

INTERNATIONAL NUCLEAR PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE— CAMPAIGNS AND STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

As we approach the 21st Century, society's values and expectations are changing throughout the world. This change is particularly rapid in the Pacific Basin where industrialisation and economic growth is acting as the catalyst for change in every area of society. Rapid global communications, single issue pressure groups and an expectation by the general public and other stakeholders to be consulted and involved in every stage of corporate decision-making, place increased pressures upon the world's corporate structures.

This paper will analyse the changes currently taking place and look forward into the next century. The author will then examine the possible impact of these societal changes upon the global nuclear industry and propose ways in which the industry can respond to these changes *before* they negatively impact the business.

He will examine the role of nuclear power in a changing world, its relationship with its various stakeholders, and suggest ways in which the industry can gain the initiative in its communications programmes of the future. In doing this he will draw upon examples of communication campaigns from both the nuclear and other industries.

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen. I am delighted to be with you again at what is one of the premier events for our industry. This conference offers a timely opportunity to take stock of our current position. It also gives us the chance to look at where we want the industry to be in the future, and what we need to do to take it there.

I am especially pleased to be able to contribute to the discussion on how communications can help the nuclear industry to fulfil its true potential in the new millennium.

I have been fortunate to have had a varied and fascinating career in what is commonly known as Public Relations (PR). However, I don't think I have ever worked in an industry in which people are so aware of the significance of public opinion. Our industry also fully understands the consequences of the failure to communicate effectively.

No doubt this is born of years of frustration and anger at misrepresentations and false accusations. The nuclear industry has had the constant feeling of being in the middle of a political war in which, as is often said, truth has been the first casualty.

For quite some time, the nuclear industry could justifiably complain about uniquely negative treatment and coverage. International campaigns, and political parties, demanded our complete closure. Other industries, with pollution records—and products—potentially far more damaging than our own, were allowed to go about their business with little media scrutiny and still less criticism.

Now, however, our days of isolation are over. Just ask the Chairman of any petrochemical company; the director of any pharmaceutical business or indeed—in the UK—any beef producer. Markets are changing, corporate structures are changing and, most obviously and significantly, public attitudes towards industry are changing.

In adapting to these new circumstances, the nuclear industry does not have to feel that it is fighting a battle on its own. If we understand the new circumstances and get our communications strategy right, we have a great deal to gain in the future. If we don't, our industry will, I fear, continue its slow decline, driven by hostile public opinion.

As with so much in life, whether this potential is realised or wasted comes down to attitude. Our attitude, like that of many other industries, needs to evolve and change. I mentioned that many of us in the nuclear industry felt that we were, at one time, fighting a lone battle. It might be reassuring for us in the nuclear industry when oil companies, for example, experience the same co-ordinated hostility that is common for us. However, in my view, that attitude lies at the heart of our industry's problem.

We should not be welcoming others onto our side in the battle against pressure groups or the public. What we should be doing is avoiding the battle in the first place.

Before we can attempt to influence or alter the relationships we, as businesses, have with our stakeholders—the general public, politicians, the media, interest groups—we must first understand why they think or feel as they do. What has transformed the public from passive consumers into legitimate, active players in Boardroom decision making?

Changes in public opinion generally mirror, or react to, changing circumstances—and the world of corporate business has altered significantly over the last four decades.

The major change has been in scale—many companies today are truly multi-national, employing hundreds of thousands across a number of continents and selling to millions more. Indeed the largest of today's corporations have annual turnovers in excess of the gross domestic product of many small nations.

People work for, and buy from, such multi-nationals. But the impact of such businesses on people's lives goes way beyond that. The economic vibrancy and the social harmony of their communities also depends upon executive decisions often made thousands of miles away. Corporations exert a tremendous impact, directly and indirectly, on people—not just in terms of income and livelihood but also on their environment, health and, in some cases, their entire way of life.

However, this increase in corporate power has, surprisingly, resulted in an increase in public influence.

In what, until recently, was called 'The West', global corporate expansion triggered a period of growth in general wealth. And 'The West' is now being displaced in this regard by many Pacific Rim nations.

At the same time, the world effectively 'contracted' at a rate unimagined just thirty years ago—communication is now instant and trade truly global. Travel times have diminished and in-depth knowledge of foreign nations is commonplace.

People in many countries are now affluent enough to care about more than the material essentials. They are also confident enough to assert their rights as citizens, as well as consumers, and informed enough to understand the effect of their purchasing choices on other nations and on the global environment. And they express this new found confidence and concern not just in individual market choices, but positively and collectively, in politics and via the single issue pressure group.

At the same time, as companies grew, and their stakeholders became ever more active and aware, so the relationship between the two grew more complex and problematic. I believe that the usual method of communication—often termed 'the battleground'—is harming corporate interests.

This, really, comes as no surprise. It is false to view an organisation's relationships with its various stakeholders in terms of two sides—of 'them' and 'us'.

o organisation works in a vacuum—it is run by, and employs, those who live in the ‘outside world’. It raises its finance and sells its goods in the ‘outside world’. It is bound by a thousand threads to the economies and political frameworks of numerous nations.

Everyone in this room is as much a part of the general public, as they are of the nuclear industry.

It is not only a false analysis to believe that communication is there to keep the outside world off the Chairman’s back so he can get on with running the business. It is also the first step on the road to corporate ruin.

Any organisation which views its relationships with the ‘outside world’ as something to be managed defensively, gradually loses touch with the world in which it operates. Its decisions, strategies and products become so inward-looking that the job of selling them to the outside world becomes all but impossible. The organisation voluntarily drains its own lifeblood.

Such companies develop a tunnel vision like that of the old regimes of East Germany, Romania or Bulgaria. And look what impact they had on their countries, and what impact the outside world eventually had on them. Industry—and above all the nuclear industry—needs to move away from the ‘them and us’ approach, to one based on the concept of ‘win/win’. This encourages a company to try to match its interests with those of its stakeholders. The role of communication then becomes the search for common ground, to the benefit of both the stakeholder *and* the company.

This must involve greater openness on our part – a greater willingness to discuss with many groups, even those who seem to oppose us. And I mean genuine dialogue, both in public and in private, not an exchange of insults in the newspapers. There may be some pain in the short-term, but if it encourages a genuine meeting of minds then the long-term benefits, for all of us, could be substantial.

As one English PR expert has said:

“If information is the currency of human contact, then controversy is a small price to pay for true dialogue.”

A move in this direction, throughout industry and including our own, has already begun, but it is a slow process. Corporate attitudes towards the environment offer a good example of the process to date.

In the early 1970s and ‘80s the environmental performance of many organisations began to come under the spotlight. Whether you were reprocessing spent nuclear fuel or selling cosmetics, the environmental impact of your activities was examined. Environmental and consumer pressure groups led the assault. Most organisations reacted to these developments by defending themselves. They used every logical argument to show that their activities brought greater benefit to mankind than the environmental detriment they caused.

Unfortunately for them, logic had little effect when up against emotion. Pressure groups could still win over public opinion with stunts and slogans.

The whaling industry was one of the first casualties, followed by the fur industry, and the tobacco industry also began its slow decline.

None of these particular industries were able to change their products to match them to peoples’ values and beliefs—so closure or decline was inevitable.

Meanwhile, the animal rights lobby were targeting the pharmaceutical industry. Consumer groups were targeting supermarket products. Health groups were demanding that lead be removed from petrol. The list was, and remains, endless.

Fortunately, many of these organisations could change their products and culture to fit in with new values and demands. Supermarkets introduced environmentally friendly products and lines, whilst oil companies removed lead from petrol and marketed their environmental records as best they could.

'Ecofriendly' stickers became commonplace on every supermarket shelf. BP, for example, spent billions of dollars on a new—green—corporate identity.

Of course, these can be criticised as cynical marketing ploys or publicity stunts. But such changes do reflect a move toward the 'win/win' idea. Supermarkets and oil companies maintain and increase market share by effectively meeting new public requirements.

But it remains *responsive*. Such re-alignments are prompted by crisis; and by pressure from the public, politicians or campaigning groups. They typify a reactive corporate culture to the outside world.

But if we are to truly abandon the 'them and us' philosophy, and replace it with a 'win/win' culture, organisations need to be constantly adjusting their relationship with stakeholders.

And that, I believe, is where the role of communications comes in.

The challenge for myself, and others in communications in the nuclear industry, has as much to do with changing the outlook of *my* industry, as it has with changing public opinion. Ideally, I would wish to reach a position where stakeholder views are seen as market intelligence and not as threats, and become an integral part of company and industry strategy.

This can be achieved both in immediate, specific, ways and also in securing the longer term future of the nuclear industry.

For example, regarding immediate action, as you may be aware, over the past year or so shipments of vitrified high level wastes have been transported by sea from France to Japan. We were already well aware of the opposition which this would cause in many countries close to the shipment. The question was how to deal with it, and the options were fairly clear.

We could attempt to dismiss the opposition as ill-informed, politically motivated and overtly hostile. We could then try to ignore the fact that the shipment were taking place at all.

Alternatively, we could be quite open. We could explain to the stakeholders in each country why and when the shipment was happening, describe exactly what the waste was and how it was contained, and set in context the safety regulations governing such movements.

We chose the latter option.

At the very start, press releases were issued making clear when we would be communicating the exact date and route of sailing, and further releases followed before the shipment set off. Representatives of BNFL, COGEMA and the Japanese Overseas Reprocessing Committee travelled to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific nations to meet with politicians, officials and the media. And we sought throughout to add to information that was already public.

A great deal of work had gone into ensuring that we were aware of the varying concerns in each nation and that we could address these. But our message really focused on three things:

- Transportation of nuclear materials is strictly governed by rigorous international regulations and we comply with - or exceed - all of them;
- These are routine shipments, and over thirty years, more than 3 million miles have been travelled without a single incident involving the release of radiation;
- No-one cares more about safety than we do—unless we ensure it, we have no business.

Media and officials were given briefings and journalists were left with detailed explanatory packs. Every opportunity was taken to inform and involve people in what we were doing. We didn't view them as opponents who were out to get us. Instead we understood why they were concerned and sought to work with them to remove those fears.

The result was even better than I expected. Media coverage was far more balanced than it ever had been before. We were treated as credible and open, and the channels of communication established are now there to be built upon in the future.

That is just one small practical example of how changing our attitude and approach can bring results.

Similarly, over recent months BNFL has undertaken a nation-wide television campaign in the UK focusing on what we, as a company, actually do. We didn't confuse people with the complexity of reprocessing. Instead, we used the concept of a match which had burned down, being able to light up again. That is, after all, what recycling or reprocessing actually does.

Again, by trying to be open, by taking the mystery away from the nuclear business, we obtained very good and immediate results. Independent research showed that, after seeing the advert, there was an increase of 17% in those who recognised our message that reprocessing created only a small amount of waste. And there was an increase of 39% in those who recognised our message that our job is to recycle fuel.

And, in Japan, that open and honest approach is also paying dividends.

The continuing process of Round Table meetings, whereby industry actually seeks the views of, and input from, local populations in many regions, is a very welcome step. It is a wonderful example of being willing to sit down, face to face, and talk and listen. These on-going meetings represent real dialogue and I congratulate my Japanese colleagues. It was a courageous step to start to undertake them, but I'm sure that the spirit of honesty and trust which I understand they are encouraging, will continue and grow to everyone's benefit.

Over the longer term, however, our challenge remains considerable. How do we ensure that the nuclear option is allowed to fulfil its full potential?

The classic 'them and us' response - isolating ourselves, feeling persecuted, ignoring our opponents and pointing to the scientific case—has been tried and it has failed.

I believe that the 'win/win' philosophy is the one which *can* deliver - if we really embrace it.

There are a number of global factors affecting the future requirements for energy. I'm sure we can all list them. Over the next century, the global population could double or triple. Economic activity could match that rate and energy demand could quadruple. This will happen largely in developing countries.

Also, global warming, largely caused by burning finite fossil fuels, is rapidly becoming the number one environmental concern. We have to find a method of supplying the energy demanded by that growing population, in the way which is least harmful to the environment.

And yet Governments have been swayed against the nuclear option by the message that it is expensive, unsafe and publicly unacceptable. I am certainly not saying that nuclear is the only answer to every problem, but it has the potential to act as a solution to many of the most significant. And that is quite a market opportunity for us.

The 'win/win' option for the nuclear industry is to involve government, the media and pressure groups in an open and honest dialogue about the future.

I see it as my job—as the job of all involved in communication in our industry—to encourage our companies to understand our stakeholders' views and to address and adapt to them. By doing so we can actually begin to lead an honest debate and contribute to setting—rather than reacting to—the agenda.

Of course, if we are to achieve the 'win/win' mentality, it is not just the nuclear industry that will have to start behaving differently. I sense that the public are beginning to grow weary of the constant hostility between industry and pressure groups. The chants, the stunts, the photo opportunities and the manipulation.

Stakeholders—all of us in the general public, media, the politicians—know that we face difficulties and that there are choices to be made in order to solve them. We are also well aware that nothing that is worth having is entirely without risk. What is wanted is an honest debate in which people can feel reassured that the best decisions—which conform to their priorities and concerns - are being reached openly and in their interests. And they want a say in that process.

That means that it is no longer good enough for environmental pressure groups to call for a world in which a growing global population needs energy, whilst demanding an end to nuclear generation and fossil fuels. A 'win/win' mentality means that pressure groups can't position themselves as outside the process, opposing everything. They are part of it just as we are, so let's listen to their solutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am in no doubt that this industry can play a key role in the future. I am convinced that our prosperity as an industry can coincide with solving many of the critical problems facing the world.

But I am equally certain that we will not be in a position to do so if we remain locked in an attitude which views the 'outside world' as separate, hostile, alien and something to be managed. Let us try to fully understand the concerns and the issues being raised by the many groups we deal with. Let us view these as opportunities and not threats. And let us refocus our industry so that it can work alongside these stakeholders to develop the solutions which are in all our interests.

In that way, communication—in its widest sense—will be contributing as it should, and the nuclear industry will have the global role it deserves.