

## Communicating Sustainability

*Christopher Graham, DG, Advertising Standards Authority:*

I can well understand marketers wanting to hitch their wagon to environmental awareness and environmental concern. It's a slightly two-edged sword. Because while you're addressing an audience that's increasingly receptive to those sort of arguments, you're also facing quite well informed critics. Often well-informed are also deeply cynical or at least sceptical.

*Lynette Thorstensen, MD Communications, WBCSD:*

We know that sustainability is a word that is used variously across sectors. It's often misunderstood and yet no-one's found a better word.

*Mark Lee, CEO, SustainAbility:*

I'm very partial to the Brundtland definition. I think that it is rich and deep, that brought together very clearly the notion of environmental, social and economic. That there is this triple bottom line aspect to sustainability; it's not one or the other, it's each and it's all three.

*Christopher Graham, Director General, Advertising Standards Authority:*

I know a company like Shell wants to develop the idea of the triple bottom line. It's sustainability, it's environmental, but it's also got to be social and it's got to pay it's way. If that's what you mean, then say it.

*Mark Lee, CEO, SustainAbility:*

And I don't think the point is don't advertise, don't talk about sustainability, don't talk about the environment. I think the point is it is incumbent upon you to talk about these things incredibly carefully and with fantastic evidence. Both based on current performance and on the path they intend to take from today to whatever future is being described. I think that's a good outcome, for short and long-term frankly.

*Bjorn Edlund, Vice President Communications, Royal Dutch Shell*

It's probably not a good idea to use the word sustainability in marketing and communications, we have seen, because it is interpreted in different ways by different people. For us sustainability is this whole approach to the way that we work, balancing economic, environment and social factors, okay. We are an economic entity and therefore the economic factors are very important. But also if we don't get the social and environmental side right we lose what we call the license to operate. We look at

how we work and what happens at the front end of the business. How we work with local communities. How do we address any environmental challenges that come with our business and if we can reflect that properly through our communications I think that we've sort of told the story of sustainability without using the actual word.

I think there are reasonable messages around comparative advertising. And perhaps the important thing is to say is don't confuse the comparative and the absolute. If what you mean is greener say greener, don't just say green.

*Dennis Hosack, IUCN – Shell Relationship Manager:*

I think for us the big thing is to encourage Shell to use those advances that they're making and use those in their advertisements where they can cite specific examples where they're making a difference because of the work they're doing.

*Christopher Graham, DG, Advertising Standards Authority:*

That's a perfectly legitimate point to make. I think we only get into trouble when we get slightly over excited and just make a bigger claim than can actually be supported.

*Lynette Thorstensen, MD Communications, WBCSD:*

I think you're only getting in danger of greenwash if your actions don't carry equal weight with your words. And I've seen this a great deal in big companies. Fortunately, none of them are our members. But rhetoric and words can get well ahead of business performance.

*Bjorn Edlund, Vice President Communications, Royal Dutch Shell:*

We can't avoid advertising because it's part of the communications mix and it's a very important part of it. But I think we have to be very careful that we come in with facts and that we don't overstate them. But sometimes the creative enthusiasm leads us to apparently overstating. We don't think we're doing it but you can read it in a different way. So it's a constructive challenge that we get and I think that the regulator will have to be a lot more clearer; so this is what you can say, this is what you can't say. That would be very useful for us.

*Mark Lee, CEO, SustainAbility:*

I think there's been a real coalescing of the position of the super majors. They've pulled together under a similar language, a similar public policy position. Lots of turning to government and saying, you know, it's up to you to give us good policy that we can follow. This company has at one point said you know, government sets the mix and we provide the best fuels within that mix. There is no question that we have a failure of political leadership vis a vis

sustainability at the present time and probably again particularly around climate. But, that to me is not an excuse for 5 of the 10 largest and economically and politically the most powerful private institutions on the planet, not to take a more aggressive leadership position themselves. I think there's more they can do to stimulate high quality debate. I think they have to be engaged. I don't think there's any possibility that the oil companies can withdraw from this debate around sustainability generally or environments specifically.

*Lynette Thorstensen, MD Communications, WBCSD:*

The bottom line for me is that in communicating sustainable actions by companies you must be able to point immediately to products and services that the given company produces. You can't just speak in general terms about good intentions. I think the minute you go into that realm you are greenwashing.

*Mark Lee, CEO, SustainAbility:*

If I was advising somebody on how to confront greenwash and the potential, you know, allegations of or just falling into the trap I would be begging the organisation to test the authenticity of what they're saying. Not only their intent but their ability to back it up with examples of the actions that they are taking that match their intent.

*Bjorn Edlund, VP Communications, Royal Dutch Shell*

Some NGOs may, can seem to be very narrowly focussed, because they have a particular species or a particular section of sustainability, you know, as their sort of issue that they deal with. They are very necessary as they develop expertise in that arena and if they are open to dialogue and if we're open to dialogue we can actually progress together with NGOs.

*Lynette Thorstensen, MD Communications, WBCSD:*

It is absolutely clear that the non-government sector in this debate. The green organisations in the energy debate would argue that non-renewable resources are not sustainable. So, you know there are learnings in this for Shell. It is probably, not to mix metaphors, but really throwing fat on the fire to try and argue that non-renewable resources are sustainable. But that doesn't mean that Shell isn't doing extremely good work in all sorts of ways to mitigate it's own impact. To develop renewable sources of energy. To do a whole range of things to do with biodiversity offsets. Shell in fact is a very, very impressive company from a sustainable development point of view. But there are some bottom lines in terms of some of their key stakeholders. Green organisations in particular who will never ever accept that fossil fuels are sustainable.

*Bjorn Edlund, VP Communications, Royal Dutch Shell:*

Some NGOs tend to want to have companies like Shell as a projection surface to sort of galvanise their own work and that's quite okay. But they also have to understand that we have to deal with a wider group of stakeholders, governments, customers, our own employees, business partners and so on and so forth. So they may see us as being less focussed with them as they are. But that's also okay. Because the most important thing is that we talk to each other and come to some sort of understanding of the basic facts and the issues at hand.

*Lynette Thorstensen, MD Communications, WBCSD:*

You need to read your stakeholders well. The green movement is not diminishing, it's growing if anything. Civil society organisations are growing. And it does mean constant and careful dialogue with these kind of stakeholders. And very robust and honest discussions about what is going on. It's a mistake not to think that civil society can't mobilise quickly. Civil society can mobilise extremely quickly. Non-government organisations are nimble and they represent a very large amount of public opinion and it's incredibly important to engage robustly and honestly with them. And maybe one of those honest discussions will be around this very point of the nature of fossil fuels versus other forms of energy.

*Christopher Graham, DG, Advertising Standards Authority:*

A responsible advertiser wants to get everybody who's involved in marketing, corporate affairs, PR, compliance, legal, whatever it is. All focussed on making the case that Shell wants to make but making it within the rules.

*Mark Lee, CEO, SustainAbility:*

I think that the public expectations around the environment are increasing, have been consistently increasing and we might expect a continued acceleration of that interest and therefore greater pressure for more clarity around communications and more evidence of improved performance.

*Bjorn Edlund, VP Communications, Royal Dutch Shell:*

I think we have to be part of the debate because we're at the centre of it. Energy is a controversial issue and it's a very difficult and a very necessary thing to talk about.

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