Who's responsible?

Consumers are increasingly favouring ‘socially responsible’ firms, but only genuinely benevolent behaviour convinces the media, says Steve Hemsey.

There is growing pressure on PRs to convince journalists that their clients’ CSR documents are transparent and include negatives, rather than just PR gloss. Corporate Culture director Nicky Amos says journalists respect companies willing to have a debate with the media. Business news is about corporate action and sometimes a company needs to be honest, she says. ‘A car manufacturer, say, could admit it has a role to play in reducing global warming.’

The Sun business editor Ian King says there are also calls for CSR reports to be simplified so the general press can interpret their relevance, particularly as few firms think about an audience’s specific needs when planning CSR strategy and contacting media. ‘Apart from those with a strong record in this field, such as the Co-op, few businesses link their actions with the things my readers are most concerned about, such as pensions, investments or job security,’ he explains.

Indeed, one of the most effective ways to generate editorial coverage for CSR activity is to produce exclusive case studies for specific media. ‘It is a common mistake to assume that every journalist will be interested in all aspects of your CSR activity; and some areas can be very technical,’ says BSkyB group head of corporate responsibility Ben Stimson.

Inviting criticism
Some in-house PR teams are tackling journalist cynicism by inviting writers to comment on their company’s CSR strategy. When Vodafone’s global PR team ran focus groups with financial journalists this year, a resultant cover story in The Economist described how mobiles were benefiting Africans.

The groups were organised by CSR strategy company Context, which also hosts lunches for clients such as Shell, Unilever and Hewlett-Packard, where journalists can debate and pick holes in CSR strategies.

‘We apply journalistic techniques to CSR so companies provide the media with a good story,’ says Context director Peter Knight, a former Financial Times reporter. ‘The first Shell report published the number of people who had been fired for taking bribes, and this really got the press interested.’
CSR

Unilever has also tried to get journalists on side by asking for their input. For Bird’s Eye, for example, Fishburn Hedges arranged a press trip to watch a pea harvest in Lowestoft, where the company demonstrated its environmentally friendly farming methods. ‘The test is to communicate CSR reports in an interesting way,’ says Fishburn Hedges head of CSR Rachel Jones. ‘Getting journalists to touch and feel what you are talking about will engage them.’

Unconvinced media

Despite Vodafone’s success with The Economist, the paper remains one of the most sceptical publications when it comes to CSR, even questioning whether companies need to invest in it at all. Business editor Matthew Bishop argues that CSR is usually a defensive action by directors, and is unsustainable unless truly integrated into the organisation. ‘For too long PR practitioners have expected journalists to jump on any story about a company doing something good,’ he says. ‘At The Economist we need hard evidence that CSR is more than just a fig leaf and that actions are being chosen because they are a good use of shareholders’ money rather than merely being of personal interest to the CEO.’

His observation that too many companies see CSR as purely an add-on to core corporate activity is important when analysing why a company might be failing to generate widespread media coverage for what it sees as ethical work.

The Guardian industrial correspondent Terry Macalister points out that creating a separate CSR department or having a CSR specialist in the press office can breed journalist and public cynicism because it will be seen as just another marketing ploy. ‘If CSR is to mean anything it has to be driven from the very top of the company and incorporated into every commercial division. Too much PR surrounding CSR undermines the whole concept and is counter-productive,’ he argues.

Gongs up for grabs

As CSR has bloomed into an industry in its own right, it has bred its own collection of awards that can provide useful tools for PROs. In March, Woolworths picked up the Retail Week Corporate Responsibility Award for its Playground Partnerships initiative, which donates money to primary schools. The retailer’s PR manager, Daniel Hims worth, admits that coverage of the launch last summer was limited because journalists viewed it as nothing more than a corporate-giving initiative. However, following the Retail Week gong, the scheme was reported in the Financial Times, as well as The Times.

The Woolworths case illustrates how the presentation of CSR affects its success – journalists expect more than sleek brochures to help them identify which companies are really making a difference.

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TOP TEN TIPS – GETTING CSR NOTICED

1. Be transparent. Don’t simply fill a CSR report with details of good things the company has done – also mention where there is still work to do.
2. Provide real-life, human examples of how third parties have benefited from the company’s actions.
3. Offer journalists exclusive stories that relate to their publications’ specific readerships.
4. Exploits local and regional angles tucked away in the CSR report.
5. Ensure someone on the board of directors is willing to engage in a debate with a journalist about the CSR strategy.
6. Get feedback from influential journalists on what they would like to see in a CSR report.
7. Invite journalists to see in person the effect that the company’s CSR activities are having.
8. Consider how the company’s CSR actions are relevant to the current news agenda.
9. Demonstrate to journalists how CSR activity has been integrated into the overall business.
10. Find ways to show how CSR has improved business performance, not just in extra sales. For example, has it created new jobs?