



— PRCA PRACTICE GUIDES —



# COMMUNICATING SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES EFFECTIVELY



— BETSY REED —



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AND ENVIRONMENTAL  
ISSUES EFFECTIVELY

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# COMMUNICATING SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES EFFECTIVELY

**BETSY REED**

*International Sustainability Strategist*



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Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For my godchildren Elspeth, Archie and Léon, who will  
inherit the world that we create for them.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Betsy Reed** is a Sustainability Strategist and Engagement Expert. Her broad experience over the past 15+ years has included overseeing the design of Scotland's National Recycling Campaign, leading Nestle UK's public engagement work on sustainability, directing a national fair trade organization and working at Director level for a range of integrated communications agencies. She has run her own sustainability consultancy since 2013 and works as an independent strategic advisor around the world.

Born and raised in the US, Betsy has spent the majority of her career in the UK and Europe and has worked in the government, corporate, communications agency and NGO sectors. She brings that experience to her work with leaders and communications professionals, helping them understand and engage with complex social and environmental issues.

Betsy is regularly asked to speak, chair events and deliver trainings and workshops. She is known for an approach that is insightful, honest, humorous and strategic yet practical. She is a Member of the UK PRCA and a Fellow of the UK Royal Society of Arts (RSA), which brings together a global community of fellows to share creative ideas and innovation to solve pressing issues. She is also a B Leader, working with businesses to help them become certified B Corps which is a certification in recognition that businesses can be both good at business and good for the wider world. She holds an MSc in Nationalism Studies from the University of Edinburgh and is currently based in Barcelona, Spain.



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# FOREWORD

Public relations (PR) has always been about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you.

But only in the past few years have businesses, government and every other sector grasped the moral and commercial importance of operating ethically and contributing positively to society.

Consumers increasingly choose to engage with brands, whose values align with their own. They expect businesses to make positive contributions to society, and these increased expectations have placed brands under unprecedented scrutiny.

Furthermore, the rise of social media has placed a magnifying glass on corporate behavior. It is no longer possible for brands to make false claims about their social and environmental credentials without being held to account by their stakeholders. And yet these same digital channels provide brands with extraordinary opportunities to bring communities together and inspire positive change.

If we're honest – helping organizations communicate to their external stakeholders has long been the bread and butter of PR professionals. There has been a rapid evolution over the last few years in the reputation and business case for being able to communicate effectively about social and environmental issues. What was once the preserve of people

with the word “environment” or “sustainability” in their job titles is now increasingly a necessary skill for communications professionals - and leaders - in all sectors.

This new paradigm has given rise to things like purpose-driven communication, which brings its own risks in an age of high public expectation and increasing regulation on related issues, from carbon to equal pay. This has revolutionized the expectations of the stakeholders communicators need to reach, as well as pushed our sector to up its game in being able to do this effectively.

We strengthen relationships and shape narratives, but modern communicators must be equally responsible for influencing how the organization or client they work for operates. That means challenging leaders, employers and clients to do what is increasingly acknowledged as the right thing for society and the environment. It's not just business who are called upon to deliver this expectation either; all sectors are equal in this.

There's often an immense gap between how an organization discusses its values and beliefs, and how it operates in the real world. The job of communicators is now, increasingly, to reconcile the say-do gap, ensuring organizations in any sector place ethics at the heart of their operations. It's a core part of the duty of professional communicators.

Nowhere is this matter more pertinent than on issues relating to society and the environment.

There is a widely held belief that governments have collectively failed to deliver on issues such as climate change, and that the private sector – backed by the support of engaged consumers – is primed to take the lead on societal issues.

This is something our industry has to get right. Too many PR professionals still lack an understanding of the risks and opportunities associated with communicating social and environmental issues. This translates into lack of understanding

of when they're actually about to get it wrong – or already have – and means we can be those guilty of ourselves creating a say-do gap. So whether it's understanding the implications of greenwashing, or mapping the complex ecosystem of stakeholders concerned about the environment or about particular social issues, we must deliver the clarity that our audiences seek and expect. It's a great responsibility and it's time for our sector to ensure we all have the awareness and skills to deliver effective communications on these issues.

The risks and rewards of communicating with conviction on social and environmental issues have never been greater. We have a tremendous opportunity to make a positive impact on our sectors and on society, and I remain entirely convinced that we will seize this chance and that the Framework outlined in this book is an opportunity to help our sector to do precisely that.

Francis Ingham  
Director General, PRCA  
Chief Executive, ICCO

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