What's There To Talk About?

Public Engagement by Science-Based Companies in the United Kingdom

Overview

THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE Ltd

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The report 'What is there to talk about?' was commissioned from The Virtuous Circle by the RSA as part of its Forum for Technology, Citizens and the Market project. The research was carried out and the report written by Peter Emery and Tony Hoskins of The Virtuous Circle, with input to the research and editorial comments on the report from the RSA project team: Dr Jon Agar, University of Cambridge; Dr Jane Gregory, University College London; Susie Harries, RSA; Simon Lock, RSA.

Our thanks go to the twelve companies that participated in this research study, whose logos are featured below. Without their open and honest responses, our findings – and our learning – would not have been possible.

The Virtuous Circle
The Virtuous Circle is a specialist Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Consultancy working primarily with large national and multinational businesses; but also public and non profit organisations. Its main aim is to assist its clients to devise CSR strategies that will enhance their brand reputation. The Virtuous Circle sees CSR as an essential prerequisite to improving business or organisational performance based on a firm statement of values, clear objectives and the careful monitoring and measurement of the impact of CSR activities.

The RSA
The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce, founded in 1754, is an independent, non-aligned, multi-disciplinary registered charity with over 22,000 Fellows. It exists to encourage the development of a principled and prosperous society, and runs a programme of work based around a manifesto consisting of five key challenges:
• Encouraging Enterprise
• Moving Towards a Zero Waste Society
• Fostering Resilient Communities
• Developing a Capable Population
• Advancing Global Citizenship

The full text of the report can be downloaded as a pdf from the RSA website at www.theRSA.org

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Background

The RSA has launched a new project, its Forum for Technology, Citizens and the Market, which seeks both to encourage the flow of beneficial new technologies into society and the economy, and to give people a greater say in their own technological futures. Its first output will be the RSA Guidance for Science-based Companies on Engaging the Public – guidance on how to engage with public concerns around the social and ethical impact of new technologies during the early stages of product development and as an integral part of overall business strategy. As part of the groundwork, the RSA commissioned The Virtuous Circle to sample the current state of public engagement among science-based companies in Britain.

The study

Between March and May 2004, The Virtuous Circle conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with twelve companies, focussing on representatives from both CSR/corporate affairs and R & D functions. This study covered a wide range of industrial sectors - retailing, agribusiness, aerospace, medical, telecommunications, environmental management, nuclear energy, pharmaceuticals, textile development, construction and engineering, technology development, and fuel additives. While the sample was small, it nevertheless produced a wide range of responses, showing a variety of contexts, understandings and strategies. Here we list some of the main points to emerge from the interviews.

Observations

Trends in R&D

• In many of the companies interviewed, R&D was now 'market driven rather than technology driven', with business-to-business customers heavily involved in specifying the need for research and its nature at the outset, and very little 'blue-sky' research carried out in-house.

• Some companies made a clear distinction between the development of new products and the modification of existing ones; one or two companies expressed uncertainty as to what precisely constituted a new 'end product'.

• The timescales for bringing potentially disruptive new technologies to market can be very long, and the R & D process tortuous – but the opportunity for engaging with public concerns was correspondingly greater.

Decision-making about R&D

• Where R & D was de-centralised within a company, individual business units played a key role in deciding whether or not to proceed with a research idea; where R & D was centralised, there was frequently some form of multi-functional group reporting to the Board on such issues.

• In general, the deciding voice was a business rather than a technical one.

• Decisions about whether or not to proceed were based primarily on potential sales, the regulatory framework, and considerations of health, safety and the environment, alongside a keen desire to maintain public trust and confidence in the company's products.

• Possible social impacts, beyond effects on health and safety, were barely mentioned.

Engaging with the public

Not only was there no standard process among companies for engaging with the public during product development, there was a range of understandings of the meaning of both the key terms 'engagement' and 'public':

• Some interviewees appeared to equate 'engagement' with 'communications'.

• The majority did not distinguish between community involvement and public engagement.

• Many identified 'public engagement' with 'stakeholder engagement'.

• Few looked beyond their primary stakeholders – customers and shareholders – to the general public; with one or two exceptions, there was little effort to anticipate the likely reactions or expectations of society at large.

When do science-based companies engage with the public?

• Timing was largely determined by commercial considerations –eg. communicating early in the R & D process to gain competitive advantage.

• Where it existed, engagement invariably took place after the decision had been made to develop the product.

With whom do they engage?

• Companies which did not sell directly to the general public saw no reason to engage with that public.

• Some apparently talked only to their immediate customers.

• Some felt it was reasonable to talk to those members of the public on whom the product development had the greatest potential impact – although more than one said conversations of this kind were hampered by the public's lack of knowledge or understanding of the science.

• Few had made significant efforts to identify and prioritise all their stakeholders.

• Most engagement was with small groups of customers, industry experts, fellow scientists, regulators and occasionally NGOs.

• One company dealing primarily business-to-business created alliances or communities with its direct customers to explore and accommodate the needs of

their products' end users – a model that could be applied more widely.

How do companies engage?
• Most companies had procedures for logging letters and emails from customers and, to a lesser extent, sharing the information internally, but feedback of this kind rarely appeared to influence existing or future R&D programmes.

• The main method of engaging around R & D was to canvass external opinions from small manageable stakeholder groups.

• Most companies doing this felt it could help the R & D process, though there seemed to be no agreed ground-rules which might help discussions between science-based companies and their critics to be less confrontational.

• One or two larger companies had extensive stakeholder engagement programmes involving hundreds or even thousands of people.

How do companies use the results of engaging with the public?
• One company commented that while engaging with NGOs could be constructive, there was no real mechanism for translating agreements between companies and their critics into political or legislative change.

• Most companies had strategies of involvement with their local communities, but there was little evidence that these activities were seen as opportunities for a two-way dialogue; they were used as opportunities for communication rather than consultation, with public views gathered, at best, by 'osmosis'.

What inhibits public engagement ?
• Most felt the main inhibitors to public dialogue around R & D were either commercial concerns - confidentiality (including non-disclosure agreements with customers), competitive advantage, and stock exchange rules – or concerns for physical security.

• One made the point that an extended R & D period made it difficult to communicate products clearly, when both risks and benefits and even the precise nature of the product might remain uncertain for a long time.

Has the GM debate influenced business behaviour in this area?
• The GM debate was seen by many companies as a salutary lesson, requiring them to communicate better about R&D in the future, using lay language – though few had yet tried to find means of discussing their R & D options in an accessible way.

• There was much criticism of the role of the media in this area.

• One or two companies also perceived the need to engage with the public in a different way – asking as well as telling.

• Few had heard of the GM Nation debate, although some felt a public debate of this kind might be useful for more 'disruptive' new technologies like nanotechnology, or stem cell technologies.

Public attitudes to science and technology
• Most companies interviewed felt that the public is probably more receptive to new technology now, at least where the benefits were immediately obvious.

• Some observed that many new technologies go unnoticed, or are taken for granted.

• It was accepted that where there has been public resistance to new technologies, this has often been at least partly due to the way in which they were introduced.

• It was suggested that the culture of commercial secrecy surrounding many technological developments fosters public suspicion.

• Several were frustrated by the public's apparent lack of knowledge of existing safety systems for screening the introduction of potentially risky new products.

Boardroom involvement
• Some felt that Board members were taking more interest in public attitudes to the science behind their products, partly because Boards often now included more non-executive directors, as well as people with scientific and industrial experience.

• The increasing emphasis on formal risk management in corporate governance was felt to be causing Boards to weigh the risks involved in R&D more carefully, though more from the viewpoint of financial and operating risks than social or ethical ones.

In general, our study has identified a potential mismatch between the current attitudes of many science-based companies and what both the recent POST report and the Prime Minister's 2002 speech commend as 'robust and engaging dialogue' with the public around science and technology.