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Meet the Green Monster

How the fishing industry could employ public relations principles and techniques to combat a global threat posed by powerful pressure groups.

1.0 Executive Summary

Few if any industries have been as beset with ongoing activism as the generality of the fishing industry in most of the developed world. A vicious cycle of bad media coverage, unfavorable public policies, negative advocacy from pressure groups, and consequential damaged reputation has, with growing momentum, conspired to undermine the vital interests of the industry. Clearly, the industry's lack of coherence translates into poor ability to communicate convincingly, which may further aggravate the situation.

As much as failing to take decisive action will be seen as abdication of responsibility, breaking out of a prolonged spiral of negativity will require tedious efforts. A reasonable degree of optimism, on the other hand, suggests that well-planned, timely, and skillfully implemented public relations strategies can help bring about change for the better.

After all, a sound analysis of the problem leads to the unmistakable conclusion that the fishing industry has a just cause, which in principle makes a whole arsenal of powerful public relations tools available for its use, provided sufficient funding will be obtained. Bearing in mind the vast number of fishing vessels still roaming the seas, it will arguably be perfectly possible to gather a sizeable proportion of the major operators under a common umbrella.

The implications are both multifaceted and ambitious—a recommended program of action would make use of extensive analyses and planning, reputation management, issues management, crisis communication, government relations, media relations, and stakeholder management. It should in brief involve the following:

- Creating a communication platform for the industry, focusing sharply on issues of shared interest;
- Setting up permanent public relations and public affairs functions;
- Devising effective response programs and plans to address urgent needs;
- Restoring trust and developing long-term relationships with key stakeholders.

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4.0 Introduction

This report looks into the question of how the global fish catching industry—as primarily viewed from a North Atlantic perspective—could utilize corporate communication strategies to tackle a long-overdue issue of antagonistic advocacy, unduly restrictive management regimes, and unfavorable public image.

The purpose is to synthesize a clear and relevant picture from a complex situation in which a number of component elements and their interplay present a fairly significant challenge.

Based on industry and academic literature—as well as first-hand experience and personal interviews—key characteristics of the fishing industry will be discussed together with fisheries science and fisheries management, and related to public relations theory and practice.

For the sake of clarity, not all views will be presented in discussions about e.g. fisheries science and management. Instead, key alternative viewpoints will be considered, as these are seen to be in alignment with fishing interests.

Conclusive findings will be presented as recommendations.

5.0 A Fragmented Industry

While the context here is confined to the harvesting sector, anyone with a basic insight into commercial fishing will know that the world's fishing fleets differ dramatically: according to geography and culture, level of capitalization and technology, access to trade infrastructure and seafood markets, types of species targeted and gear used, all of which are key determinants of vessel type, size, and characteristics such as ocean going capacity and catch efficiency.

For instance, in the northeast Atlantic, one of the world's 19 major fishing areas as defined by the Fisheries and Aquaculture Department of FAO (the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization), there are several categories and subcategories of fishing fleets, listed by target species and technology (2008).

An estimated 20,000 ocean going vessels, together with hundreds of thousands of decked inshore vessels and two to three million smaller, undecked boats, catch a combined 100 million metric tons of fish per year according to UN figures (FAO 2002).

5.1 Large vs. Small

As in other industries, there has traditionally been a certain divide between large-scale and small-scale fishing operations, typically at odds in terms of access to inshore waters as well as in the distribution key applied to the regulation of the resource: the small and many feel threatened by the financial muscle and political influence of the large and few, who in turn tend to view the former as another source of restrictions and potential trouble.

5.2 Concentration of Ownership

Taking such divisions to socio-economic and political levels, Ben-Yami (2003) and Allain (2007) warn against societal disruptions resulting from privatization of fishing rights, a trend discerned since the late 1980s in e.g. Canada and Iceland.

5.3 Rights and Commons

Allain (2007) identifies fallacies adopted with modern fisheries management's adherence to ideas expressed by Hardin (1968)—the underlying assumption being that fishing communities are unable to self-regulate, prone to some shortsighted selfishness which must lead to depletion of the resource, necessitating external control either by paternalistic state power or by large commercial corporations.

5.4 Management and Science

During the decades following World War II, fisheries science was introduced to public fisheries management in North America, Europe, and elsewhere. According to Jón Kristjánsson (personal communication, 10 June 2005), the new approaches to fisheries management were initially met with curiosity and expectations by the industry, as they held promises of increasing catches and profitability through the aid of scientific methods; however, relations gradually deteriorated between, on the one hand, fisheries scientists and fisheries managers and, on the other, fishermen, vessel operators, and fishing communities.

5.5 Mistrust

Central to negative sentiment in the fishing industry is the observation that cutting back on fishing by reducing catch quotas or otherwise imposing restrictive measures has, with few exceptions, been the sole content of all advice given by the established networks of fisheries scientists to their subscribing governments.

The issue of mistrust is further associated with perceived lack of communication between e.g. established fisheries science and commercial fishermen. Haggan, Neis and Baird (2007) point to the professional knowledge of fishermen—and the fact that there are indeed examples of good cooperation between them and scientists—even if there still might be a long way to go in terms of raising communication standards. A feeling of being subjected to a combination of arrogant neglect and abusive public policies has long been detectable among fishermen and their industry representatives, who have grown used to seeing their business and operating conditions changed on a yearly basis, often by the enforcement of drastic measures.

They seem to sense that even if their livelihoods are dependent on their own in-depth knowledge of commercial fisheries, that expertise isn't being taken very seriously.

5.6 Criticisms

A few independent scientists and consultants have expressed skepticism toward the advice regularly given by the officially established fisheries science organizations—such as the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, “the world’s largest marine science and advisory body” (ICES 2008)—and the corresponding policies pursued by their subscribing governments.

“My criticism of ICES philosophy is by no means out-and-out. It is limited to the presentation of its assessments and estimates of biomass, recruitment and spawning stock biomass in precise figures, and to some of its apparently basic assumptions.” (Ben-Yami 2006, p. 18)

“Unfortunately, even with the best information, many of the EU’s management steps would be based mostly on statistical-mathematical manipulation of ‘guesstimated’ values. Scientists are unable to properly assess stocks, or make reliable predictions, as long as they apply the present methodology. Fish population models are employed, nevertheless, because they are the only tools available for numerical stock assessment. Although they are represented as the ‘best available science’, they produce in most cases inadequate science. They are unable to represent marine fishery reality. They are void of other than fishing factors and are innocent of ecology and ignore environmental factors, such as multi-annual, cyclic and semi-cyclic climatic fluctuations affecting the populations of fish and their prey and predators, and also anthropogenic ones, such as pollution and habitat destruction.” (Ben-Yami 2006, p. 30)

“Scientifically unfounded theories about the demise of the world’s fisheries because of overfishing have set the agenda for modern fisheries management. But in reality, *underfishing*, rather than overfishing, is often the main problem today—fish need a certain abundance of food, and overpopulated fish stocks become weak and volatile.” (KRISTJÁNSSON, J., personal communication. 20 June 2008)

6.0 Activism

With ideas of ever-dwindling fish stocks widely popularized and perceived problems largely blamed on fishing, the climate has been rendered fertile for pressure groups to exploit. The fishing industry’s uphill battle for rectification of wrongs inflicted by scientific advice that is at best devoid of socio-economic considerations and at worst scientifically flawed, may thus be made even more difficult as pressure groups, in their eagerness to frame issues using simplistic references to science, treat complicating details as ignorable nuisances.

This has led to a shift in perceived threats: whereas earlier fisheries scientists and their impact on policies were seen as a primary concern, radical environmental groups now occupy a more prominent position: while some of them would seem hostile toward the industry, they would nonetheless appear highly capable of influencing public opinion and legislation (BATES, Q., personal communication. 26 October 2008).

The consensus seems to be that radical conservationists today present the greatest threat to the fishing industry; the overall impression is that such groups increasingly set the agenda for policy decisions, with politicians and scientists complying—the former driven by the vote currency motive and the latter by the lure of money or publicity.

6.1 An Array of Activities

Tactics used lately by e.g. Greenpeace include the dissemination of misleading data to promote further restrictions on fishing (Seaman and Pietro 2008); dumping hundreds of large rocks on North Sea fishing grounds off the coast of Germany to obstruct trawling there (FNI 2008); lobbying against deep sea trawling at the EU level with damaging consequences for fishing operations (Bates 2008).

Other examples include the long standing drive by pressure groups to induce the UN to ban deep sea trawling in international waters. NEAFC, the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission resisted the indiscriminate nature of the original plan but caved in after modifications made such a ban dependent on the characteristics of the specific areas in question—which nonetheless was celebrated as a victory by the green lobby (Seas At Risk 2008).

In their efforts to control the sustainability agenda, pressure groups have engaged e.g. retail chains to enforce certain standards, promote eco-labels or threaten with consumer boycotts—with supermarkets easily persuaded once in a vulnerable position.

6.2 The Pew Trusts

In the U.S., Stolpe (2008) traces much of the negative publicity on fishing to the aftermath of the 1989 Exxon Valdez shipwreck and oil spill off the coast of Alaska, and places one of the largest charities, the multi-billion dollar Pew Charitable Trusts—established in 1948 and controlled by the children of Sun Oil founder Joseph Pew and wife Mary—at the center of campaigning against the fishing industry. After having noted that surveys in the late 1980s identified the oil industry as the greatest environmental culprit in the eyes of average Americans, the Pew Trusts founded the SeaWeb organization and started funding a number of so-called marine conservation programs run by anti-fishing pressure groups.

“Environmental Defense, Audubon, Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council (...) are actively anti-fishing. Also the Ocean Conservancy, Conservation Law Foundation, Center for Biological Diversity, Marine Fish Conservation Network and Oceana. Oceana is the biggest player now—established and funded by tens of millions of Pew dollars.” (STOLPE, N., personal communication. 20 October 2008)

After a decade of running advertising campaigns designed to sway public opinion and influence the agendas of policymakers, sponsoring scientific reports aimed at positioning the fishing industry at the heart of virtually any problems related to marine ecosystems—and various other activities—severe damage has been inflicted on the public image and commercial interests of the fishing industry.

6.3 'A Concerted Campaign'

As scientific publications strive to tackle shrinking sales and advertising revenues, some of them are seen sliding toward entertainment and sensationalism. An illustrative example would be an article published in *Science Magazine* (Worm 2006), which predicted that all seafood might be gone by the year 2048 largely because of fishing.

Highlighting the article's findings immediately before and after its publication in *Science*, a worldwide publicity campaign spread the story with astonishing efficiency: it appeared simultaneously across the Western world, in virtually all major news outlets (Google 2008). During the weeks and months that followed, the article's conclusions were dismissed as scientifically baseless in *Science* and in other publications; but with limited headline-making potential and no publicity campaign attached, the responses received no attention.

"The major threat is the green lobby. There appears to be a concerted campaign against fisheries in general. I'm not certain that there's an orchestrated campaign set up by the greens as a whole... The threat manifests itself very largely in that these organizations have cash at their disposal and are able to employ the right people, giving them immense lobbying power. At the same time they have little or no regard for the science around fishing, tending to cherry-pick what suits their aims and ignoring findings that don't." (BATES, Q., personal communication. 26 October 2008)

7.0 Getting Organized

The first thing to address in meeting the communication challenges that face the fishing industry concerns funding. As things stand, any organization representing this small industry would have far from sufficient means to match those of well-funded pressure groups (BATES, Q., personal communication. 26 October 2008; STOLPE, N., personal communication. 20 October 2008). However, the financial side of the playing field could be leveled to an extent through appropriately coordinated efforts to mobilize the industry.

7.1 Coherence

Corporate communication and public relations academics and practitioners agree that perceived credibility is crucial for any organization seeking long-term success. By extension, it may be argued that coherence—whether in terms of an organization's communication objectives or the resulting public image—forms an integral part of the process of achieving trustworthiness and managing stakeholder trust, which in turn is closely linked to reputation and image credibility (Argenti 2003).

In this particular case, the process would begin with rallying the industry to its common cause, after which a thorough situation analysis should be conducted, followed by careful strategic planning and programming.

Considering the potential impact and significance of the process for the industry, stakeholder management could be a viable tool, not only to ensure that the crucial element of internal communication is addressed properly but to get priorities right with regard to e.g. urgency, power, and legitimacy (Rawlins 2006).

7.2 Research, Analysis, Planning, Programming

Any serious approach to the challenge discussed in this report will place great emphasis on research, e.g. using the four-step problem-solving process—defining the problem and the situation; planning and programming for effective response; implementing action plans and communication programs; evaluating programs (Cutlip 2006). An analysis of industry strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats—SWOT—could be combined with a look at relevant political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental factors—PESTEL.

Also known as RACE—research, action planning, communication, evaluation—the 4-step process has been expanded to a more detailed planning and programming tool, known as the 10-Step Strategic Communications Planning Matrix (Wilson and Ogden 2004). In this systematic approach, which could be of practical use for addressing the communication challenges of the fishing industry, the steps are specified as follows: background, situation analysis, core problem/opportunity, goal and objectives, key publics and messages, strategies and tactics, calendar, budget, communication confirmation, and evaluation criteria and tools.

Establishing the threat picture will involve analyses of both external and internal environments as well as assessments of public opinion on subjects of major relevance, considerations of the impact of public policies, in addition to looking at the agendas and plans of civil advocacy groups and activists (Deegan 2001).

At the planning and programming stage, it will be essential to define the industry's core values and common strategic aims as well as developing common positions on key issues, to be reflected or incorporated in organizational-level and intra-industrial communications.

7.3 Issues Management and Crisis Communication

Further to the point of issues management and crisis communication including the practice of anticipating risk issues and setting priorities: Regester and Larken (2008) stress the importance of identifying immediate and medium-term challenges from e.g. the legal environment or activism while considering contributing factors as well as anything else of significance that may influence the organization's ability to deal with the challenges presented. Likewise, setting up special task forces to deal with separate issues is referred to as another well-known tactic.

7.4 Dialogue and Negotiations

Entering into dialogue and negotiations with pressure groups is generally seen as one of the most effective ways of responding to direct action threats such as boycotts (Deegan 2001). The measures should be well-prepared and preferably taken as early as possible, as the aim will usually be to achieve cancellation of direct action and meaningful improvement of relations.

7.5 Reputation Management

Doorley and Garcia (2007) highlight the growing importance of ethical standards and global corporate communications as major ingredients in reputation management, alongside media relations, new media,

employee communication, government relations, community relations, investor relations, integrated communication, issues management, crisis communication, and corporate responsibility.

Integral to reputation management and ethics, developing long-term relations with key stakeholders is clearly interrelated with the other aspects of public relations, which in this particular case is highly relevant—making the case for the holistic approach to communications.

8.0 Recommendations

For a comprehensive program to address some of the most pressing communication needs of the fishing industry, the following is recommended:

- Create a communication platform for the industry, focusing sharply on issues of shared interest to
 - Conduct a thorough situation analysis and strategic planning, i.e.:
 - Outline the threat picture—public opinion and policies, advocacy agendas and plans;
 - Assess industry situation and image credibility;
 - Define core values, positions on key issues, strategic aims, communication objectives;
 - Establish effective systems of internal and intra-industry communication;
- Set up permanent public relations and public affairs functions to
 - Communicate values, positions, reason for being;
 - Lobby policymakers professionally;
 - Engage scientific and popular debate on fisheries management, and
 - Disprove assumptive fallacies found in fisheries science and management;
 - Evaluate strategies and tactics on a continuous basis;
- Devise effective response programs to address urgent needs, using
 - Issues management and crisis communication, including:
 - Dialogue and negotiations with pressure groups;
 - Contingency planning to anticipate future problems;
- Apply reputation management to restore public trust and develop strong relationships with
 - Government interests;
 - Fisheries science;
 - Conservationists;
 - The media.

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