In this issue of *BCQ*, we launch a new series of themed sections, which will appear on a regular basis. The theme for this section is communicating sustainability in the workplace.

**USE IT UP, WEAR IT OUT, MAKE IT DO, OR DO WITHOUT: COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE**

Sam H. DeKay, Section Editor  
*St. John’s University and BNY Mellon Corporation*

YOU HAVE CHECKED into the hotel, located your room, fumbled with the key card, and finally unlocked the door. As you wheel your luggage inside, you notice a small, glossy card in the center of a freshly made bed. The card bears a title, in large font: “Doing Our Bit.” Curious, you read further.

Right now, there are probably millions of towels being washed in hotels. Just imagine the tons of water and millions of watts of electricity that is used, day in, day out.

Well, here’s how you can help. If your towels could really do with freshening up, please leave them in the bath and we’ll change them for you. If you think they could do another day, please put them back on the towel rack and we’ll leave them until you are ready. It may seem like a little thing, but we’re doing all we can, so please help us help the environment.

Are you impressed with the hotel’s commitment to a cleaner environment? Or does the thought cross your mind that this hotel, like many others, is primarily motivated by the desire to reduce its laundering expenses? Do the high-minded sentiments expressed on
the card seem a form of thinly disguised propaganda? You are by no means alone.

Although numerous corporations are now issuing annual “sustainability reports” that offer evidence of efforts to adopt sound environmental, social, and governance policies and practices, many readers of these reports have concluded that their contents are essentially public relations announcements. Jonathan Wootliff (2010), writing for the website *Triple Pundit: People, Planet, Profit*, claims, “... many of these reports often read more like propaganda as opposed to providing transparent accounts of the way in which a company is balancing its equally important management imperatives of people, planet and profit” (para. 3). Major watchdog organizations—including Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and Amnesty International—are carefully scrutinizing these reports to ensure that they are not merely PR “puff.”

The two articles in this special section are concerned with the manner by which corporations communicate their concern for sustainability in a credible manner. The first, “Doing Well by Doing Good: Ray C. Anderson as Evangelist for Corporate Sustainability,” suggests that the narrative style adopted by many organizations to express their sustainability program is flawed. This style, which emphasizes present and future activities intended to remedy environmental or social problems, bears the tone and content of propaganda. However, if the organizational narrative admits to past practices that were less than desirable, and also describes a “conversion” to sustainability, the reading or listening audience is more likely to accept the program as an authentic commitment. The article includes a case study exemplifying this type of narrative.

The second article, “‘Making It Do’ at the Movie Theatres: Communicating Sustainability in the Workplace,” presents a case study involving Latin America’s largest motion picture theater chain and its commitment to eye care. Between 2006 and 2009, this program has improved the visual health of 6,000 persons. The program involves multiteried communications, including filmed pronouncements, employee involvement, and services provided by medical professionals. The sustainability program described in this article, engaging the participation of numerous stakeholders both within and external to the sponsoring organization, cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda.
Reference

Sam H. DeKay is a vice president for corporate communications at BNY Mellon Corporation in New York City. He is also an adjunct assistant professor at the Graduate School of Education, St. John’s University, Jamaica, NY. Address correspondence to Sam H. DeKay, BNY Mellon, 101 Barclay Street, Floor 9E, New York, NY, 10007; email: sdeky@bnymellon.com.