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Proactive Positioning – a Public Affairs approach

Public Debate as a given

Private enterprise exists and thrives within a space of social and political consent. This is always a conditional consent. It is liable to revocation or restraint and in dynamic balance between economic benefits, social costs and topical currents more or less favourable to the firm. All kinds of special interests are constantly intervening, consciously or not, to shape the space of consent. Debate wells up in general awareness when fanned by media responding to its need for income, circulation and readership. Journalists of all media depend on the pursuit of stories that spark interest among their audience where bystanders far outnumber economic players and where distrust for the latter's motivations is endemic. They are the vectors of public scrutiny.

Small and medium-sized firms generally are able to pass under the radar screen of public scrutiny. When illuminated they still manage to capitalize on their under-dog image. Their intervention through trade associations is also seen as justifiable defence. Large firms, particularly multinationals, do not enjoy similar favourability of preconception. Their attempts to communicate on sensitive issues is too often perceived as self-serving and only adds fuel to a burning fire or inflames dormant issues by bringing them to the fore. Generating press releases when an issue is already on the public arena is construed practically as an admission of guilt. Advertising under such circumstances is a shot in the foot. Remedial communications and issue containment are very difficult to manage, expensive and not always successful.

Examples of issues or events getting out of hand are plentiful. Union Carbide (Bhopal) was grievously weakened or simply decimated, as the result of insensitive or untimely response when their consent space was threatened. The on-going asbestosis saga has hit ABB, Halliburton, Johns-Manville Corp., Armstrong World Industries, GAF Corp., National Gypsum Co among others and continues to harm the surviving corporations. Billions, if not trillions, of dollars in corporate wealth are destroyed as large, respectable corporations allowed themselves to be blind-sided by public issues.



Corporate Options in Public Debate

After half a century and more of experience dealing with increasingly sensitive public opinions, the tools available to corporations and institutions are well understood if too often misapplied. Far from being the exclusive domain of communication specialists, these tools have become part of the perceived baggage of the man in the street. They are particularly sensitive for the working journalist. You will overhear the brush off “that is just PR” at cocktail parties and the most mundane dinner tables. Pub analyses of advertising spots on TV are just about as prevalent as definitive solutions to the problems of the local soccer team. Politicians are accused of propaganda almost as often as they are of having their pockets lined by lobbyists while in office. There is hardly a movie or TV show that is not the object of brand or product “placements.” “Sponsorship” of sporting events has achieved fad status with audiences of all ages. Some merchandising items are even elevated to collector’s status. The tools are there, threadbare for all to see and react against.

So what is an enterprise to do if it does not want to be feathered, tarred and driven out of business as a result of occasional collateral damage its activities may cause, or worse, as the result of rumours and intentional disinformation? The threat negative opinion represents grows exponentially with the size and diversification of corporations. Each business line develops its particular set of threats, some of which become cumulative in the eyes of the press and policymakers. We all know the cost of “deep pockets” in legal and administrative safeguards. We are also acutely aware that these bulkheads are far from foolproof. So what is the answer?

The answer is that there is no simple answer. The defence starts with ethical standards applied through sincere corporate governance, strict and well-communicated policies and respect for the human being both inside and outside the corporation. It goes on with the application of communication tools in accordance to the objectives and goals each is intended for. Advertising will position products and brands, including corporate brands in a highly controlled, short-term and visible way, with clearly identified audiences. Public Relations extend the reach of the brands mid- and long-term at lower relative cost and “borrow” credibility from the media that accepts to vehicle the message. Lobbying helps set the legislative background conditioning business rules. Public Affairs help carry the corporate message to broader audiences of policy influencers. As a general rule each one of these tools gains strength and effectiveness when it fits into the mainstream of public opinion, is not subject to backlash and does not generate debate in the public arena. But this blissful state can’t always be achieved or maintained.



Conditioning Public Debate

Public debate has a way of starting with low-level awareness to sensitive issues. This makes it particularly dangerous for corporate management because people down the line, responsible for the action or policy at the origin of the issue, are prone to practice head-in-the-sand denial until the issue gets completely out of hand. Often the corporate response at this stage only adds fuel to the fire with obviously self-serving communications. The motor for the issue and therefore the public debate is the corporation's own energy in pushing its point of view onto the public scene. The splashing around of the wounded corporation serves only to attract further predators smelling blood, or more likely Biiig Dollars!

There is a tool we have not yet talked about. It is a refinement of Public Affairs not generally available or proffered by PR agencies or PA executives because of the difficult underlying premises. There are two main premises that, by themselves, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for success.

First, elevate the issue as high up the scale of logic, objectivity and social relevance as possible: It is not about this or that product, it is the boundaries to freedom of commerce. It is not about the price of medicines, it is the ability to afford innovation to improve people's health. It is not about changing ancestral habits, it is about saving babies. We must broaden the nature of the issue to interest and eventually win the support of influential allies. For example, practically all products may have negative health consequences, yet there is the broader issue of personal choice that needs to be balanced with an inclination to regulate. The freedom for adults to make their good or bad choices attracts influential audiences who otherwise may have no particular interest in the particular products.

Second, have a prestigious and credible third party assume the public debate on your behalf. The corporation doesn't hide, yet its spokespersons never take the front of the stage in the public debate. Wherever possible, the third party is an independent institution, a recognized platform for objective debate among experts.

Bringing these two conditions together requires enormous tact, long-standing networks of relations at the highest levels and the ability to behave in a neutral fashion as a bridge between academic, political, media and commercial thought processes. The latter often disqualifies large, well-known consultancies. That is why this approach is not applied more often. Or if it is, can't attract attention to itself and risk self-defeat.



In practical terms

Here is how such approaches have been successfully implemented and can be modulated on behalf of corporations and associations in Europe or across the globe:

- Select the issue(s) and elevate to a broader plane
- Assemble a specific pilot region platform to pilot the public debate process, bring together in a recognized institutional environment relevant experts and influencers from academia, research, regulatory and legislative bodies, thinkers, writers, NGOs as well as consumer and business spokespersons from the highest levels across Europe.
- Organize a series of inter-related events originating and flowing from a major conference of unimpeachable intellectual quality – supporting lunches, workshops, private briefings and publications to foster objective and balanced debates covering a broad range of relevant topics that extend the debate beyond the welfare of company, industry or cause.
- Monitor and help channel the information thus generated into appropriate media to create objective resonance among broader audiences and induce a balanced public opinion as concerns the issue and sponsor's activity in the pilot region.
- Carefully audit results and make adjustments before rolling out to other markets. For instance, after starting in the UK, roll out to language-defined areas in the E.U. before venturing further afield in Asia-Pacific, South America and North America.



Benefits for the sponsor

The program is a unique vehicle. It intervenes directly at the point of knowledge acquisition and hence opinion formation. It works to impart important ideas of great relevance to the sponsor by providing independent forums and publications of high quality, objectivity and public interest.

At the Corporate Citizenship level the contribution potential is even greater as it subtly positions the sponsor organization in issues of ethics, governance, business regulation, fiscal responsibility, security and privacy. It enhances the fund of knowledge for the public good while at the same time strengthening the intellectual and policy role of sponsors in the context of internationally accepted, positive values.

Specifically, the Sponsor benefits by

- Not being the host
- Not being identified directly with a problem or issue
- Broadening the debate to bring in new allies with their influential networks
- Increasing its *bona fides* capital
- Gaining access to influential persons and opinion leaders
- Being seen to support independent discussion and publication in an environment of intellectual rigour and highest standards of scrutiny
- Transferring the bulk of work onto the external platform
- Drastically limiting the need for staff involvement and support



Examples

Platforms and follow-through series:

University of London, Institute of United States Studies / Lanesborough Lunch Series

Centre for the New Europe / Liberty Lunch Series

Friedrich Naumann Stiftung / Berliner Mittagsdebatte

Institut Français des Relations Internationales

Host personalities and speakers :

Baroness Margaret Thatcher; the Hon. Prof. Robert Bork, District Judge United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia and nominated by President Reagan to the Supreme Court in 1987.

Count Otto von Lambsdorff, Parliamentary leader of the German Liberal Party (FDP), former Minister Federal Minister for the Economy

Prof. Luc Ferry, Minister of Education; M. Jean-Louis Brugière, juge d'instruction spécial contre le terrorisme

(complete personality lists and clipping books available on request)