

Purpose-led public affairs – what’s new?

Until recently, a leaked internal strategy document from a global tech company detailing an aggressive campaign to undermine the EU’s proposed new digital services legislation would probably just have prompted a weary ‘*so what?*’. That’s just what public affairs people do.

Similarly, the powerful oil and gas lobby has long been an extension of the lobbying arm of the petroleum industry, despite corporate climate reduction commitments.

Recent months have seen signs of change. The tech company strategy leak sparked headlines in business media across Europe and the US (and rebukes of “old style way of doing things” from policy makers) and last week saw a major oil and gas company pull out of the largest US lobby group because it didn’t align with their climate position.

What’s changing?



Action by all stakeholders

Despite, and even accelerated by, the pandemic sweeping across the globe, international calls for action on climate change and social justice are getting louder and more insistent. The United Nations is calling for bolder commitments to finance a global green new deal and meet the Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and in 2019 the European Commission launched the EU Green Deal, setting out policy actions aimed at making Europe climate neutral by 2050.

The general public is increasingly concerned about our health and wellbeing and that of the planet. And in turn, the role of business in society is also changing, with public expectation that industry and corporations will assume more responsibilities. Today, more and more companies are choosing to rise above business as usual and use their collective power and know-how to address the biggest challenges facing our societies, our future generations and our planet.

Governments can't solve global challenges on their own

Official responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have shown up many of the fundamental weaknesses in our current government structures, highlighting an urgent need for reform and new thinking once the virus has been brought under control.

For corporations, the turbulent events of 2020 have reinforced the importance of being a 'purpose-driven' business, pursuing profits with regard for your impact on people and the planet. This new multi-stakeholder approach has enormous implications for future public affairs strategies and the people responsible for carrying them out.

How public affairs is adapting

Public affairs must quickly adapt to the new reality or risk irrelevance – or, worse, condemnation as some have found out to their cost. Old-school strategies designed only to protect corporate profits are no longer acceptable in this new environment. Companies today must re-think their government relations strategies to align them with their purpose and sustainability agenda. This will require a new internal relationship between public affairs teams, operations teams and C-suites.

The upside is a huge opportunity: public affairs and government relations teams are, after all, the interface between business, politicians, policymakers and the public – a prime example of multi-stakeholder collaboration if ever there was one.

Future looking and achieving global goals

Being purpose-driven will help public affairs teams take a more future-focused approach, instead of constantly responding to issues that threaten their business. In practice, this means getting onto the agenda of policy makers who are thinking about how to create a better future for all, rather than just addressing the individual concerns of individual companies. It is a chance for public affairs to increase its positive impact and act as an extension of purpose-driven corporate strategy. An example of this in practice is business aligning their strategies with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and targeting specific goals to show how their activities can help accelerate their achievement.

The alternative is to risk being exposed as purpose-washing. Companies cannot proclaim their new corporate purpose and sustainability strategies to employees, customers and investors – and then send their lobbyists and lawyers to try to water down the EU's Green Deal. Increased awareness and transparency, as well as more and more public commitments make it difficult to get away with saying one thing in public and doing something else in Brussels or Washington DC.

If anchored to a company's business and sustainability strategies, purpose can be the stepping-stone to more effective, forward-looking public affairs strategies. It can keep businesses relevant and flexible, helping them achieve their goals - while contributing to global ones.