

## ■ *Special Issue Paper*

# Green lobbying: is sustainability more than a new frame for old-style lobbying? A consultant's personal point of view

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Framing and spinning are vital to effective public affairs. This could be one out of several reasons why sustainability is being instrumented heavily for public affairs measures. Because in a broad but common understanding, all efforts of corporate social responsibility are a critical strategy to influence political decision making and the stakeholders' actions and reactions relevant to a company. In a populist understanding, sustainability is simply a good thing all together. And that is where politics comes in: many politician are trying to use "sustainability" to better sell their ideas to the media and the public. Therefore public affairs and lobbying have definitely gone greener to meet the politicians' expectations. Critics might say that this is about green washing or mainstreaming the basic concept of sustainability. But it is also true that by doing so, companies were able to bring this issue to a prominent spot on the politicians' agenda.

## INTRODUCTION

Looking onto the current issues throughout the political capitals of the Western world these days, one cannot escape the feeling that all politics have gone sustainable. And it seems that all public affairs have gone that road as well. The last decade has shown rising criticism on lobbying, bringing about scandal after scandal. In the same time, sustainability has risen to the echelon of political wording as well as to day-to-day politics. Many politician are trying to use 'sustainability' to better sell their ideas to the media and the public. Not only ecological issues are sustainable in today's political world. Also finance, health care, and infrastructure are labeled sustainable. Companies on the other hand are also not only publishing sustainability reports but invest in sustainability trainings for employees and stakeholder-oriented corporate social responsibility programs. In other words, at least the political language has become greener.

The rationale behind all that might be the apparent easy-to-understand concept of sustainability. It simply means to act responsible towards the ecological, social, and economic environment. In other words, treating all aspects of our society in a

responsible and sustainable way to preserve what we have for coming generations. Scientific definitions and academic research do go a lot deeper than that for sure. But in a populist understanding, sustainability is simply a good thing all together. And that is where politics comes in.

So, if one wants to discuss the practical use of the frame sustainability in politics and public affairs, at least three—skeptical—questions arise:

1. Did lobbying already hijack sustainability? It looks like sustainability is an effective spin to put on any issue in public affairs in order to succeed. If only for the simple fact, that politics, media and the public like that spin.
2. Is 'green washing' the new approach to issues management? It looks like lobbying efforts for green issues, for example, against greenhouse gas and for solar power, for renewable energy, biofuels, electro-mobility, and so on are on the rise. There are more actors than ever on these issues, and there are more campaigns on green issues out there than ever.
3. Who is in the driver's seat? Governments permanently issue sustainability programs and thus attract lobbying actors to follow their call. Who is instrumenting who?

It might be useful to look at these—provocative—questions to find out more about the linkage between sustainability and public affairs. It has

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to be mentioned here that in general discourse, corporate social responsibility and sustainability are used similarly. Whereas there would be many facts that allow for a separate use of both terms in academics, this article follows the practitioners' practice and uses them interchangeably.

### DID LOBBYING ALREADY HIJACK SUSTAINABILITY?

Since scholarly interest in corporate social responsibility (CSR) has primarily focused on the synergies between social and economic performance, our understanding of how (and the conditions under which) companies use CSR to produce policy outcomes that work against public welfare has remained comparatively underdeveloped. This study addresses this issue using internal tobacco industry documents to explore British-American Tobacco's (BAT) thinking on CSR and its effects on the company's CSR Programme. (...) how BAT managers made sense of the company's declining political authority in the mid-1990s; how they subsequently justified the use of CSR as a tool of stakeholder management aimed at diffusing the political impact of public health advocates by breaking up political constituencies working towards evidence-based tobacco regulation; and how CSR works ideologically to shape stakeholders' perceptions of the relative merits of competing approaches to tobacco control. (...) by showing how CSR practices are used to stymie evidence-based government regulation, the article underlines the importance of highlighting and developing matrices to assess the negative social impacts of CSR. Fooks G, Gilmore A, Collin J, Holden C, Lee K. 2012. The Limits of Corporate Social Responsibility: Techniques of Neutralization, Stakeholder Management and Political CSR. *Journal of Business Ethics*. [Open access 02 March 2012: 17pp]

Public affairs is the function to manage a corporation's nonmarket environment. Its goal is to interact with political and societal stakeholders to stimulate an environment that enables the company to reach its business goals. In a broad but common understanding, all efforts of CSR therefore are a critical strategy to influence political decision making and the stakeholders' actions and reactions relevant to a company.

Secondly, public affairs and all its tactical strategies such as lobbying, stakeholder management, or CSR are always mirroring the political issues, themes, and trends. One could thus argue that if sustainability is a major political theme, corporate public affairs have to jump train and adopt this main theme at least as an umbrella strategy for bringing forward the business' interests. A company's effort to have its

interests be understood, heard, and taken into account by political decision makers will always be based on the basic skill of using the adequate political wording and scripting the core message in a ready-to-use political spin. Therefore, lobbying simply has to hijack the sustainability theme to be heard and to get accepted.

This paradigm of professional public affairs and lobbying can be seen on other issues as well. 'Homeland Security' after 9/11 became a main public affairs theme for years, simply due to the fact that almost all political spin and wording were oriented along this issue.

### IS 'GREEN WASHING' THE NEW APPROACH TO ISSUES MANAGEMENT?

This paper demonstrates how using the word "carbon" within global warming debates severely impedes lobbyists in favor of building stronger renewable energy policies in the European Union (EU). Within the EU, carbon is widely used to speak about many of the perils of climate change, global warming, energy policy, and contingent subject matters. In political circles, media outlets, and public debates, carbon acts a pillar for many policies, discussions, and ideas related to fundamental errors of transferring energy from fossil fuels and nuclear sources. At the same time, however, limiting carbon does not necessarily preclude fossil fuels, such as natural gas, or uranium fuels, such as nuclear energy, from becoming central sources of future energy supplies. This is a major pitfall of arguing within "the carbon frame", which this paper defines as any usage of the word carbon to situate debates or discussions regarding energy policy. Using the carbon frame is found to directly impede the progress and efficacy of the Environmental Non-Governmental (ENGO) energy lobby in the EU. (...) to show how using the carbon frame will continue to drive EU policy towards favoring natural gas, carbon capture and storage (CCS), and nuclear energy, as opposed to building stronger renewable energy policies, which are stated goals of the ENGO lobby. Herman KS. 2011. The Carbon Frame: Lobbying for Renewable Energy in the European Union. *Master Thesis*. Paper 14. <http://repository.usfca.edu/thes/14>

In political communication, spinning and framing are crucial elements of success. In political campaigning as well as in public affairs, all actors are always trying to put a suitable spin on their message to impart the message across to the audience. Spinning can make the big difference between only hearing a message and accepting what the addressee hears. 'It's not what you say, it's what people hear' is the core concept of political

communication (Frank Luntz: 'Words that work'. Hyperion, 2007).

You can have the best message, but the person on the receiving end will always understand it through the prism of his or her own emotions, preconceptions, prejudices, and preexisting beliefs. In political communication, it is not enough to be correct or reasonable. The key to successful communication is to take the imaginative leap of getting yourself right into your listener's mind to know what they are thinking and feeling. How the receiver perceives what you say is even more 'real' than what the communicator perceives itself. It is all about framing a company's interests in exactly the way that the audience is thinking about an issue. Like the 'carbon' example earlier shows: if the political keyword is 'carbon', all communication towards politics—in other words, public affairs—will use that keyword to align with the mindset of political decision makers.

Critics might say that this is about green washing or mainstreaming the basic concept of sustainability. It might be but it is definitely also true that without using the right frame or spin, public affairs would be out of touch with its prime audience. And that is simply neither the concept of nor the professional expectation of public affairs.

#### WHO IS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT?

How should we evaluate and regulate the impacts of lobbying in the European Union (EU)? The current lack of transparency around lobbying activities and the absence of formal regulation mean that a hidden lobbying problem may prevail. The tentative case study of green industries in the EU is illustrative. The wind turbine industry, for example, benefits from ambitious environmental target levels for greenhouse gas reductions that will increase the future market for renewable energy. In contrast, for example, no environmental target levels exists that increase the future market shares of organic farming. Rational choice theory suggests that lobbying and group size advantages can explain the observed difference in achieving environmental target levels. Svendsen GT. 2011. Evaluating and Regulating the Impacts of Lobbying in the EU? The Case Study of Green Industries. *Environmental Policy and Governance* 21: 131–142. DOI: 10.1002/eet.567; 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment

Politics sets the rules, initiates the issues, and presents solutions. Companies, associations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and citizens can—and should—voice their opinions and stimulate debate. In this bipolarity of democratic decision making, it is sometimes impossible to exactly say which actor first brought an issue upon

the public agenda. But as a matter of fact, if any given issue rises in popularity, more and more actors will contribute to the debate.

To this respect, it is not really important who started the sustainability issue. It is here, and it is here to stay. This means that all actors of the political arena will jump on in and try to make sense and use of it. The NGOs do so, as well as the politicians. The public affairs professionals are doing so as well. On some aspects, there are heated debates going on if politics or industries are in the driver's seat. But without disregard, at least in public affairs, it is about solid results not about being the winner of a debate.

#### SUSTAINABILITY IS MORE THAN A SPIN

Yes, framing and spinning are vital to effective public affairs. This could be one out of several reasons why sustainability is being instrumented heavily for public affairs measures. As mentioned earlier, it is written in the DNA of every professional public affairs practitioner to tune into the political main theme given to protect or propel the interests at hand.

It is a given fact that governments and chief executive officers stress the word sustainability on almost every account possible and proclaim how important sustainable policies are for our times. And this is a good thing altogether. What it means for professional public affairs practitioners is mentioned previously: use it to impart your messages and interests in a more successful way because of the receivers' state of political mind. Acting in a sustainable way or at least impart the message that you are somehow connected to this main theme is what businesses' public affairs is required to do. But neither critics nor scientists should get this wrong. Because even if the rationale for doing so is only the communicating part of it, every once in a while communication creates reality. In other words, sometimes the communication of sustainability can lead to a sustainable behavior later on.

On the other hand, the rise of the issue sustainability has created a new industry in regards to lobbying and public affairs as well. A decade ago, many of today's powerful actors in this arena were unheard of. There was no industry-driven lobbying for electric-mobility, biofuels, or solar panels when the political framework was not responsive to this. Even many NGOs that had issues like that on their agenda a decade ago shifted their priorities to jump the train. We saw the creation of institutes, associations, think-tanks, and even single-issue agencies formed around one or another aspect of sustainability. Conferences, books, journals, and educational programs have come to life all over Europe and the USA. Dealing with sustainability, managing it, or just talking about sustainability has become mainstreamed in politics and media, and it has become a business of its own. If nothing else, taking all this into account, sustainability follows

exactly the traditional development of any issue, from 'emerging/dormant' to 'current/critical'. For all actors on a national as well as on European level, it is a solid assumption that sustainability has reached center stage. And all indicators seem to point in the same direction; it looks like it will stay there.

Public affairs and lobbying have definitely gone greener to meet the politicians' expectations. But it is also true that by doing so, companies were able to bring this issue to a prominent spot on the politicians' agenda. Everybody has to be high on sustainability these days, either in reaction to government policies or due to the pressures of an omnipresent main theme. However, it should be kept in mind that in global terms, sustainability is much more than a popular theme for lobbying to hide behind.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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