

Watch your back in the NGO jungle

Robert Blood of SIGWatch

This month SIGWatch launches a new one-day workshop for corporate communications teams on how activists strategise. Here is a taster.

Earlier this year two of the world's most powerful companies discovered you no longer had to drive an indigenous people off its land, or dump a thousand tonnes of toxic waste in the North Sea, to experience the wrath of environmentalists.

McDonald's and KFC's error, in the eyes of Greenpeace, was to buy chickens from farmers who bought grain from Cargill which bought some of its soybeans from South American growers, some of whom had been chopping down the Amazon rainforest to enlarge their farms.

It's as if England's 19th century anti-slavery crusaders had targeted, not the slave ships transporting Africans to America's cotton plantations, but London's shirt makers, for buying the cotton.

Modern NGOs know that this apparently oblique strategy gets results. Moreover, it is usually much easier to lean on one or two multinationals than to persuade hundreds of time-serving MPs, possibly in a faraway and uninterested parliament, to enact new laws.

In the 21st century struggle for social causes and global justice,

corporations have become proxies for elected decision makers.

But being a means rather than an end for NGOs leaves corporations with a new kind of reputational conundrum: how to respond without becoming a soft touch for NGOs generally, and how to unravel activist strategies to avoid becoming a target.

The second problem can be likened to nervous animals watching hunters creeping through the jungle. They are not all equally likely to finish up on the end of a spear. That depends on what the hunters want. Are they seeking food, or an animal with qualities worth bartering, such as fur? Perhaps they are looking for bait to catch something more valuable. Or maybe they are after a trophy, a head to hang on the wall of the chief's hut.

In the NGO jungle, corporate prey comes in several varieties. Knowing what kind you are may help you avoid becoming an activist's dinner.

Elephants

Elephants are targeted because they are big and powerful. An elephant corporation dominates its sector. Activists believe that if the elephant can be 'captured', smaller companies will find it harder to resist, not least, because any changes imposed by the dominant firm will inevitably filter through the entire supply chain.

This is why PETA targets McDonald's to raise animal welfare standards in the meat industry, and why Greenpeace concentrated on Tesco's and Carrefour to get GM foods removed from Europe's food shops.

Lions

Lions are also targeted for their status, but more for reasons of

symbolism than in the hope of triggering immediate change.

Greenpeace spent several years trying to persuade consumers to boycott ExxonMobil because it would not agree with them over the causes of climate change. Nestlé has been the *bête noire* of breastfeeding campaigners for over twenty years. Yet both firms have steamed on, apparently little touched by their critics.

What makes one company a lion, able to resist capture, and another an elephant which succumbs despite its size?

There are probably many factors, such as whether activists are attacking from several quarters simultaneously so that the target is overwhelmed, as happened to Monsanto over GM crops in 1999. A clue seems to be how quickly campaigns evolve and whether broad NGO alliances develop.

Goats

In India, when villagers wanted to capture a tiger which has turned man-eater in old age, they would tether a goat to a pole and wait for the animal to come sniffing for an easy meal.

Corporate goats may not be literally tethered, but they do operate outside the protection of their stronger partners. This makes them vulnerable to determined activists.

The classic examples are firms that breed animals for medical research and testing. They are often just farms, and several orders of magnitude less resourced and protected than the pharmaceutical firms that are their customers.

In short order, Britain lost its only research cat breeder, dog breeder and guineapig supplier as a result of sustained campaigning and harassment by animal rights activists.

With these suppliers removed, the same activists have stepped up their campaigns against the next tier of 'goats': the contract research firms, created when the big drugs and chemical companies hived off their animal toxicity testing work.

Drugs development is not the only sector that has its corporate goats. Every industry depends on small contractors somewhere. When these are concentrated in a vital part of the business, the whole industry can be put at risk.

Antelopes

Lionesses capture a fast moving animal like an antelope by chasing the whole herd, until one of them - the weakest, the lamest, or the already wounded - stumbles and falls.

A weakened corporation is similarly vulnerable because activists believe they are more likely to fear anything that will further besmirch their reputation.

Within months of the 1995 Brent Spar debacle which severely damaged its reputation in Europe, Shell was again exposed when the then dictatorship of Nigeria executed several Ogoni political activists demanding a bigger share of revenues from Shell's oil operations for their people.

The pressure on Shell has hardly let up since, although it has done more than almost any other oil company to engage and listen to its critics.

Today it is being attacked over the environmental impact of its natural gas operation on the Russian island of Sakhalin. Exxon, which also drills for gas on Sakhalin, is largely ignored.

Pigs

PG Wodehouse once observed that pigs are the most contented of animals as long as they have enough food. So what makes a

corporate pig happy? An easy life, its days untroubled by controversy or any problem where the hassle is substantially greater than the profit.

When the campaign against the export of live calves from Britain started, activists did not waste time targeting farmers who produced and sold the animals. They had to sell or lose money.

Rather, the activists went after the cross-channel ferry companies. Shipping lorry-loads of animals was a small but profitable part of their business, until protestors began disrupting sailings and upsetting passengers and other freight users.

Soon, no ferry company would ship live animals, and farmers had to use specialist shippers which were more expensive. (Subsequently the trade shut down anyway for a decade because of BSE).

Using the same tactic, fur campaigners first went after department stores with fur departments (why get your plate glass windows smashed because of a small part of your business?).

SHAC mounted noisy and disruptive demonstrations against every bank and insurance broker that might possibly want to work for Huntingdon Life Sciences. HLS is today banked and insured by HM Government, a unique but hardly satisfactory privilege.

Just as every industry has its goats, every company has its pigs - suppliers that are so much bigger that, to them, there is always the possibility that one day, you will be viewed as a source of aggravation rather than profit.

Even big companies are not invulnerable. NGOs have learnt that a good way to delay a developing world infrastructure

project is to target their key rich country suppliers, and the best way to get to the suppliers is to target their investment banks...

It's a jungle out there - and the NGOs call it 'supply chain accountability'.

Robert Blood is an expert on NGOs and how they campaign. He runs SIGWatch, a global activism research and early warning service.

For more information about the Activist Strategies Workshop, email robert.blood@sigwatch.com.



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