

How the industry can move past rhetoric to take on climate change

While major agencies and holding companies have floundered in their response to climate activists, a concerted communication strategy around carbon pricing could turn things around, says independent communications consultant Paul Mottram.

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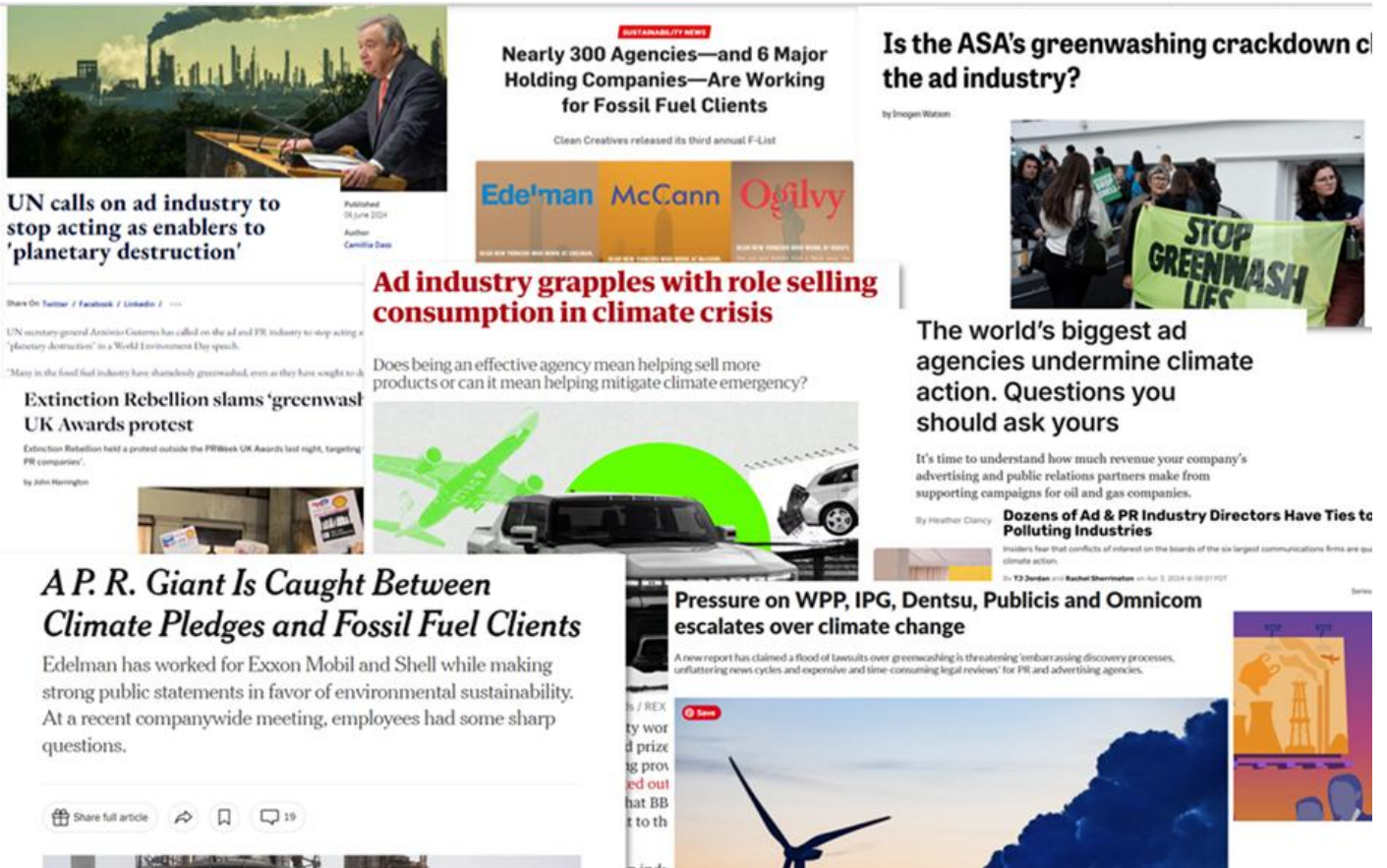


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From a public pasting from the UN Secretary General to the annual F-List published by Clean Creatives, agencies of all kinds continue to have their collective arses handed to them on climate change. Why is it that we communications experts haven't come up with a better response than variations on "the right to a fair hearing"?

There is, of course, no simple answer to that challenge. The climate crisis is a systemic problem which demands systemic solutions. Boycotting oil companies is not going to change the world's demand for affordable and convenient energy. However, we as an industry must do better.

One approach is to focus on doing what we do in a more responsible way. At least three interesting organisations are doing different versions of just that.



In the US, the Potential Energy Coalition is creating groundbreaking, data-informed work on the sort of communication that can make people think and act differently about climate change. The Conscious Advertising Network, meanwhile, does an excellent job of setting standards for both marketers and media platforms in addressing climate issues, among others. And in the UK, Purpose Disruptors is ambitiously attempting to redefine how the advertising industry can be more accountable to the needs of the planet.

These initiatives are focused on making what advertising and PR people do either better, or for better clients, and that is good. But let's face it: more responsible marketing isn't going to solve the climate problem. At best, it will minimise the harm that our industry does.

Instead, what if the core of what we do—getting people to think, feel and act differently—could be used to directly make a difference in addressing the cause of the problem? There is one powerful and proven solution to climate change that arguably has everything going for it but seldom gets talked about in the mainstream: carbon pricing. Getting that one idea into the public domain could have a greater impact than every brand's net-zero commitment combined.

Carbon pricing: The one thing that accelerates everything else

Increasing the cost of carbon pollution via taxes or cap-and-trade systems so that it reflects the true impact of pollution can affect billions of consumer and business decisions every day, in favour of carbon-free or less carbon-intensive alternatives. It can raise billions of dollars that can be redistributed back to consumers to give them the freedom to make their own decisions or used to fund energy transitions in lower income economies. And it will further promote private investment in renewables, carbon removal, and other technologies. As one climate journalist has put it, when it comes to climate solutions, it's the one thing that accelerates everything else.

The only thing it lacks is the mainstream public awareness and acceptance needed to become adopted widely enough to be effective. Why isn't it already better known? There are a few reasons. One is that it's complicated. The second is that it increases prices across the economy (although those costs can be compensated for with dividend payments to citizens). And a third is that unlike renewables or voluntary carbon markets, few organisations beyond economists, academics and NGOs have an immediate commercial motive to argue the case.

But that's where we come in: our industry is great at simplifying ideas, getting value propositions across, and just getting stuff talked about. Amazingly, one of the things that the world needs most could just depend on the one thing that we, as an industry, do best.

We cannot expect to directly cause public policy change on a global scale. But that's okay. If we can work together to nudge carbon pricing into the mainstream agenda and have its pros and cons discussed as much as other more heavily hyped but less effective solutions, we will at last be contributing meaningful, positive progress.

For sure, it is not easy being clean. Agency statements on climate change and client portfolios are already under intense scrutiny. That will not go away: even if the wind has changed in Washington, agency employees won't let their leadership off the hook so easily.

Frankly, our industry's response to date has been less than effective. But the problem is not that some in our industry choose to work for fossil fuel companies. The problem is that we are not—with the exception of a few, small scale initiatives—doing anything else substantial or impactful.

Promoting public awareness for a higher price on carbon can play an incredibly powerful, central role. And by putting our talent and resources to work for this cause, we have a chance to reclaim the narrative from those whose vain hope is to try to simply cancel fossil fuels. And in so doing, give a clear answer to our employees, stakeholders and families about how we are playing a meaningful role in the fight against climate change.



Paul Mottram is an independent communications consultant and was until recently the APAC regional president at Zeno Group. Source: Campaign Asia