

Sustainability: Difficult yes, impossible no

Kathryn Sheridan, lead consultant at PR and issue management firm **Sustainability Consult**, looks at how sustainability can shape the future of the speciality chemicals industry



Work in the chemicals industry and you will probably feel like ‘everybody wants a piece of me’. And indeed they do - from regulators to environmental and health pressure groups to customers who want the same raw materials but at a lower price and the scope to be marketed as ‘green’.

With slogans like ‘greener products for leaner times’ springing up everywhere, as well as the REACH-inspired substitution rush, clearly the temptation is there to produce ‘green products’. But even if substituting one raw material for another does reduce the end product’s environmental load, it does not tick all the boxes for achieving sustainability.

Let’s face it, sustainability is complicated. It means very different things to different people, as a glance at the different articles in the Sustainability feature in this issue will show. Sustainability can also be driven by fashion. One minute it is all food miles and biofuels, the next minute the rights of farmers in developing countries and hybrid vehicles are back in vogue. It is all very confusing.

Sustainability Consult and others like us work with organisations to try to improve their sustainability performance. This is about boosting credibility by guiding them to make real changes, not by ‘greenwashing’ and making corporate statements of intent.

Although much of what the chemicals industry does is driven by legislation, the idea of sustainability is not new to many companies. Some lead the way with internal eco-audits forcing the phase-out of certain products and promotion of others. Others lag behind, sticking to the age-old rhetoric of risk-benefit and being part of the solution.

In the current economic climate, however, sustainability makes sense for a number of reasons. Energy is still a major cost for businesses. Oil, gas and other natural resources are getting scarcer, pushing prices up to unpredictable levels in the future. Investing in energy efficiency now can help cut running costs for the long-term and, although upfront investment may be hard to justify in times of belt-tightening, subsidies may be available to sweeten the deal.

In addition, embracing sustainability and the principles of corporate social responsibility creates a better environment for employees, making them more likely to stay loyal, even if they are faced with wage cuts. Employees are the first line of defence against the often negative reputation of the industry, yet getting internal buy-in is one of the greatest challenges. Working together for the greater good by producing innovative technologies and products and contributing to improving the world we live in are all powerful employee motivators, if handled well.

The tendency to abandon sustainability as a priority is understandable if keeping a company’s head above water takes up all of the available resources. But it is short-sighted. When this cloud passes, be it in five years or ten, companies which have survived through this period by becoming more efficient and more innovative will blast ahead, leaving any surviving dinosaurs behind.

Not only does it make sense, but becoming more sustainable is demanded by various noisy stakeholders. Most companies will have crossed swords with an environmental NGO or a children’s health group at some point and hopefully will have emerged all the wiser for it. However, NGOs are smart. Instead of attacking individual producers, they have taken their fight to downstream users and retailers who are under pressure to phase out certain substances, not from regulators but from alternative substitution campaigns and well-publicised blacklists.

This cannot be ignored because a good NGO campaign can result in legislative action or swiftly drafted self-regulatory commitments. Either way, both regulation and voluntary initiatives force change and make industry look reactive. Proactive engagement with stakeholders through advisory fora, informal meetings or debates and a genuine willingness to become more sustainable go down better with the outside world and give communicators something real to talk about.

Waiting for legislation while lobbying to fight it off is a valid strategy for some sectors, particularly when the science is weak. That said, public opinion and the mainstream media are probably the biggest threat to the sustainable future of the chemicals industry. It is easy to think that becoming more sustainable is someone else’s responsibility but we can all make a difference on a personal and a corporate level. Since when did we think government had all the answers? Do we trust the state to take care of us on finance, pensions, social welfare or banking issues?

Policymakers can legislate and tinker with financial incentives, citizens can act locally and call for change but business has a major role to play in driving change. Umbrella organisations like the World Business Council for Sustainable Development have a seat at the table of international negotiations like the WHO or G20, but every organisation can have an impact, starting locally in each plant, office and facility.

So, enough with the doom and gloom and finger-wagging. Being positive is key to communicating on sustainability. Shock tactics stopped working back in the 1980s and more intelligent communications are needed, be they with employees, stakeholders or the local community. For the reputation and image of the chemicals industry, sustainability goals should not be abandoned but seen as a differentiator in a market which is under pressure.

Striving for improved environmental performance should not be seen as an obligation. Companies who succeed do so because they want to bring about positive change. They believe things can be done differently and want to prove it. This industry, with its proven track record in research, innovation and global leadership, has the potential to create a better, more sustainable future.

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