

## The media and business : towards positive environmental interaction

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**SKYWAYS, HIGHWAYS & CORRIDORS  
ASIA'S COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES**

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**Parallel Session 6: Involving Media in Asia's Sustainable Development**

**The Media & Business -  
Towards Positive Environmental Interaction**

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## A New Story

From the Exxon Valdez oil disaster in North America, to Nike's recent spat in Indonesia; from Shell Oil's run-in in the North Sea to Marcopper Mining's disaster in the Philippines, business has been cast rightly or wrongly by the media, into the role of the environmental and social bad-boy. And boy, does it make good copy. The world's newspapers, TV and radio are full of stories of environmental and social wrong-doing by big business.

The trend for the media to get involved in this way is now well over 20 years old in the West. It is a challenge which the press across Asia is now responding to with increasing gusto as public opinion in the Region begins to vocalise a demand for better environmental quality and so a better quality of life. To take the example of Canadian owned Marcopper Mining, which in 1996 spilled highly polluted wastewater into local rivers in the Philippines. The huge amount of publicity which resulted in the arrest of two foreign mining executives and the parent company, Place Dome of Canada, giving the mine away to its local partner.

Now, catching socially-exploitative bad boys and blowing the whistle on environmentally-destructive business is, without doubt, a key role for the media. However this afternoon, I would like to look beyond such dark headlines and focus on a new story - one which has only really surfaced in the world's media since the end of the '80s and which is still relatively new to Asia. It is the story of a process of positive change which is now happening inside the Asian business community. This is a process which, if given the right support, could help Asia leap-frog over the mistakes of the West to real environmentally-sustainable development.

My message is that the media can not only report this story, but can encourage and help business to deliver the headlines and that in doing so it doesn't have to compromise its credibility or its need for a good angle.

First of all, what's the pitch? Put simply it's that business is not only an environmental destroyer but has at its disposal the tools and skills to reverse the seemingly inexorable process of environmental destruction. In fact, in an Asia which will not be denied development, business is a key tool in the fight to save the environment.

Let me explain: Environmental impact can be summed up in a simple, rough and ready equation:

$$\text{Environmental Impact} = (\text{Amount of an Activity}) \times (\text{Number of People Doing It}) \times (\text{Type of Technology Used}).$$

In other words the less people who use less of the least environmentally-damaging product, the smaller the environmental impact will be. However, Asia is faced by both accelerating population growth and by the ever-increasing consumption expectations on the part of the person on the street. Because of this, it is down to business to work out how to provide the things Asia demands - whether that is a water supply or a toaster - with the smallest amount of environmental degradation possible. Of course some products and services are less environmentally-sustainable than others - however well made a car, it will always loose out environmentally to a bicycle. However, within the limits set by the desires of society and the policies of government, the task of sustainability falls squarely on the shoulders of business.

This gives the media a vital role - while it can, of course, help to educate people to change their



consumption patterns and can pressurise governments to make their policies more environmentally-sustainable, if it ignores business then it is ignoring the very engine of any environmental solution. My focus is therefore on the role of the media in working to bring about the necessary *internal* revolution within the Region's business. Luckily, this isn't as difficult a task as it might seem at first, because it is now becoming apparent that business itself can benefit substantially from making this change.

### **Green Profit**

This change revolves around a number of key issues: resource use; energy use, water use, and pollution management. The more efficiently a business can do its job, the less energy, water and resources it uses and, generally, the less pollution it causes and the less environmental impact it and its products and services have. But by using less resources, less energy, less water and having less pollution to deal with it also has less overheads and its profits go up.

The exciting thing is that thanks to new technology and innovative thinking this win-win situation isn't as difficult to bring about as it might appear. Let me give you some examples: In Europe, thanks to the pioneering efforts of far-sighted companies it was already plain in the 1980s that good housekeeping measures and waste management can yield substantial improvements in environmental performance and result in highly attractive financial gains. Such gains were brought about by, for example, the installation of energy-saving light bulbs and heating systems, and modest investments based on thorough waste audits.

In the 1990s, the successes of projects such as the Aire and Calder Project in West Yorkshire have convinced even the most hardened sceptics that good environmental management equals good business management. The Project involved eleven factories in a waste minimisation programme. The cost savings per year from a wide range of actions in water, raw materials, energy, liquid and solid wastes was over 2 million pounds sterling.

Perhaps the most famous example is the 3M corporation in the US, which makes chemicals and office materials. The company estimates that its 'pollution prevention pays' campaign has resulted in cost savings of \$600 million since the mid-1970s.

This message is starting to have an impact on business in Asia. In Singapore for example, microelectronics firm SGS-Thomson, recently revealed savings of S\$200,000 gained from improvements to the energy efficiency of its cooling plant. While Sony Display Devices was profiled in the Singapore *Straits Times* in May of last year discussing savings of S\$1.4 million a year produced by eliminating raw material wastage.

The Green profit principle crops up all over the place. Building management is a good example. The Olympia Thai Tower - billed as Thailand's first Green Building - uses almost 40% less energy than the average Bangkok office building. While Western Digital's disk-drive manufacturing facility here in Kuala Lumpur boasts a range of innovative energy-saving equipment and claims that it has half the operating costs of its rival's equivalent buildings.

A key development in this area is the concept of the environmental management system, which gives an organisation a mechanism to drive the continuous improvement of how it manages its environmental aspects. A voluntary international standard for environmental management systems - ISO 14001 - was launched in September of last year and is gaining rapid popularity



across the region. Indeed, at the launch of the Singapore ISO 14001 Environmental Management System certification scheme, Baxter Healthcare disclosed savings and cost-avoidance of US\$4.76 million due to the implementation of an environmental management system (EMS). The word is out - improving a company's environmental performance can make good commercial sense in Asia.

Singapore is not alone, companies in Malaysia, Indonesia, India, in fact from most countries in the Region are waking up to the cost saving potential of 'going green'. In the Philippines, for example a desiccated coconut processor carried out a pollution management appraisal, which identified how to recover raw materials from spillage of coconut bringing down wastage. After investing P160,000 wastage fell from 18.5% to 8.5%, with a consequent saving of P2,500,000 in raw materials. It also saved P1,000,000 on energy use and recovered P500,000 worth of by-products.

While making bottom line savings is obviously a key business goal, the experiences of the environmentally-pioneering companies in Asia shows that the benefits of environmental improvement go far beyond straight cash. It is becoming clear that there are operational, management and marketing benefits as well - ranging from a reduced threat of law suits, better financing terms and enhanced public image, through to happier staff, product innovation, access to the 'green consumer', and greater international competitiveness.

#### **A Positive Environmental Interaction**

So we now know the story - that business and the environment can both benefit, when business gets its act together and becomes more efficient and less polluting. So what is the role of the media? Here I'd like to introduce the concept of a positive environmental interaction between the media and business, which forms the title of my presentation.

As said, when a business is inactive or, worse, a major polluter or environmental villain, then the media has the vital role of whistle blower. However, this is increasingly creating a situation in which business, wants to perform better. At this next stage, the media play another vital role, providing information. As Eugene Linden, the journalist responsible for TIME magazine's 'Planet of the Year' issue said last year in the Philippines at the 4th Conference of the International Federation of Environmental Journalists, journalists are in a key position to help people - and that includes businesses - understand the science, the politics and the economics of the issue. In the context of this presentation, this means information on the technology and management decisions which business must make to become environmentally less damaging and the gains which they can make from doing so.

Here the press in the region is already responding, from general interest pieces in newspapers and more technical articles in the business sections, through to sector-specific pieces in trade magazines such as *Asia Environmental Technology* and *Asian Water and Sewage* and the work of specialist newsletters such as the one I produce, *RIET in Focus* or the Confederation of Indian Industries *Green Business Opportunities*. Through this process of education and encouragement, the media can help businesses to act.

Once companies start to act then the media can come in again to champion best practice and give the best, pioneering companies the praise they deserve. Again here the media is getting active through such publications as the Australian *GREEN & GOLD*, the US-Asia Environmental



### Partnership's *Competitive Advantage*.

This process creates a positive spiral of positive change along which the media has another key role to play - driving the development of markets for environmentally-friendly products such as whether energy-efficient process technology, or public transport.

One example, which shows this process in action is the Indonesian Proper Prokasi rating scheme. This is an attempt to obtain voluntary compliance from companies by using cultural rather than legal, incentives. Under the scheme, which is run by the Indonesian government, a company's environmental performance - graded from black to gold - is published in the country's national newspaper. In December 1995 results were made public for the first time and in their year end assessment the government claimed success in upgrading compliance by many companies. Companies who got 'black' were shamed into improvement, companies who got better 'scores' - red or green, got rewarded by positive publicity.

### Problems along the way

The concept I've outlined is, of course, a very simplistic model, but I think it illustrates the three main kinds of business/media interaction on the environment issue - whistle blowing during the crisis phase; education during the learning phase; and championing during the action phase. It also, I think, throws up a number of important questions and problems, which demand answers if this positive spiral is to be achieved. I would like to look at a few examples to highlight areas of conflict and then suggest some solutions.

### Who wants good news?

The first problem as I see it is that 'good news' doesn't sell and that the process tends to get stuck at stage one - the Media is biased toward stories which contain drama, conflict, expert disagreements, and uncertainties.

### What is good news?

The second problem revolves around the issue of risk assessment ie. One person's environmental problem is another's environmental solution. This was well illustrated by a recent case in the Philippines where journalists were up in arms about incinerators being put forward as a solution to the country's pollution problems, despite the fact that many environmental consultancies were advocating their use.

Uncertainties in environmental risk assessments often leads to radically different estimates of risk and this means that an important factor underlying many debates about the environmental impact of industry is the different assessments of risk produced by government agencies, industry, and public interest groups.

An infamous example of this was the outcry over the disposal of the Shell Oil Brent Spa platform in the North Sea. The debate raged around whether the platform should be dumped at sea or brought to shore for disposal. The UK's Department of the Environment stated categorically that the risk to marine life was greater with the on-shore disposal option and the fatality risk to workers six times greater. But both Shell and the UK government did such a lousy PR job in trying to put this over as compared to the campaign waged by Greenpeace (who advocated on-shore disposal), that Shell was seen as milking billions of pounds from North Sea



oil while refusing to spend 45m pounds on bringing the platform back from whence it came.

### **Where is the good news?**

The third problem is that business is very often closed-off and defensive when it comes to talking about its environmental impact - even when it's got good news to tell. Shell again gives us an indication of this, when a journalist from the London *Spectator* rang them up to research a piece on the company's alleged environmental infringements in Nigeria, she was faxed a vague, 'Statement of Principles in return. 'I shouldn't think you'll have any more questions after that,' said the head of press. Given the complexity of the issues involved this was patently not enough.

### **Who will believe the good news?**

The fourth problem is that there is a general lack of trust of business. In the United States and UK, for example, overall public confidence and trust in government and industry as sources of information has declined precipitously over the past two decades. It is undoubted that assumptions are made by the general public, and we must ask why some individuals and organisations are trusted as a source of information and some not?

### **Building the necessary dialogue**

So there are a number of barriers in the way to building the positive environmental interaction I discussed: the bias of the media towards sensation; the lack of agreement on what constitutes 'good environmental business practice'; the lack of willingness by industry to give out information; and a basic lack of trust of business.

So why should business and the media be bothered to overcome these barriers and how can they do this?

For journalists, I believe that the positive environmental revolution happening within business is the environmental story of the decade and to ignore it is to ignore one of the most important developments taking place in this field. In particular for journalists interested in contributing stories to specialist trade magazines - and there are an increasing number of these coming into existence in Asia - this is the story of the next few years and one which will sell ever increasing numbers of copies.

For the journalist who really wants to play a part in the sustainable development debate it is really not enough just to knock big business - as satisfying and newsworthy as this often is. As I have attempted to explain, business provides solutions as well as problems, it's up to journalists to help them along the way and support good work when it becomes apparent. The points of interest are there - stories of innovation, invention, community involvement, science and general interest - given a bit of imagination, and a receptive editor, the story can be a winner.

For business, as I hope the example of Shell shows, having an environmental communications strategy and talking to the media is vital - whatever stage of development your environmental strategy is at. Good communications ensures that your point of view is heard, but it can also be a catalyst for action - action, which as I've shown, can bring substantial bottom-line benefits. Remember, if you don't talk, someone's bound to ask, sooner or later. On a more positive note, if you've got good news to tell, tell it - it will bring you all the 'green buck' benefits I described.



The challenge is of course to overcome the four main problems I outlined - getting people's interest; sifting out the facts from the fiction; maintaining good business-media communications, and; gaining the trust of the readership. To do this, I think straight-forward journalistic tenets apply: get the story right; don't pull the wool over people's eyes and find an interesting angle. In this light I've put together a number of pointers for the media and for companies to ensure that the process of positive environmental interaction is just that and not a war of attrition. (These pointers are based in part on information from Sustainability's 'Engaging Stakeholders' report on environmental reporting.)

I hope that these will help the media decide which companies need championing, educating or exposing and will help business approach media interaction on the environment with as little trepidation as possible:

#### Ten recommendations for journalists.

1. Beware of Greenwash: cross-check data!
2. Look for ISO 14001 - its a sign of commitment to continual improvement.
3. Educate yourself about the company's technologies, products, processes, regulatory framework and business realities and try to benchmark with similar companies.
4. Look for what is not addressed - this is often very telling.
5. Check for independent verification.
6. Ask questions at the annual general meeting (AGM). Keep reports and quote back later!
7. Take a long term approach - a one or two year time period is too short to significantly affect the long-run performance of most companies.
8. Make it clear that you expect all companies to publish a Corporate Environmental Report and call for integration in the Annual Report.
9. Think of yourself as an environmental customer - specify your needs.
10. Give feedback, encourage dialogue.

#### Ten recommendations for companies

1. Hone your message- pay attention to credibility, but make it user friendly
2. Give the good news and the bad
3. Quantify and benchmark
4. Spell out clear targets
5. Focus on credible risk-assessment
6. Demand environmental information from trade publications
7. Search out the information you need - Internet, specialist publications, consultants
8. Find out what stakeholders think and want
9. Use your annual report as a shop window
10. Ask for feedback & welcome criticism

I firmly believe that the media and business can together work to produce the story of the next millennium. It's a story Asia needs to be able to read, it should be an exciting one to write.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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**Date of Birth** : 8 June 1966

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**Education** : 1979-1984 Repton School, Derbyshire, England  
1985-1989 University of St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland

**Qualifications** : Degree BSc in Pure Science  
(Following a degree course in medical science)

A levels Mathematics (A)  
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Chemistry (B)  
Art (B)

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Full current driving license

**Further Training** : Completed courses on Project Management and Presentation Skills  
given by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea's staff  
training centre.

Prior to departure to Singapore completed first half of an MA in  
Urban Studies at the University of North London. Courses  
completed: Economic Development, Research Methodology,  
Urban Theory and Urban Policy.

**Employment**

**Oct. 1995** : **Publications Manager for the Regional Institute of**  
**to present** **Environmental Technology (RIET), Singapore.**

In charge of all of RIET's publication activities including: the  
development and implementation of the Institute's publishing  
strategy; the development of its Internet 'homepage' and e-mail;  
writing and producing newsletters, annual reports, corporate  
brochures and other promotional publications; commissioning,



editing and producing technical reports; developing and writing speeches, promotional articles, literature and adverts; PR and press-liaison duties; and the organisation of promotional seminars and events.

Sept. 1995

: **Freelance consultant for B&Q International,**

Produced report on the environmental impact and sustainable management of the Filipino capiz shell fishing industry.

Oct. 1993  
to Oct. 1995

: **Environmental Coordinator for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London.**

Responsible for the implementation and development of the Royal Borough's environmental policy, action plans and a Council-wide environmental management system. Also responsible for the development of the Borough's local Agenda 21 environmental project, especially the promotion of community involvement in environmental policy formation and action. Other duties included staff training and awareness raising.

Oct. 1990  
to Sept. 1993

: **Features Editor, *Green Magazine*.**

Part of the team producing Britain's leading popular environmental monthly magazine. Responsible for initiating, researching and writing news and features on all aspects of environmentalism. Over 150 articles published.

### **Radio experience**

While at Green Magazine also hosted a monthly environmental 'slot' on LBC radio (a London-wide station) for a year, and undertook freelance work for BBC Radio 4's 'Costing the Earth' environment programme.

March 1990  
to Sept. 1990

: **Researcher at the Expedition Advisory Centre, Royal Geographical Society, London.**

Oct. 1989  
To Dec. 1989

: **Intern at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.**

**Other Experience**

: Member of the St. Andrew's University Expedition to Sumatra, Indonesia, studying the indigenous medicinal uses of rainforest plants, Summer 1988. Part of the team which made a documentary of the expedition for the BBC's Mike Burke Award. Winner of the Shell Award for Best Scientific Paper from an undergraduate expedition.

Varied conservation and building work with a Kenyan development charity for 6 months in 1985.

**Computers** : In-depth working knowledge of both Apple Macintosh and PC hardware and many applications such as PageMaker, Microsoft Word, Wordperfect, Access, and Powerpoint.

**Other Interests** : Travel: Europe, North and South America, Indonesia, Australia, Iceland, Greenland, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

Backpacking, distance running and juggling.