

A Tissue Issue – When Good is not Green Enough

MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

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The Decisions Made by the Organisations

On August 5, 2009, Kimberly-Clark Corporation and Greenpeace International held a joint press conference in Washington DC, where the company announced it would source forty percent of its paper fiber from recycled content or other sustainable sources – seventy-one percent increase from 2007 levels (Greenpeace, 2015). The demand created by Kimberly-Clark for sustainably logged fiber was greater than the supply, enabling the company to convince logging companies to change their practices. In return for this change in sourcing, Greenpeace proclaimed it would end its long-running public relations campaign, *Kleercut*, against the company (Kaufman, 2009). Additionally, at the joint news conference, both Kimberly-Clark and Greenpeace declared an historic agreement that ensures the greater protection and the sustainable management of Canada’s Boreal Forest and other ancient forests around the world. This agreement is also applied as a model for other forest-products companies worldwide (Greenpeace, 2015).

Although the case had been closed for many years, Kimberly-Clark still has twice-a-year meetings with Greenpeace to review their sustainability targets, to share their marketplace challenges, and to discuss their future innovations. In addition, Greenpeace has played an important role as a “sounding board” for Kimberly-Clark when the company wants to know how NGOs will react to their future announcements, or whether a potential supplier meets sustainability criteria (Schwartz, 2011). It turns out that the end of the hard-hitting campaign marks the beginning of the real work, the mutual collaboration between the large private company and the non-governmental organisation, as well as, the lessons learned from both sides.

Mutual trust is the first important lesson for both parties; it is required to turn years of conflict to collaboration. Things started changing when lead negotiators from both sides began to trust each other. Normally, campaigners have a doubt in companies and their spokespersons, as too often companies try to pass off greenwash for real change. Therefore, it is easy to understand why it may be difficult for those within companies to be comfortable trusting someone, who tarnish their brands for years. However, trust building has a natural momentum to it. At first, it seems risky for both parties. Then, when it turns out having the trust in each other is the right decision; it gets easier to do it again. That is why trust building has continued

between Kimberly-Clark and Greenpeace over the last five years. With transparency, clear communication, and acting in good faith, both sides can certainly benefit from this reciprocal cooperation (Skar, 2014).

Potential benefits gained can go far beyond expectation. The Kleercut campaign initially stemmed from concerns about Canadian Boreal forest. And, while Kimberly-Clark has had a positive effect on Boreal forest conservation since 2009, the effect of the new fiber-buying policy and the collaboration has had a much larger effect. It is not only the procurement for the product lines that has been affected. Kimberly-Clark and Greenpeace collaborate on issues of common interest; for instance, at the recent Forest Stewardship Council General Assembly the engagement of Kimberly-Clark helped Greenpeace craft and pass a motion to conserve Intact Forest Landscapes. This improves the world's most respected forest certification system and has positive effects on the forests far beyond the Kimberly-Clark supply chain (Skar, 2014).

Not everyone is a supporter; detractors can sometimes cause nuisance. Greenpeace is no stranger to controversy. The haters accuse Greenpeace of selling out to companies. "On the other side of the spectrum, anti-conservation ideologues erect absurd conspiracy theories that pit Greenpeace against jobs and freedom" (Skar, 2014). The announcement of the new Kimberly-Clark fiber buying policy in 2009 was no exception. Some environmentalists said Kimberly-Clark's plan was not good enough, and anti-conservation critics said Kimberly-Clark had made a big mistake. It had been observed that a company attacked against Greenpeace and Kimberly-Clark, skeptically seeking to boost its own sales on the back of the media attention on the mutual collaboration. Over time, the haters fell silent, as the benefits to forests and the bottom-line proved them wrong (Skar, 2014).

Slow and Steady wins the Race can be another lesson learned from the case. Some companies move quickly when struck by Greenpeace, but that was not the case with Kimberly-Clark. The Kleercut campaign was a long one, taking almost five years to settle and solve it. At times, some thought there might never be resolution to the campaign. After all, when Kimberly-Clark and Greenpeace finally did reach the agreement, the company's commitment to their new procurement policy may have been stronger than they may have otherwise been. Over the years, both media and stakeholders paid attention to the issues raised by the Greenpeace campaign - they reached millions of potential customers around the world. "Backtracking or pursuing the new commitments with something less than real ambition would doubtless backfire" (Skar, 2014). Additionally, the long period of the aggressive campaign meant that a lot of people in the company were affected. Those that experienced

conflict manners rather than collaborative ones with Greenpeace probably do not want to reiterate the hostile experience anytime soon. Hence, it is learned that lasting change sometimes requires a large investment, and though Greenpeace does not plan it this way, both sides are certainly pleased about the results.

Last but not least, *the end is the beginning of real work*. Unlike the haters, a lot of people are ready for good news. Therefore, when the conflict ends and the mutual collaboration begins, it is easy for the public to applaud and assume the problem has been fixed. Also, NGOs as Greenpeace often “find it easier to run advocacy campaigns than to resource long-term implementation work that creates real results on the ground” (Skar, 2014). While Greenpeace has invested in following through with Kimberly-Clark, there are plenty of things they might be able to do better; for example, it should not take five years to take a step back, celebrate what has been accomplished, and communicate that to the world. Similar to Kimberly-Clark, they can continue their key business without concerning whether their sustainability commitment is perceived as the greenwashing policy in the public’s eye; and with their new procurement policy, Kimberly-Clark can gain benefits from being the role model for other companies within the same industry, as they become the trend setter to offer the environmental-friendly products to consumers all over the world.