

**KOMMENTAR:****CLIMATE CHANGE AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATION:  
THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE US**

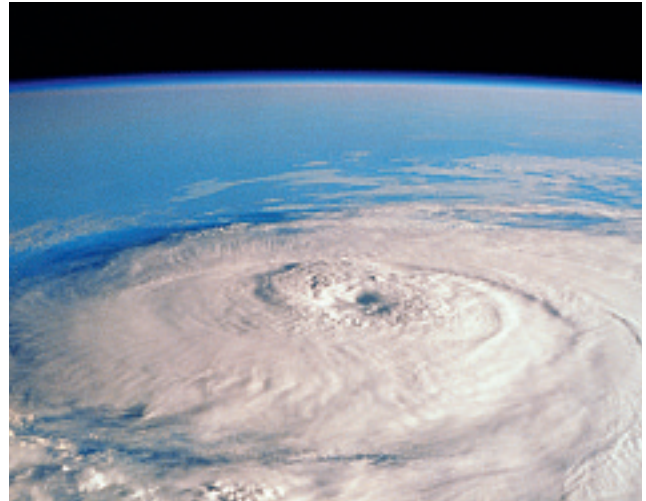
By Kevin Flowers, Director, Environmental Resources Management (ERM)

Driven by consumers and policy makers, global recognition of climate change has increased, putting companies under pressure to provide goods and services with low 'carbon footprints'. Unfortunately, the current US Administration and many international business leaders have been in denial. This has put US companies in an awkward position and created some interesting challenges for communications and PR executives in these companies.

The complexity of the climate change issue and how to manage it from a company perspective pose enormous communication challenges in their own right. Then, try to imagine charting and navigating a communication pathway for your company if it has no stated climate change policy, no clear climate change strategy and management framework, no greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction targets, and, most likely, still does not even have a good handle on the direct and indirect GHG emissions from its operations, products and services – its 'carbon footprint'. This is currently the situation faced by many US corporate communications executives, operating in a society of 'citizen media', 100 million blogs and some very attentive investment analysts. Greenwash does not go unnoticed for long.

To make matters even more interesting, the availability of cheap oil and low energy prices in the US for much of the last century has created an environment where many companies, products and services are woefully energy inefficient when compared to their European and Asian counterparts. So not only has being in denial left many US companies far behind in the game in terms of understanding the impact of climate change on their business and how to control it. The lack of any incentive to be energy efficient – at least until the recent hike in oil and gas prices – has left them facing a much bigger hill to climb than many of their competitors elsewhere around the globe.

Not all of the blame for this situation can be placed on the shoulders of US companies. In contrast to Europe, the lack of US consumer awareness and pressure related to climate change, combined with little regulatory impetus (e.g. no GHG emission trading schemes) from the federal government kept the issue off the radar of most US company boardrooms. There was little apparent business or compliance risk associated with the climate change issue.



Clearly, all of this is now beginning to change rapidly. So what are the communications officers of US companies to do? Well, first and foremost they need to work closely with their core senior management team to help ensure that the company builds a clear understanding of how climate change can affect it. This will require the company to calculate and manage its carbon footprint, get to grips with how changes in the climate might impact its operations and value chain (e.g. increased water scarcity, more frequent storms, etc.), and identify opportunities for gaining a competitive advantage.

Next, they must help clarify the company's climate change objectives, targets, strategy, and risk management framework, and ensure this is clearly communicated to key stakeholders – particularly the investment community. They must be careful to avoid the temptation of greenwash, making promises that might not or won't be kept, and, last but not least, they need to make sure that what the company says via its advertising campaigns, product labelling and information, website, annual reports and presentations by senior executives aligns with what the company is actually doing and intends to do with respect to reducing its carbon footprint. ■

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Kevin Flowers er direktør for Group Strategic Services hos Environmental Resources Management (ERM) i New York. Hans kommentar er personlig og afspejler ikke nødvendigvis ERM's officielle holdning.