



## Rosetta Public Relations – Communications Briefing *January 2008*

### EVERYTHING'S GONE GREEN – ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATIONS

The environment is rapidly becoming the communications environment. Concern over climate change pervades the public discourse – 74 per cent of Americans believe global warming is happening and, more tellingly, 72 per cent want their government to force major industries to cut their emissions (Zogby, 2006). If you've experienced climate change first hand you are liable to be more worried about it and to want more drastic action – for example, almost 70 per cent of Australians, who are suffering from severe drought, support strong action to curb climate change even if high costs are involved (Lowy Institute, 2006).

There are two lessons to be drawn from this:

#### Two Key Environmental Communications Facts

1. The space you are working in is (to varying degrees) about the environment, whether or not your organization is directly involved with environmental issues. Your story has to fit.
2. Your audiences are sensitized, concerned and often worried about the environment... even if you're not talking to them specifically about it.

Let's examine the first point in more detail with two examples – your local hospital and an e-commerce website. Neither is a typical environmental story. But the average North American hospital produces about 20 lbs. of medical waste per patient, per day and about 20 per cent of that is biohazardous (Canadian Medical Association, 2002).

E-commerce conveys an image of electrons moving silently and efficiently across global networks. But how much energy does it take to power it? A typical server farm consumes the energy equivalent of 57 barrels of oil every day. Your sector may not scream 'environmental' but it inevitably is an environmental story at heart.

Start with an informal audit of your environmental 'exposure' and your opportunities, beginning with your sector. A mining company has specific and obvious environmental communications

imperatives – communicating compliance and conveying a perception of responsible stewardship to name just two. But what about other sectors like transportation? Or a non-governmental organization providing micro-credit programs in Africa? Or the military? A quick review of your communications aims and responsibilities will be revealing. The audit should focus on three questions:

### Environmental Communications Audit – 3 Key Questions

1. What sort of story do you **have** to tell about your role in the environment?  
This is usually about compliance with environmental regulation, adherence to industry best practices or even just keeping up with your peer group. Identify your communications responsibilities.
2. What sort of story do you **want** to tell about your role in the environment?  
This speaks to how you want audiences to see you in relation to the environment. In alignment with your brand, how do you want to position your organization relative to environmental issues?
3. What sort of story **can** you tell?  
Not everyone can be on the side of angels (e.g. environmental remediation firms, Greenpeace) but everyone has an environmental story of some sort, even if it's just mitigating effect on the environment. Two factors affect your capacity to tell an environmental story – (1) your deeds (words are never a substitute for action) and (2) your organization's principal activity, which will constrain your narrative and affect credibility with your audiences (for example, Exxon Mobil can never tell a Body Shop-like environmental story). What sort of environmental story will audiences believe, coming from your organization?

#### THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

British journalist, George Monbiot, is an articulate critic of the airline industry, having coined the phrase “flying is dying,” which has helped rally environmentalists to the cause. Most companies in this sector are responding in some form, either as part of an industry consortium, or acting on their own to put a green face on air travel. Here are two examples.

Irish discount airline, Ryanair, is known for rapid growth (from a single route in 1985 to 132 destinations in 2007), cheap flights and an irascible CEO – Michael O’Leary. Alaska Airlines is a 75 year-old US regional airline serving 70 destinations in North America.

Let’s apply the simple communications audit to these two companies:

1. What must Ryanair and Alaska Airlines say? Not much. They have to flag certain risk factors in financial filings with securities regulators but there is no requirement for them to discuss their impact on the environment or their environmental initiatives. However, it would be prudent (given the actions of peers), to stake out some sort of environmental position.

2. What do the companies want to say? Their positions are differentiated by the boldness of the claims. According to an investor presentation (2007), Ryanair sees itself as the “greenest, cleanest airline in Europe.” It also wants to remind audiences that airlines are not the worst polluters in Europe. Alaska Airlines is more modest, claiming it wants to “reduce our company’s impact on the environment.”
3. What can these companies say? They can outline how they reduce the environmental impact of their operations. This can be done by emphasizing fleet modernization (Ryanair has replaced its 25 year-old planes with new ones that pollute less; Alaska Airlines has modified its aircraft to improve efficiency) and highlighting other fuel-saving initiatives. They can’t argue that air transport is a green industry though.

There are rules to environmental communications. Don’t oversell the story or stretch belief. When Ryanair’s CEO claimed that his company had cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by half, no one believed him and journalists called him on it, forcing him to retract the statement. Make it believable in the context of your sector, your organization and the history of both. Match the boldness of your statements with the reputation of your organization. Open-pit mining companies will have a hard time selling themselves as ‘green’ companies.

And connect the dots for your audiences so that the implications are made clear (don’t rely on them to draw the appropriate conclusions). Alaska Airlines’ environmental initiatives save 144 million gallons of fuel or (as the company contextualizes it) “the savings represent a 16.4 per cent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions (3 billion pounds), which is equivalent to taking 271,000 cars off the road for one year.”

#### AUDIENCES FOR YOUR STORY

Now let’s get back to those worried audiences you have to connect with. According to a 2007 study by the Pew Research Center, the dominant public sentiment worldwide is worry over the environment. Half the population of countries as diverse as Canada, the US, France, Britain, Argentina and Slovakia say that environmental problems are the top global threat. More than disease, war or economic hardship, it’s the environment that scares people. And a worried audience has specific characteristics you need to keep in mind when communicating.

Talking about the environment, especially when discussing threats to it, generates a ‘dread factor’ with audiences. The threat to them from environmental damage is unclear, remote, diffuse and difficult to quantify. Audiences also feel little control over the situation. The result is an inability to (a) face the situation and (b) process information about it. Audiences may ‘turn off’ communications about the environment or at the least have difficulty taking in complex stories. Interestingly, while negative facts dominate in other realms of communication, when it comes to the environment, negative information generates dread and results in decreased message reception. Similarly, the ‘chatter’ clogging the environmental communications channel and the debates over climate change make connecting with audiences even more difficult.

Communications must therefore be:

- Simple
- Understandable
- Positive, if possible
- Related to the specific situation of the audience

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

Communicating environmental issues, or communicating other information in the constant context of the environment, has specific challenges. You must tell complicated stories in charged environments with audiences whose ability to process your messages is often compromised.

Determine what your story will be, based on your communications needs, objectives and the range of possibilities open to your organization. When honing your story, remember the need to communicate a credible narrative. You will also need to make the implications of your points clear, given the stressed audiences you will be speaking to. You need to apply the basic tenets of communicating to audiences under such conditions: simplicity, clarity, repetition and contextualization if your message is to be well-received.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul McIvor is the founder of Rosetta Public Relations Inc., a Toronto-based communications shop. Prior to creating Rosetta, Paul managed communications at the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and on Bay Street, providing financial communications services.

416.516.7095    mcivor@RosettaPR.com    www.RosettaPR.com