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Finding the Balance

Communicating Effectively About Environmental Issues

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Throughout most of modern-day business, the color green has traditionally been associated with money and wealth. But in the 21st century, green is more commonly used in business circles to describe sustainable or environmentally-conscious initiatives. Some would say the two definitions are near opposites; but many are finding green can beget green, and an eco-friendly approach to business can actually help realize a number of cost-saving, revenue-generating and reputation-enhancing benefits. Ultimately, companies are looking for ways to strike a balance between the need for bottom-line success and doing the right thing for the environment.

A strategic approach to the environment is one of the key elements of the Triple Bottom Line, a standard of excellence for measuring business performance which looks beyond just financial performance to include a company's social and environmental performance. Many companies are also addressing eco-concerns through a sound corporate social responsibility program that aligns with a company's business practices.

As energy and gas prices continue to rise and concerns about global warming escalate, the focus on environmental issues has become entrenched as a long-term priority with far-reaching impacts for both companies and consumers. Without question, today's consumer has a heightened sense of awareness about all things green, and they expect business to be engaged in the discussion as well. According to the 2007 Cone Environmental Survey, Americans not only have increased their concern about the environment as a personal issue, but they also want business to play a role in addressing environmental concerns. Key findings of the survey include:

- 93% of Americans surveyed believe companies have a responsibility to help preserve the environment; and
- 91% have a more positive image of a company when it is environmentally responsible.

Forward-thinking companies of all sizes and across a wide range of industries have recognized the importance of assessing and managing their environmental impacts. But there are also many companies just beginning this process. As more organizations place a greater emphasis on environmental practices, communicating about those activities with their stakeholders will become increasingly important.

Unfortunately, there is still a great deal of confusion about what to communicate and plenty of risks for not communicating effectively. Some companies are not sure what information is meaningful to

share with stakeholders. Others are hesitant to communicate if they are in the early stages of environmental assessment and don't have much of a story yet to tell. On the other hand, some could be accused of overstating their activities and fall into the category of "greenwashing," which is making an unsubstantiated claim about environmentally-friendly practices in order to profit or in some other way benefit. For fear of making that mistake or inviting increased scrutiny, others have simply chosen not to communicate at all.

Not communicating is not a good choice. Communicating effectively is the better path and is not as difficult as it may seem. Following are several guidelines to help companies develop and implement environmental communications strategies that provide meaningful information to stakeholders as well as positive results for companies.

1. **Have a clear understanding of impact.** Before communicating at all, it is critical to do a life cycle assessment of all operational activities. This data-collection process takes a 360-degree view of the organization to identify materials used, energy required, and existing or potential environmental impacts associated with developing a product or service. During this process, it is important to look upstream to find out what resources the company is using in the production process as well as downstream to see what resources are required by customers or consumers to use its products or services. Only after understanding the full scope of impact can communication strategies be developed.
2. **Identify areas of strength as well as weakness.** Once a comprehensive review of activities has been done, map out what the company is doing well. Look to see not only how the company is meeting regulatory standards, but what it is doing to go above and beyond what is required. For example, a closer look may uncover a best practice in the making to reduce waste on the factory floor or greenhouse gas emissions in the production process. Employees may be reducing energy use in the office. Likewise, look for areas where the company needs to improve and how the company will address those opportunities in the future.
3. **Get a grasp of the science and substance.** Do some homework to find out how significant the company's practices or impacts are and how to communicate accurately and authentically. Be sure to:
 - a. Understand the science behind the company's environmental impacts to help stakeholders see the relationship between the two.
 - b. Understand the substance of the company's environmental activities to be certain there are operational philosophies and policies in place to guide those activities. There has to be more than marketing behind a message.
 - c. Benchmark against peers both in and outside of the industry to ensure the company is keeping up with – or better yet staying ahead of – accepted standards.
4. **Be proactive. Be strategic.** In addition to evaluating the company's overall environmental impact, it's important not to just manage risks but also look for opportunities to develop proactive programs to benefit the environment. Be strategic about those concepts by tying initiatives to the company's business focus and objectives. For example, if the company uses water in its operational practices, identify conservation or environmental groups who focus on water conservation or watershed restoration. Look to them for guidance and determine if they would be willing to partner on an initiative.
5. **Seek third-party support.** Identify stakeholders such as community leaders or conservation and environmental groups that are interested in working with business and industry to benefit the environment. Ask for their feedback about the company's practices as well as its

proactive initiatives. Several organizations could potentially provide verification of or support for the company's positive environmental activities and stewardship.

6. **Develop messages to build credibility and create support.** Sometimes environmental communications can seem too complex or irrelevant for consumers to care. Use these tips to develop engaging messages.
 - a. State the facts plainly; explain the science, use precise language and avoid jargon.
 - b. Don't overstate the positives; don't confuse doing "less bad" with doing good.
 - c. Don't just say what is being done, say why it matters and be prepared to explain benefits.
 - d. Use stories to illustrate impact on people, animals and the environment. Bring things to life so audiences will care.
7. **Engage employees.** Once messages are developed, the first place to start communicating is internally with employees. The best environmental communications efforts focus strategies and programs on what employees care about, what they will support and what creates pride and loyalty. Top-down commitment and communication from the CEO will also bolster internal communications efforts. A side benefit: environmentally-conscious companies are more attractive to prospective employees and can use their eco-friendly approach to help recruit the best and brightest.
8. **Monitor, measure and modify.** Being environmentally-conscious is a long-term proposition, and one which requires determination as well as a good dose of humility. No organization is expected to be green in every area of its operations, but companies are expected to start somewhere. A good place to begin is with an obvious strength; build upon that, report regularly, constantly evaluate and monitor feedback from stakeholders, and make adjustments when necessary. The important thing is to be in the game making meaningful contributions when possible.

Above all, remain committed to transparency about environmental activities and initiatives. Be willing to share what is working well, what still needs improvement and plans for making progress in the future. Such authentic communication shows the company is striving to be both relevant and responsive and will win support from a wide variety of stakeholders who choose to trust the company that isn't afraid to shoot straight on all things green.

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