

# PR: WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

Jo Reeves, Senior Account Manager in the environment team at communications consultancy Mistral, talks about the role PR has to play in the success of the renewable energy industry.

## GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR PR CAMPAIGN

CURRENTLY THERE ARE 2.73 GW OF WIND FARM PROJECTS ONSHORE. GIVEN THAT THE GOVERNMENT PROPOSES 14 GW BY 2020 THERE IS A LOT TO PLAY FOR. THIS COULD BE A GOOD TIME FOR WIND COMPANIES TO EXAMINE THEIR CAMPAIGNS AND PR STRATEGIES.



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In the words of the much-celebrated PR guru Frank Jefkin: “Public relations is the planned, deliberate and sustained effort to establish and maintain a mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.”

For the wind sector, this understanding is urgently needed. Latest BWEA statistics show that there are currently 8.3 gigawatts (GW) of applications in planning, often held up by prevaricating local councils besieged by small, but vocal groups of protesters.

Though 2008 was a record year in terms of consents (as the BWEA Annual Review puts it: “for the first time onshore capacity consented has overtaken capacity submitted”), the number of undecided applications is likely to swell further as Round 3 projects make it into the system. Given also that the Government’s Renewable Energy Strategy proposes 14 GW for onshore wind by 2020, up from 2.73 GW today, it is a good time for companies to examine their campaigns and put more weight and urgency behind their PR strategies.

The emphasis on the public in PR is particularly relevant for the renewable energy industry. Instilling understanding and commitment towards these relatively new technologies is a constant challenge. Change and the unknown breed fear, so ensuring all stakeholders are equipped with the best knowledge and most accurate information available is the most effective route to widespread acceptance of the major role renewables must play in the energy mix.

In other words, for a PR strategy to work, creating and maintaining a desired reputation, and influencing opinions and behaviour, must be complemented with clear messages and creating understanding through knowledge. It makes sense to ally from the outset corporate reputation-building and lobbying, whether political or within the media, with direct local community engagement. And the key to successful local engagement is to start early.

### TURBINES ARE ‘MAJESTIC’

Early engagement can avoid the circulation of outrageous ‘myths’, and ensure that accurate statistics

and facts are communicated from the beginning. Where there is a particularly tenacious opposition group in full swing, an early and dynamic myth-busting campaign can turn opinions around.

As an example of this Mistral worked on an onshore wind project that already had a very active and irate opposition group. An Advertising Standards Authority complaint about the literature the group was circulating was upheld, but not before the damage had been done with door-drop leaflets making misguided statements on how wind farms affect health, reduce house prices and affect the success of local businesses.

“On behalf of the developer Mistral launched a series of myth-busting newsletters, counteracting these claims with facts and figures. We also wanted an innovative way of impacting upon the local communities the realities of wind farms. So we commissioned a series of cartoons, each one representing and dispelling a well-known myth. This acted as a fun and engaging way of addressing and dismissing inaccurate claims about wind energy,” comments Mistral’s managing director Mike Evans.

“An organised bus trip for local community members to view an operating wind farm was also a great success as each participant expressed amazement at how the realities of these developments differed from the perceptions. This included surprise at how quiet the moving turbines were and how ‘majestic’ the turbines appeared. Through this myth-busting campaign we were able to more than double the number of active supporters of the development,” says Evans.

### ‘CONSULT AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE’

Consulting with the local community as early as possible in the development process shows that the developer has nothing to hide and ensures stakeholders feel they are involved and their views are valued.

“Sharing broad plans at the earliest stage is vital in avoiding disgruntled residents. Nobody likes feeling as though they are the last to know – particularly with something that may affect living environments. It’s important to remember that communication is a two-

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way process – giving individuals the chance to feed back views, ask questions and make suggestions makes them feel empowered, rather than being overwhelmed with changes that are out of their control,” says Evans.

Some developers send their project teams round door-to-door at the early stages of a planning application so they can speak to local residents face-to-face and alleviate any fears early on. This can pay dividends in the future – and build a mutual respect between the community and the developer.

#### GETTING TO GRIPS WITH COMMUNITIES

Rob Fellows, director at Quatro PR, stresses the importance of information saturation: “It is crucial that the consultation process works to benefit the wider community and not just a minority or those who can ‘shout the loudest’. The challenge is to ensure that the interests of all groups of stakeholders are fully represented and involved. This includes being open to the interests of people who are often excluded from the decision-making process, such as children and young people.” He adds that engaging key people such as local head teachers and the voluntary sector can help to provide access to various communities and reassure individuals that their interests are being represented. It also helps if you can get leadership from the relevant local authority as it tends to ‘legitimise’ the consultation for the public.

“In this sector, successfully engaging communities involves so much more than a flashy website and marketing materials; it’s about really getting to grips with local communities. If you can assure local people that you genuinely want to hear their views, and more importantly are prepared to act where genuine concerns are raised, this will help to break down the mistrust that many communities have, and help to pave the way to a successful and constructive dialogue.”

#### ENGAGING THE SILENT MAJORITY

Alex Doyle, managing director at Pendragon PR is also a great believer of engaging with the ‘silent majority’. “Our strategy is to promote the benefits of a scheme and encourage supporters to speak out, ensuring the decision-makers understand the full range of community opinions. Experience suggests that the vast majority of local residents around a planned wind farm are generally supportive, but their views are eclipsed by well-organised and passionate opponents.”

Pendragon PR, has recently run a successful campaign in Scotland with developer Infinergy for the proposed Lochluichart Wind Farm in the Highlands. They were anxious to address

community concerns and establish with some accuracy how local residents viewed the project.

Doyle says: “Ongoing engagement with individuals, families and community representatives enabled a broad group of supporters to be identified. Encouraged to express their views, nearly 6,000 expressions of support were received by The Highland Council and the Scottish Government, totally eclipsing the opponents and showing councillors the true weight of local public opinion”. The 17-turbine project near Dingwall was supported by The Highland Council and, in December last year (2008), the Scottish Government issued approval.

The Scottish Government’s web announcement noted: “During the consultation exercise, 9,097 public representations were received – 3,170 objections and 5,927 in support of the development.”

#### COMMUNITY BENEFITS: WHAT’S IN IT FOR US?

Community benefits can be a double-edged sword. From a developer’s point of view, investing in a community that is likely to be at least temporarily inconvenienced by construction activities is a fair and rational practice. This can be twisted, however, by opponents who claim this is tantamount to bribery.

Public affairs manager at Centrica, Neville Bartrop, believes the company struck the right balance with local communities near their Lynn and Inner Dowsing offshore wind farm development.

“One commitment has been to invest funds and time in the redevelopment of the visitor centre at Gibraltar Point Nature Reserve at Skegness. We are working with local volunteers and environmentalists there to explain the environmental challenge facing us and the role of renewables development. It is a partnership that stresses our own very real commitment to environmental issues, shares the valuable environmental data we capture and helps to boost visitor numbers in an area whose economy depends on tourism.”

Currently, Centrica is helping the centre capture and record on computer all the bird data that has been gathered in unique hand-written records dating back 60 years. This will make the data much more accessible for them and visitors and will help understanding of changes in the local environment.

E.ON also recognises the importance of giving back to the community. At its Scroby Sands development it has invested in community events, held art competitions and funded a visitor centre. At Robin Rigg it has sponsored the local football team and part-funded a local boat, which has been christened the ‘E.ON Spirit of Maryport’ in a community-wide naming competition.

At its Siddick and Oldside wind farm in Cumbria, E.ON funded an annual horse show – which takes place quite literally in the midst of the wind farm. This not only boosts community spirit, but dispels myths surrounding the threat of wind turbines to horse riders.

