“Two-Way Communication: A Win-Win Model for Facing Activist Pressure: A Case Study on McDonalds and Unilever’s Responses to Greenpeace”

By Adrienne Cooper

Abstract

This thesis consists of two case studies which examine how Greenpeace, an independent global environmental campaigning organization, targeted major multinational corporations, McDonald’s and Unilever, in attempt to stop destructive agricultural processes in the developing world. This multiple case study examined how these corporations responded to activist pressure and offers prescriptive insight on how corporations can turn criticism in to an opportunity to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes when responding to activist pressure. These case studies will suggest that if public relations practitioners can create a dialogue with activists publics through two-way communication the profession of public relations can be a guiding force for creating more sustainable business practices, fostering corporate social and environmental responsibility, and creating positive social change.

This paper examined recent literature on changing attitudes toward environmental issues, the credibility of corporate sustainability, and symmetrical communication. By studying the use of two-way dialogue in the practice of corporate communications with environmental activist organizations, these case studies will help to test the real world validity of theoretical propositions about symmetrical communication (L. Grunig 1992). Rather than directing its campaigns toward Cargill and other agriculture suppliers, Greenpeace chose to focus their efforts on McDonald’s and Unilever, two large highly visible international corporations using their products. Both companies chose to work with Greenpeace, pressured their suppliers to change their environmental policies, and worked toward creating moratoriums to end deforestation.