Timing Is Everything
Being viewed as a respected leader or an irresponsible corporation is as much about timing as anything else.

With real estate, it is all about location, location, location. With sustainable development and social responsibility, it is all about timing, timing, timing, to wit:

• What did this company know and when did it disclose this information?
• What have other companies done and when did this company employ similar industry practices?
• Does management consistently take a wait-and-see position and then react (or overreact) to an issue only after it can no longer be avoided?
• Does management anticipate future trends and get ahead of the curve through proactive steps?
• Does management attempt to delay the implementation of clearly needed new industry standards or regulations?
• Does the company’s corporate culture discourage the bringing forward of negative news or recommendations assumed to not be in keeping with upper management’s beliefs or wishes?

Closely related is a company’s speed to which it responds to changing external dynamics:

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• Does management actively encourage new approaches?
• Does the management seek contrary views and opinions by engaging in stakeholder dialogs?

Results Not Slogans
The answers to the preceding questions may determine, to a large extent, how a company is viewed by external stakeholders in the long term. The playing field is very dynamic, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and regulatory agencies are constantly accessing companies, not by the soothing words conveyed in their value statements, core beliefs, policies, and sustainability reports, but by progress meeting measurable and substantive commitments.

For some so-called sustainability leaders, their headline-grabbing actions can be quite trivial compared to the magnitude of their overall environmental footprint. For example, some major retailers promote mass consumerism via aggressive marketing and yet they are still viewed by the public and even NGOs as sustainability leaders. There appears to be a cognitive dissonance in the minds of executives who run multibillion-dollar sales and marketing programs encouraging people to consume more—a basic sustainability issue—and at the same time believe that utilizing something as minor as eco-friendly packaging makes the company a sustainability leader.

Yes, implementing a stream of relatively minor, but newly inspired actions has proven to be an effective and powerful way of improving the brand. Some companies have even claimed credit for the sustainability demands they place, not on themselves, but the requirements they dictate to their suppliers. Again, it may do relatively little to move the needle on the company's total environmental footprint. Every little bit helps, of course, but in the grand scheme of things projecting a leadership image based on minor actions is a risky undertaking. There is a delicate balance between demonstrating a real corporate commitment and putting forward greenwash.

Back to the timing issue. The concept of green marketing was cutting edge in the 1990s; today, it is institutionalized.

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the trucker who oiled roads and was at the center of the infamous Times Beach ecological disaster in the early 1970s. In retrospect, the Times Beach, Love Canal, and W.R. Grace contamination disasters were all avoidable. Forty years hence, some of the current, perfectly legal product, manufacturing, recycling, and disposal practices may be similarly viewed with 20/20 hindsight.

In his book, *Getting Green Done*,1 Auden Schendler explores some of the current challenges in convincing management that green is better today. It is one of the few books that clearly lays out the challenges of sustainability professionals in managing change. Far too much published literature is devoted to why green is good and why the science is compelling, but very little is written on how to work within organizations to affect change. How do you, for example, convince management to buy more expensive LED lighting when there are cheaper energy-saving fluorescent light bulbs?

Strategic and scenario planning are useful tools to examine timing and change. These are involved processes and there is insufficient space in this column to explore the various (and numerous) options available. But there are also very simple approaches. One of the most basic is to stop lecturing management and instead ask very pointed and well-structured questions to get management thinking of alternative approaches.

I am currently writing a book on the learnings from leading professionals in how to work within organizations to affect change. I’d be interested in your thoughts and case studies regarding approaches to take and those to avoid.

**Reference**


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**EPA Appoints A&WMA Members as Heads of Two Independent Science Advisory Committees**

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Lisa P. Jackson has appointed two engineers, both long-time members of the Association, to serve as chairs of two independent Federal Advisory Committees: the EPA Science Advisory Board (SAB) and the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC). Dr. David Allen, an internationally recognized engineer specializing in air quality will serve as the SAB Chair, and Dr. H. Christopher Frey, an environmental engineer expert in quantitative methods for dealing with variability and uncertainty, will serve as the CASAC Chair. They each will serve a two-year term.

“At EPA, using the best science available as we work to protect human health and the environment is critical. I’m honored to appoint Dr. David Allen and Dr. H. Christopher Frey, who will bring their expertise and unique talents to the helm of the SAB and CASAC, respectively, and help us ensure that science remains the backbone of all we do,” said EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson. “We’re grateful to Dr. Deborah Swackhamer, outgoing SAB chair, and Dr. Jonathan Samet, outgoing CASAC chair, for their dedicated service and leadership over the past four years.”

Dr. David Allen is the Gertz Regents Professor of Chemical Engineering and the Director of the Center for Energy and Environmental Resources at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. As Director of the Center for Energy and Environmental Resources at UT–Austin and as Director of the Air Quality Research Program of the State of Texas, he brings extensive leadership experience to the job.

Dr. H. Christopher Frey is Professor of Civil, Construction, and Environmental Engineering at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC. He directs a multidisciplinary research program in the broad area of environmental systems analysis, including development and demonstration of quantitative methods for risk assessment, technology evaluation, and air pollutant emissions. Dr. Frey is a past president of the Society for Risk Analysis.

The SAB (www.epa.gov/sab) and the CASAC (www.epa.gov/casac) are independently chartered Federal Advisory Committees composed of external scientists and engineers. The SAB provides advice to the EPA Administrator on the scientific and technical information being used or proposed as the basis for EPA decisions. The CASAC provides advice to the EPA Administrator on the technical bases for EPA’s standards for criteria air pollutants.