

Engaging in Dialogue with NGOs

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In this presentation I would like to explore the reasons why we engage with the broader public and NGOs, together with an overview of what we have done to date - with specific reference to the debate on genetic modification, and finally where do we go next?

Why engage at all?

The context is Unilever's mission to meet the everyday needs of consumers everywhere through its branded products and services. The imperatives of brand trust are that we continuously develop the brand to meet consumer needs using ingredients, processes, and technologies that meet technical, economic, social and safety requirements. Today they also need to be in line with broader needs expressed in society. This is easier to say than to do: listen to the evolving agenda; engage with the external world to understand better; discover methods to help the process, these are all necessary to gain and retain brand trust.

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Trust in institutions has diminished together with the revelation that the market place is not a simple transaction between provider and buyer, but moving towards a partnership activity between industrial (and Government) institutions and society.

This connected economy - one that is connected in ways not know before - is connected not just from one person or company to another, from one buyer to one seller - but as a network of multiple and simultaneous linkages. The techno-economic network is not linear but multi-dimensional.

Part of this connected nature is that of 5 crucial relationships

- employees
- customers/consumers
- shareholders
- public
- Governments

These relationships are part of the wider social content in which we operate.

Companies (especially consumer goods companies) operate not just in markets but in societies.

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Innovation is crucial to industry, which often entails employing new and emerging technologies. The aim of industrial innovation is to provide the customer (individual or institution) with a product or service (knowledge) that customer wants to buy and, will do so again and again. In order to do this there has to be strong connection, and understanding of, the end consumer.

Thus, in addition to the issue of connectivity of the marketplace, there is another force driving the way we engage with the wider public - which is the strong evidence of a widening gap between scientific understanding of risk of introducing new products and, public perception of risk of novel solutions. Companies are at risk from an erosion of brand-value, and ultimately a lower return on innovation, if they do not manage the gap between scientific and public perceptions of innovation

Society more generally is now challenging the way parameters are set for assessing risk and for decision making, in particular with reference to new technologies such as modern biotechnology.

Therefore, Unilever has been interested to search out a deeper understanding of the social challenge, while at the same time responding in its front line business operations to consumer needs and concerns.

What did we do?

The learning story starts in this example in the early 90's with an established GM technology: multicopy enzyme production. Unilever does not make enzymes but uses them widely in laundry detergents to enable washing at lower temperatures and to remove stains without prewashing, which saves time for consumers.

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At the start of the controversy in Switzerland and Germany the majority of production was moving rapidly to multicopy, and wider use of enzymes depended on this cost reduction move. A series of three independently moderated, industry workshops in Germany led to a set of partial agreements on which the industry could proceed with care, and stimulated further work on how to move forward with developments of this technology.

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In parallel Unilever was involved in the development of 'dialogue groups' with NGO's in the Netherlands and the UK. [7] The motivation was very

straightforward - if this was a technology on which there were differing agendas of risk, it was necessary to understand and embrace these rather than assume they would become the same. There were also interesting cultural and institutional differences in this work between in the Netherlands and the UK. The apparently greatest hurdle: how to work on a more cooperative basis with NGO's turned out to be lower than expected. The toughest task was on content. In the Netherlands the dialogue group was an industry group and the outcome was a voluntary agreement on labelling then underwritten by Dutch legislation.

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In the UK in 1994 the dialogue was initiated between Unilever and the Green Alliance and with an NGO contact group. This involved meeting with many and varied NGOs, consumer groups, environmental NGOs, Womens Institutes etc. and providing information on why Unilever was interested in modern biotechnology and what it was currently doing.

We were very fortunate to find a common interest with the Green Alliance and members of the NGO contact group: to understand better what was going on, particularly from the perspective of the public as consumers and citizens, and to invest time and effort to put up the questions and hypotheses for deeper study.

In 1996 the University of Lancaster was commissioned by the Green Alliance to undertake qualitative research into how consumer perspectives were developing in relation to products made with the help of modern biotechnology. Unilever agreed to sponsor the study recognising the importance of the insights and understanding of consumers that it would bring.

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The research, (Uncertain World) published in March 1997 raised serious challenges for regulators and for business:

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- public values are not given enough scope for expression
- people's sense of being at risk is heightened by exclusion from decision making
- insecurity lowers perceptions of quality (and ultimately quality of life)
- current scientific claims about food safety are seen as misleading and those expounding them are mistrusted (regulators, industry)
- the trend toward increasing codification (narrowing of parameters considered in the regulation of technologies such as modern biotechnology is seen as increasing long-term risk because the

regulatory provisions will not be able to adapt to changes in external factors.

- industry's reliance on regulatory provisions reinforces public perceptions of "regulatory capture" leaving citizens with little or no control or choice.

This work had been done notably before GM soya became a major public issue - but showed very clearly that it was likely to do so, and why.

An important aspect of this work was the different views and perceptions of risk brought by participants in the contact group. It is unlikely the learning would have been as great had it been contracted research, or without the discipline of publication and dissemination to encourage debate and action.

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The second study, again commissioned by the same contact group was at the height of the GM controversy, when the relevant question was: "could such opposing views *ever* be considered more calmly?". The mathematical task undertaken by Sussex University was to map options and criteria, and again the existence of the contact group meant that a very wide range of views could be included.

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This technique is a systematic and transparent way of comparing policy options. It can tap into a wide range of perspectives and expertise, and produce an overview that "maps" the debate. It does not attempt to foreclose deliberations by coming up with a single solution, but seeks rather to foster the exploration of alternative outcomes. It carves a middle way between highly technical, purely quantitative analysis and qualitative, discursive approaches. It combines the transparency of numerical approaches with the unconstrained framing of discursive deliberations, harnessing the best of each approach. This was published as 'Rethinking Risk' in 1999.

To quote 'Rethinking Risk' "The crucial task is to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the new (deliberative) approaches - in comparison with the old (analytical) ones. There is a need for open minds, creative thinking, free experimentation and good communication across the old boundaries".

A third study arose directly from an important finding from the Uncertain World study: that the assumption frequently made that the answer to most issues of risk and uncertainty is to provide more information on which consumers can make choices, may be at least incomplete and at worst misguided.

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Wising-Up, is study by Lancaster University that has compared the characteristics of information of two high profile technologies – GM foods and IT applications.

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This again highlights the importance of institutional frameworks and the implicit understanding of roles and bias that all information provision has. While these are UK studies arising out of the insight, input and interest of a small but very diverse contact network they give directly useful insights for the UK, and hypotheses that are useful in other contexts.

[17] Conclusions

The Future?

The work of the contact group is ongoing and we are keen to work on bringing this wider perspective and listening to more tough challenges.

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Unilever has for some time been developing a programme in sustainable agriculture: the definition and measurement of parameters is now well established for several pilot projects around the world and the value of such a widely based contact group is to be able to tackle difficult questions on how to move forward in areas of mutual interest for the participants and working largely in a societal context, but with strong linkages to the business.

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An obvious tough question is how does GM technology realistically get back on the food agenda in those countries and regions that have rejected it. One possible conclusion from this series of work in the UK, so far, is to focus not on the products in the first instance, however attractive their "benefit set", but on understanding and helping, with others and institutionally, to build a *space* within which consumers will be keen to evaluate new ideas and assess their benefits and also their risks. A key criterion being is that this should be genuinely a public space, and not owned by any particular group, and that the nature of the space will evolve to reflect developments in the risk environment.

We are, and need to, develop tools for businesses to create an ability to listen to the evolution of the societal agenda.

Industry has to translate these needs, together with the economic ones, into a practical action programme that can be seen as engaging in a social contract with consumers. The mechanism of expression being the brand.

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