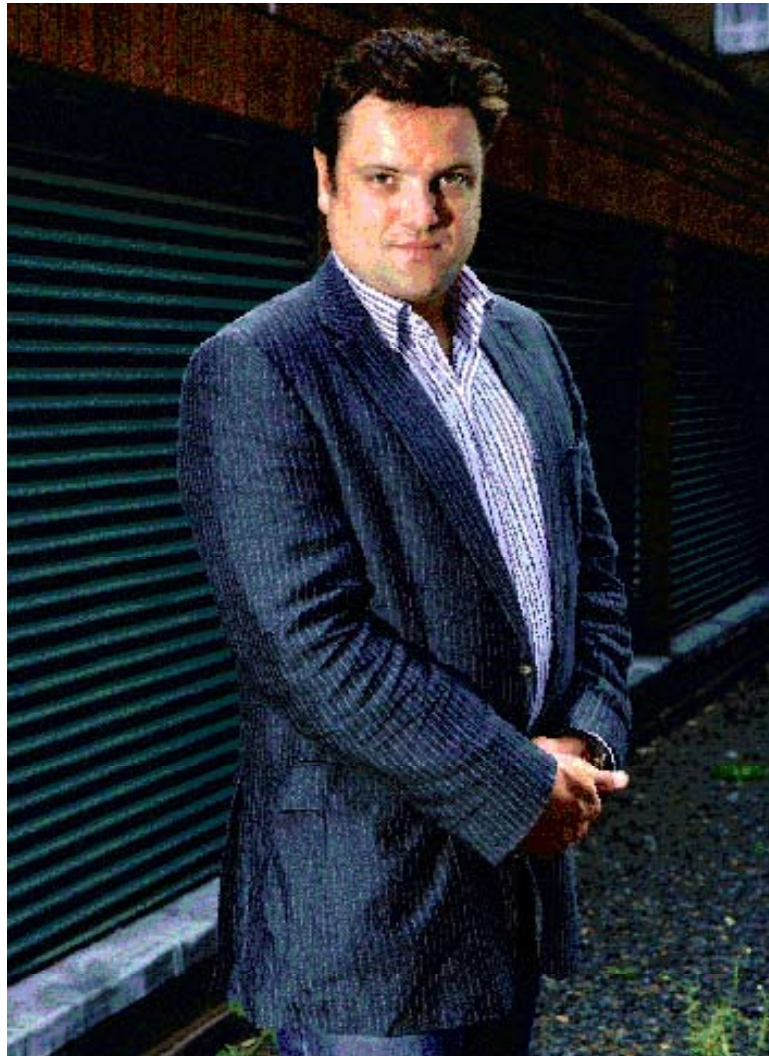
This is the age of the blog, internet activism, a revitalised environmental movement, a risk-averse investor community and a media that salivate at the first hint of corporate malpractice. The rules of the game have changed for good. There is no escape for the corporate laggard.

The case for corporate responsibility and the tireless pursuit of sustainable business practices is now firmly established. Very few companies now believe they can ignore the environmental and social agenda completely, although some embrace it with a good deal more conviction than others. Yet still the role of the PR industry in the CSR world is viewed with suspicion.

Recently, I was at a lunch with three friends, all of whom would (I think) acknowledge that after several years in the environmental NGO community I am not one to puff loudly about clients' achievements when their CSR standards fall short.

Yet as lunch wore on, the usual jokes about my being a 'PR man, spinning my clients' came flooding in. Normally this would not trouble me, but in this case the friends in question numbered two respected CSR journalists and one member of the shadow cabinet. PR and CSR, for them, sit uneasily in the same sentence.

I have some sympathy with this view. Our industry has done a better job at



PHIL ADAMS

promoting clients than it has itself and we have paid scant attention to the reputation of our own profession.

And it's not hard to see why many journalists regard some of the CSR communications that target them with suspicion. The problem with CSR is that it doesn't conform to the traditional PR rulebooks. There are no quick media hits in CSR – those who try the quick-fix approach without having done the hard work behind the scenes end up with worse reputations than when they started. We need to shape cultures, not just headlines.

Increasingly, there seem to be new golden rules emerging about what works and what doesn't when it comes

to communicating CSR. The first is to deliver the goods before you communicate. The best example of this is Marks & Spencer and its award-winning 'Look behind the Label' campaign.

The second is that to catch the eye in an overcrowded media marketplace already tiring of Al Gore, ethical shopping bags and carbon offsetters, any CSR initiative needs to be big, audacious, bold, iconic and above all, unexpected.

The third is to remember that no matter how well you behave on one issue, if you don't sort out the less exemplary behaviour in other parts of your business, every minute, pound and PR fee spent will be wasted.

And last, but by no means least, never underestimate the ability of a well-meant programme to unravel if buy-in and participation has not been secured from that sprawling mass of groups often called 'civil society'. Jargon though the term may be, the frontline NGOs and pressure groups have the power to undo months of work in a day of campaign action. Better to adjust your behaviour to meet their needs than ignoring them because you have plenty of money to spend on PR.

A huge growth industry of CSR consultancies, think-tanks, ratings agencies and sector-specific initiatives has flourished thanks to the widespread acceptance of the notion that 'if you're not at the table, you're on the menu'. So we need to assert our voice at that table, to overcome that undercurrent of cynicism that still surrounds PR's activities. We need to get our own houses in order, and develop a credible point of view on these crucial issues in order to really help our clients transform perceptions and stereotypical misjudgments of their activities. In doing so, we can be leaders, not followers, of the trends we have thus far failed to influence.

'Our industry has done a much better job at promoting clients than itself'

Brendan May is MD of Planet 2050, Weber Shandwick Worldwide's corporate responsibility and sustainability practice