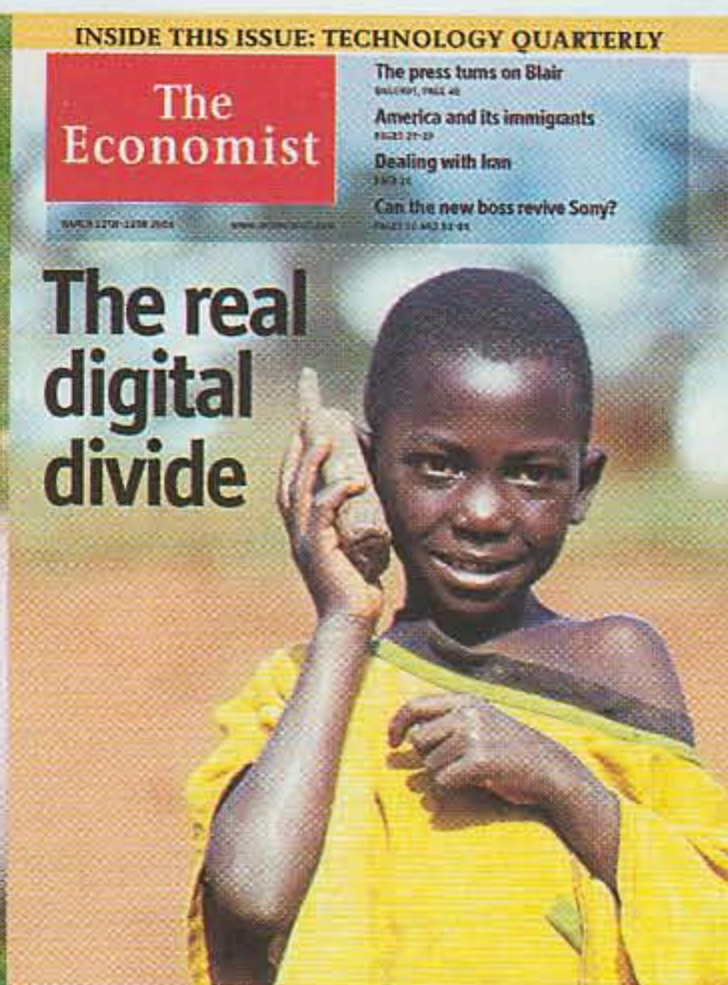




Pea harvest: Bird's Eye showed off its farming methods



The Economist: often a CSR sceptic



Playground Partnerships: Woolworths won an award for its initiative

# Who's responsible?

Journalists' desks are fast becoming cluttered with glossy brochures featuring smiling African families, and kids using new computers in schools. These lengthy corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports are regarded by many businesses as essential to convince a sceptical media and public that companies can have a positive human impact.

With CSR so high on the agenda, companies are in competition with each other to get their social credentials recognised by journalists. In a MORI survey of 40 financial journalists last year, 45 per cent felt industry and commerce did not pay enough attention to social responsibility, while half said the drive to promote CSR had a minimal effect on the way most firms conduct their day-to-day business.

'CSR is such a buzzword at the moment,' says *Financial Times* environment correspondent Fiona Harvey. 'Every company wants to talk about it but many do not talk about it very well. My attention is only grabbed by concrete examples. Many businesses think that merely complying with environmental regulations is CSR, when they are only doing what they must by law.'

There is growing pressure on PROs 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

Consumers are increasingly favouring 'socially responsible' firms, but only genuinely benevolent behaviour convinces the media, says **Steve Hemsley**

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 re-

ports 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.

## BUSINESS AND CSR WIRES STRIKE DEAL



Baron Tamraz

In response to the huge investment that many companies are making in CSR, news distributor Business Wire has formed a strategic alliance with specialist outlet CSRwire. The exclusive deal will enable businesses to reach relevant media and investors with news relating to community work, ethics, corporate governance, and environmental, human rights and workplace issues.

'CSR is an integral component of a company's corporate image campaign because it is based on tangible actions as opposed to generic or esoteric claims, and therefore carries far more editorial credence,' says Business Wire president Cathy Baron Tamraz. 'Also, more institutional funds now factor in CSR when making investment decisions.'

She adds that CSRwire identifies journalists who have expressed an interest in the topic. 'CSR announcements should be considered part of the overall editorial mix in formulating corporate coverage. Journalists are likely to use these announcements when forming perceptions of businesses and this will be reflected in their reports.'

Business Wire's UK clients can supplement their usual press release distribution to include the CSRwire network at an additional charge of \$395 (£222) per news release, or they can pay an annual fee of \$3,995 for unlimited distribution.

Over the next few weeks, Business Wire will confirm a date and venue for a London conference on the subject of CSR.

## 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.'

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

**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** Exploit 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?

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

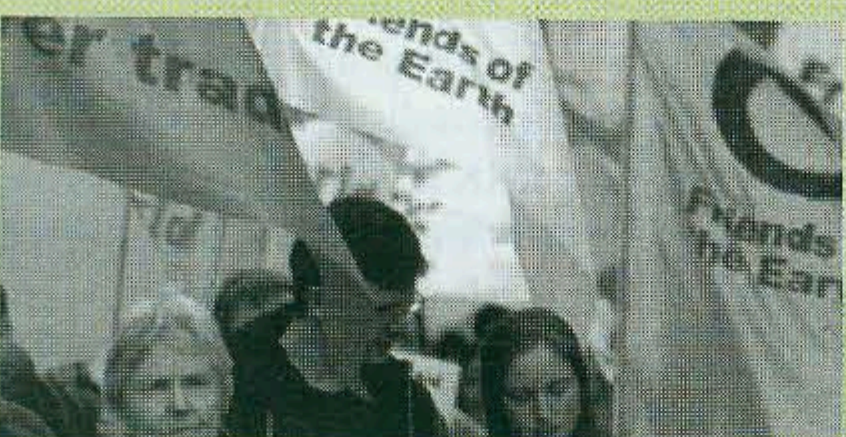
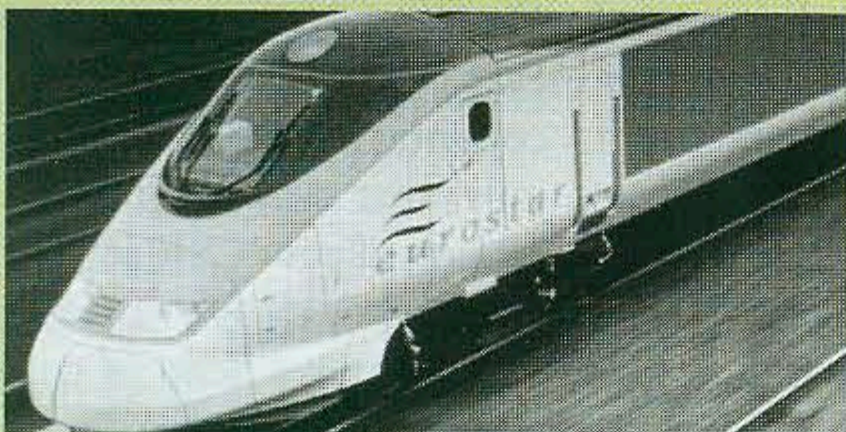
from the very top of the company and incorporated into every commercial division. Too much PR surrounding CSR undermines the whole concept and is counter-productive,' he argues.

**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 Himsworth, 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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