The recent spike in environmental awareness has caused countless organizations—including some energy companies—to release a flood of communications promoting their green credentials. You see the messages with beautiful color pictures of nature in print everywhere. You see and hear them in television and radio spots with slick slogans and soft strains of music that conjure up images of nature in the raw—a tranquil running Rocky Mountain stream, a thick forest of tall trees, or a flight of wild birds across a clear blue sky.

The messages are usually simple and straightforward and pretty much share the same overall theme: “we’re green.” After a while, all of these advertisements even begin to sound and look the same. There is no differentiating strategy that is key to all fundamental communications. In the communications business, we call this “me, too” promotion.

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Sadly, it is a waste of valuable resources for the sources of these advertisements because their credibility is called into question by those exposed to the messages. It is questionable if all this “me, too” self-promotion actually protects or fosters a hard-earned corporate reputation. Not everyone, however, is following this herd.

IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO “TALK THE TALK”; ONE MUST “WALK THE WALK”

Many companies are rising above “me, too” promotion and wisely wondering how to be genuinely proactive about a sustainability communications strategy. And the timing could not be better to move beyond greening and to implement strategies that simultaneously will increase revenue while solving emerging sustainability challenges. Companies willing to rise above the herd mentality of “me, too” marketing with a sustainability communications strategy will find exciting possibilities to fulfill environmental and revenue needs with profitable strategies for environmental and corporate sustainability. There’s more about sustainability below.

The path for any organization to the wellspring of sustainability opportunity begins by understanding the answers to questions such as the following:

- What is actually behind the interest in global greening?
- What are the alternatives to “me, too” green marketing programs?
- How do we marry environmental needs with business goals?
- How can we credibly communicate?
- What key constituent groups are moved by a green message?
- What technologies can we explore and harness for sustaining a genuinely green culture?
And what is our sustainability communications strategy for building credibility in our brand name?

Answering these questions helps in getting management all on the same page. More questions may arise as the answers come forth. But that is healthy, and it further separates you from the herd mentality. This internal thought process is the first step in moving beyond greening to sustainability.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” You will notice that the EPA does not include “me, too” promotion as part of its definition.

In fact, Steve Johnson, an EPA administrator, goes on to say that the United States has “a responsibility to sustain, if not enhance, our natural environment and our nation’s economy for future generations.” That is not coming from the president of the Sierra Club but from a government representative who is well aware of the change afoot with the public at large.

Thus, when it comes to sustainability, we are talking about specific actions that a company is taking or will undertake to demonstrate it is truly green and, therefore, environmentally responsible. Satisfying government regulators and regulations is no longer sufficient because people expect industry to meet EPA and state environmental quality standards. The public focus has shifted into higher gear when it comes to industry and the environment.

People now expect and are demanding to know what industry is going to do above and beyond satisfying regulations. In short, what is industry doing or going to do to sustain and improve the environment and economy not just for today and tomorrow, but for generations yet to be born?

The new environmental awareness culture presents a challenge to industry. The ball is in industry’s court.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

A good start for responding to the challenge is for a company to publicly tie its business goals to the sustainability wagon. It is time to brush off and update the corporate mission statement so that it is in tune with today’s environmental expectations for sustainability. A solid mission statement that is simple and to the point gets management and all employees pointed in the right direction and the public understands and appreciates it. The mission statement should be prominently displayed in all corporate communications, in the boilerplates of all press releases and just below the company logo in all signage.

But a mission statement is just that—words that communicate the purpose of a company. We need to put some action behind those words that communicate we are “walking the walk” when it comes to the environment. We are looking for meaningful and tangible actions. What is the company’s research and development arm doing to come up with cleaner and cheaper energy? What new technologies are being explored to reduce emissions and produce more affordable energy? What alternative fuels are being researched?

Another opportunity is to make sure that the company’s fleet of vehicles and its plant operations are reducing emissions and are fuel-efficient. There are more opportunities:

- What is the company doing to reduce paper and, therefore, save trees?
- What is the company doing to reduce employee travel to and from work—flexible time schedules, telecommuting efforts, etc.?
- How is the company partnering with environmental organizations and the community to spare no quarter in producing and providing cleaner and cheaper energy?

NOW HERE IS WHERE COMMUNICATIONS COMES INTO THE SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAM

A company’s efforts to achieve sustainability should be matched by its communications. Sustainability needs to be communicated in order to be effective. No billboards! Communications should be very direct by including community town hall meetings, plant tours, briefings for opinion leaders, and a speakers bureau that reaches out to Rotary, Kiwanis, and other grassroots groups.

This is the time to get down with people and go “mano a mano.” ☀
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