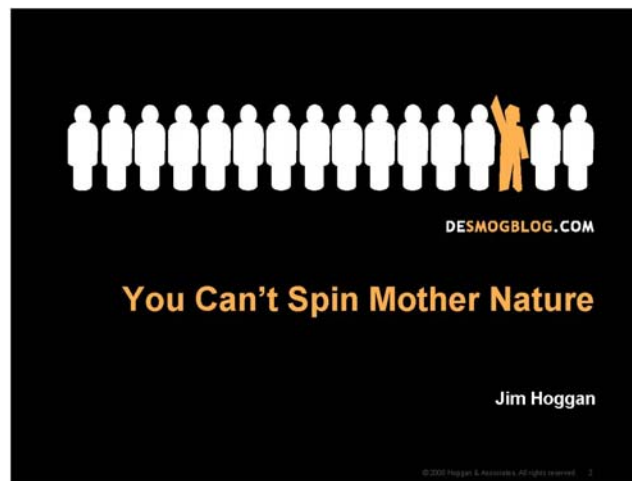


**You Can't Spin Mother Nature
James Hoggan**

**Diana and Charles Tisdall Lecture in Communications
Canadian Public Relations Society's
National Conference**

Edmonton, Alberta, June 14, 2007



Good afternoon. Thank you for that generous introduction.

Thanks also to the CPRS for the opportunity to deliver the Diana and Charles Tisdall Lecture in Communications.

Charles Tisdall's legacy is well known in our industry; and I think we all share his commitment to the values of understanding, ethics, accountability, and community goodwill. I am honoured to speak in that tradition.

I want to talk to you today about one of the most difficult public relations challenges I've ever come across. It's a classic case – a case where the clients took too long to recognize that they had a problem, and even now they may still be in denial.

It's classic because what looks like a crisis today, may well be an opportunity for change tomorrow. It's an appropriate case to raise today because the client is in the room: the client is us.

The public relations profession has a public relations problem. We have a serious credibility issue when it comes to the environment.

And that lack of credibility is undermining our ability to serve our employers. With that problem in mind, I plan to do three things today.

First, I'd like to share some research that shows the extent of our credibility problem. I think you'll find it as alarming as I did.

Second, I'd like to present a case study. An example of the kind of public relations practice that, I'll argue, has stained our reputation. And has made our clients look suspicious in the public eye.

Finally, I plan to propose a challenge – to set out what I think is a choice we all face. Are we going to continue business as usual? Or are we going to take advantage of our position and our influence to be agents of positive change – to make a better world?



I know how presumptuous that probably sounds – “to make a better world.” But I believe in my heart that we have an opportunity to do just that. Canadians are crying out for leadership on the environment – and we can provide that leadership.

We are not just public relations people: We are fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, some of us grandparents. We have a responsibility to provide that leadership.

But before we talk about leadership – let me tell you about our problem.

According to research that Angus Reid Strategies conducted early this year, the environment – the state of our earth – became the number one public issue in Canada late in 2005.

Within the broader category of the environment, the number one issue is climate change. In the Angus Reid survey, almost four out of five Canadians said they are convinced that our climate is changing and that human activity is making it worse.

When the pollsters then asked who was most credible when speaking about global warming, they found Canadians believe scientists and environmental organizations.



But look at the credibility ratings for the federal government, for corporations and for industry associations. Those are *our* clients, and they have almost no credibility on the most important issue of the day.

With this information in hand, I asked Angus Reid Strategies to add a couple questions about public relations to a more recent national survey. I wanted to know specifically what the public thinks about the PR industry's credibility on environmental communications.

We posed a two-part question. We asked: "Which of the following statements best represents your own opinion of the role and function performed by public relations experts?"

The choices were: "PR experts help the public better understand the environmental performance of companies by providing clear and accurate information."

And,

"PR experts help deceive the public by making the environmental performance of companies appear better than it really is."

Here's the quite horrifying result:



81 per cent of respondents said they thought we were helping our clients misrepresent their performance. That means, when it comes to the environment, 81 out of 100 Canadians think that we mislead people for a living.

That doesn't reflect the way I practice PR and it certainly doesn't do justice to the standard of public relations work I see from my friends and colleagues.

It leads me to ask: How could we have earned such a terrible reputation? Could it be related to the way that some of our colleagues play with public perception on issues ranging from tobacco to climate change?

This leads into my case study.

Before I go too far, though, I want to make it clear that I'm NOT suggesting that everyone who questions the science of climate change is part of a conspiracy of disinformation. But, I plan to demonstrate that it is no accident that many reasonable people are confused.

I plan to outline a well-orchestrated public relations campaign designed to cast doubt on the science of climate change.

Let me tell you first, though, about how I got involved in this issue.



About three years ago, I was thinking about adding a community service element to the James Hoggan & Associates website - and someone suggested a public information section on global warming. I liked the idea immediately.

I knew climate change was controversial – and I knew that in a controversy, people are inclined to oversell their position. I thought we could introduce an objective viewpoint. But when I started reading, I was surprised by what I discovered.

While I expected a serious scientific controversy, I found surprising scientific agreement. Let me read you a list of some of the organizations that had accepted the science of global warming.



The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the American Geophysical Union, the Royal Society, the Royal Society of Canada, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the American Meteorological Society, NASA.

All these scientific bodies agreed that humans are changing the climate in a dangerous way.

Six years ago the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – the IPCC – posted a certainty level of 66 per cent, this year the IPCC said the certainty level was 90 per cent. In fact, they said there is a 90+ per cent certainty that human activity is causing potentially dangerous climate change.



As I read more, I also noticed something else.

Some very skilled PR people were already hard at work in the field – but they weren't trying to "educate" the public. They were trying to confuse and they were doing a terrific job. The more I learned, the angrier I got. And when I talked about this with friends, they got angry too. My friend John Lefebvre was so concerned that he offered to finance the DeSmogBlog – a climate change website that we created to call attention to what we think of as the "PR pollution that clouds climate science."

What about that science? What are the facts of climate change? Well, I'm not a scientist. But I've enjoyed a personal briefing from four lead authors of the last IPCC report, so if you'll bear with me, I'd like to share a quick overview. I think it's important for the context of my talk.

We begin with our big, round earth, encircled by a thin layer of atmosphere, including an important component of greenhouse gases.



Those gases form a warming blanket, without which the sun's energy would bounce back into space as quickly as it arrived. Earth would be frozen solid from pole to pole. One of the most important greenhouse gases is CO₂, *carbon* dioxide.

Carbon is the building block of all life on earth. So every dinosaur, every fish – every leaf and flower that ever lived – has, in some way, drawn from the earth's supply of carbon dioxide. When those animals or plants fell dead into the swamp or drifted lifeless to the bottom of the ocean, that carbon was then sequestered – stored in the earth itself.

In the last 200 years, we have turned the process around. We have been digging up the dinosaurs – long since transformed to oil, coal or natural gas – and we have been setting them on fire.

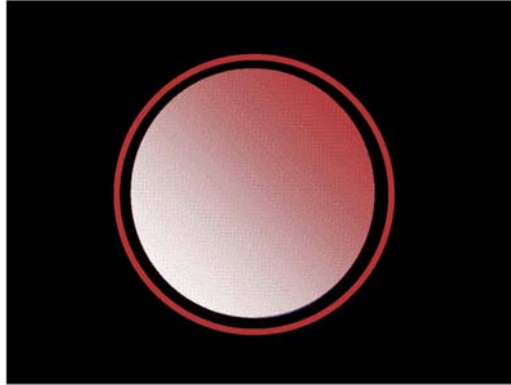


I don't have to explain to anyone in Alberta the upside of that process. It's built a strong economy and provided a huge number of jobs for Canadians. But while we have been enriching the developed world with a supply of energy, we have also been broadcasting CO2 back into the atmosphere through everything from coal-fired electricity plants ...



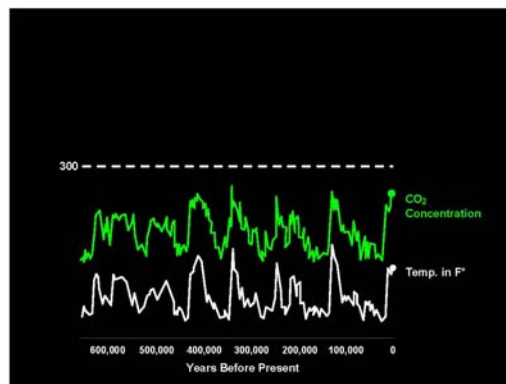
... to traffic jams.





The result is a CO₂ blanket so thick that it's trapping more and more of the sun's radiant energy. We are overheating the planet.

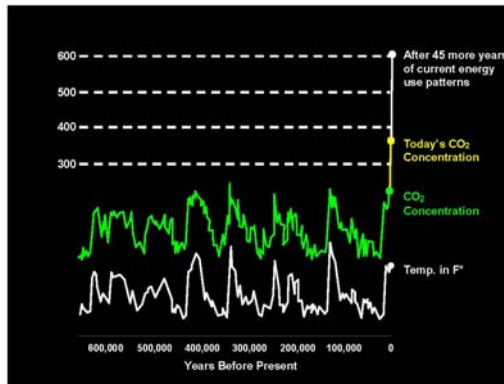
Take a look at this graph.



Here's a record, taken from Antarctic ice cores, of CO₂ in the atmosphere over the past 600,000 years. And here is a record of average global temperatures over the same period. You'll notice a similarity.

You'll also notice that the concentration of CO₂ hasn't risen above 300 parts per million during the whole time. Now look at this. This is what has happened to CO₂ since the industrial revolution.

And this is where we're headed in the next 45 years if we don't reduce our greenhouse gas emissions dramatically.



Many detractors have said lately that climate change is natural – that the climate is changing all the time. And they’re right. But, clearly, this rate of change is not natural. This is faster than anything that has occurred during the 100,000-plus years that humans have lived on earth. The Antarctic ice cores show that it’s faster than anything in the last 650,000 years.

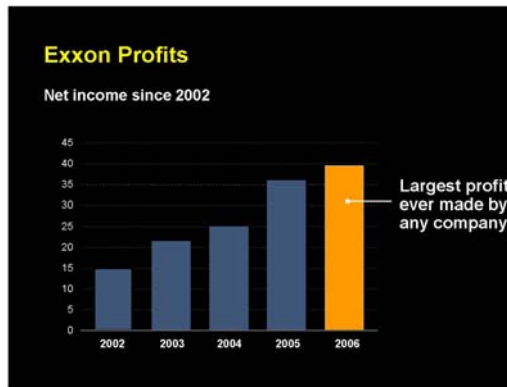
This is new territory. This shows a change so rapid that scientists fear it may overwhelm our ability to adapt. These CO2 concentrations point to potentially catastrophic human-induced climate change.

So, the best scientists in the world have identified a problem. We know the climate is changing, we know how and we know why.

The question, then, is this: who doesn’t know? Well, ExxonMobil is still confused.



Of course, if you were in Exxon, you might cling to doubt, too.



Last year, for the second year in a row, Exxon posted a bigger profit than any company in the history of companies – almost \$40 billion.

Those are high stakes; compelling motivation to challenge accepted climate change science. Exxon isn't alone. There are other climate science quibblers in the energy industry.

And the auto industry is confused, as well – campaigning and litigating against climate change regulation even while spending billions in advertising concentrated on its most profitable and most environmentally damaging models.

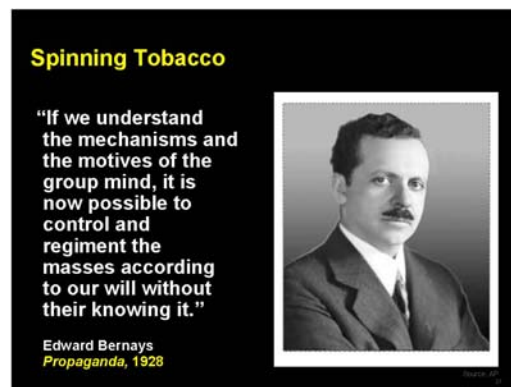


We have these conflicting realities. We have an environmental crisis and we have a group of industries that don't want to know about it – and don't want us to know about it, either.

That's where the questionable PR begins – or where it began 80 or 90 years ago, although with a different industry.

You may recognize the name of the “father of public relations:” Edward Bernays. He was Sigmund Freud’s nephew. Bernays is the person who coined the term “engineering consent.” Depending on your perspective, he was either a great strategist or the original dirty trickster.

Take a look at this quote:



Bernays came up with some harmless stunts: he organized the first known political pancake breakfast. But he was also the brains behind some questionable innovations. For instance, he organized the Torches of Liberty parade in Manhattan in 1929, assembling a crowd of young women who took to the street smoking Lucky Strikes.

Bernays sold it as a march for women’s rights, but it was the American Tobacco Company that paid the bill – and got the benefit when women felt “liberated” enough to start smoking in public.

Big tobacco wrote the book on manipulative PR. They started by giving cigarettes to soldiers and paying stars to smoke on screen.

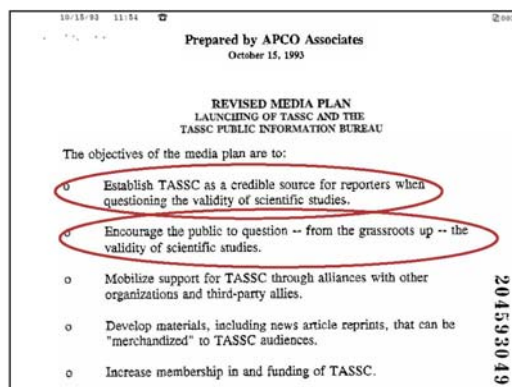
But the parades and publicity stunts became more reprehensible as we learned more about the dangers of smoking.



I believe that Philip Morris really crossed the line in the early 1990s with a PR campaign organized by APCO-Worldwide. Those were hard times for tobacco. Americans were quitting in large numbers – and American governments were starting to restrict smoking in public places because of the dangers of second-hand smoke.

By then, Philip Morris knew that people weren't going to be fooled again by tobacco "experts" vouching for the safety of their product. But the APCO PR people thought the public *might* believe a group of "independent" scientists.

So, in 1993, the company proposed the formation of "a grassroots organization" called The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition, TASSC. Take a look at the original APCO memo setting out the TASSC media strategy to manipulate public opinion:



Look especially at the first two objectives:

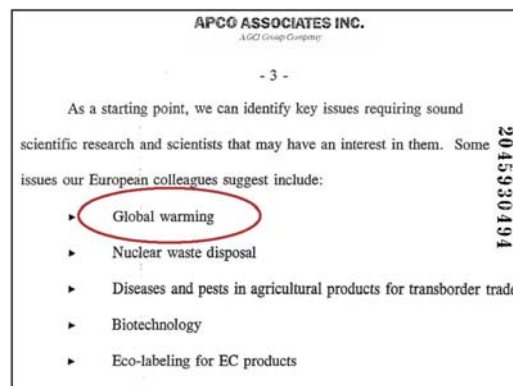
- Establish TASSC as a credible source for reporters when questioning the validity of scientific studies.
- Encourage the public to question – from the grassroots up – the validity of scientific studies.

APCO also realized how obvious this would look if Philip Morris was TASSC's only client. So they sent out recruitment letters to 20,000 businesses inviting them to join a fight for “sound science.”

Through this gesture, and through years of related campaigning, Philip Morris, APCO and TASSC reframed several legitimate public health questions as debatable issues of “junk science” and free choice.

When APCO took TASSC to Europe, they created a list to “Link the tobacco issue with ... more ‘politically correct’ products.” Another original memo – shows a potential list of regulatory issues that corporations could denounce as “junk science.”

- Global Warming
- Nuclear waste disposal
- Biotechnology
- Food Processing and Packaging



We have these memos because of a landmark court case in which Philip Morris was ordered to make all related files available on the internet. You can Google “TASSC” and the “Tobacco Papers” and read the originals online.

If you do, you start recognizing names. People like Dr. S. Fred Singer and Dr. Fred Seitz keep popping up as “experts” who are willing to provide industry-friendly “scientific” opinions.

You also begin to notice a host of deceptive communications tactics.

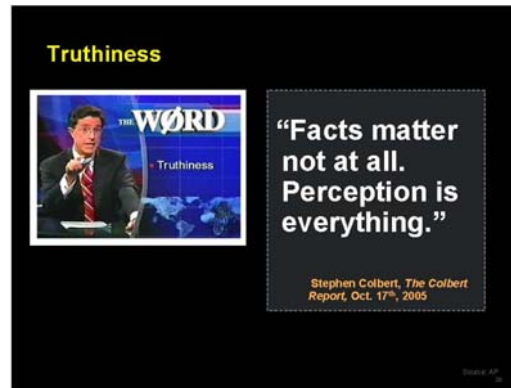
These techniques start with the same critical, ethical misstep – taking important social or environmental issues and defining them as “public relations problems” to be finessed rather than addressed.

And they cast critics as adversaries to be overcome rather than as stakeholders (or sometimes victims) whose views may be valid – perhaps even helpful. In the worst cases, they go to war with the public interest in favour of corporate profits.

I’d like to review four tactics that I think should *not* be in the portfolio of public relations practitioners: Ventriloquism, Truthiness, Astroturfing and Echo Chamber.

Ventriloquism is obvious: you pay an “independent scientist,” like the tobacco industry’s Fred Singer, to say something that wouldn’t be credible if you said it yourself.

Truthiness was coined by the comedian Stephen Colbert to describe things that sound true intuitively – things that you *feel* are true regardless of whether they are backed up by evidence or actual facts.



George Orwell called it “bellyfeel.”

An example is a quote from Tim Ball a self-styled Canadian climate change expert who often says: “Environment Canada can’t tell you what the weather’s going to be like next week; why would we believe them when they try to tell us what’s going to happen in 50 years?”

This is silly it confuses weather with climate. But it still has a ring of common sense, a ring of truthiness.

Another technique, related to ventriloquism, is Astroturfing ...



... the setting up of fake grassroots organizations.

TASSC – The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition – is the Astroturf granddaddy. And you can draw a line straight from TASSC to a Calgary-based clone called the Friends of Science – a pseudoscientific organization funded by the oil industry.

In 2002, APCO-Worldwide arranged a coming-out party for Friends of Science, complete with a list of eminent “science advisors.” Prominent on the list were former tobacco “experts” Fred Singer and Fred Seitz. Two guys who were willing to question the science of climate change just as they had questioned the health risks of smoking.

And after Friends of Science was exposed in a huge *Globe and Mail* feature last year many of the principals resurfaced in a new – anonymously funded – organization. It’s called the Natural Resources Stewardship Project and again dedicated to fighting climate change regulation.

A third questionable PR technique is called the Echo Chamber – in which you create a coalition of information sources and repeat dubious messages so often that they start to ring true.

Companies or political parties sometimes do this by recruiting friendly reporters to salt stories in the mainstream media. Others hire “independent” experts or fund think tanks that all arrive serendipitously at the same conclusions. Then they count on ideological media like Fox News and agenda-driven journalists to spread the word.

There’s a great example of Echo Chamber tactics in a book called *Heat*, written by *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot.

When Monbiot was researching climate change a couple of years ago, he found a letter by the former UK environmentalist David Bellamy in *New Scientist* magazine. Bellamy reported that “555 of all the 625 glaciers under observation by the World Glacier Monitoring Service in Zurich have been **growing** since 1980.”

This would be significant if it were true.

When Monbiot phoned the World Glacier Monitoring Service they said, indelicately, that the story was (and I quote): “complete bullshit.”

Glaciers are retreating around the world.



Monbiot chased all over in search of a source for this information. The claim appeared dozens of times in many different locations – but all trails led back to a website run by our tobacco expert – sorry, I mean, global warming expert, Dr. Fred Singer.

When people challenged Singer, he lashed out, saying Monbiot “has been smoking something or other.” But Singer later conceded that the information *had* originated on his site. He said it was posted there by a “former associate.”

Singer acknowledged that the information “appears to be incorrect and has been updated.” But 18 months later, it was still posted on his site, misleading people as it bounced around the internet – being picked up in speeches and mainstream media.

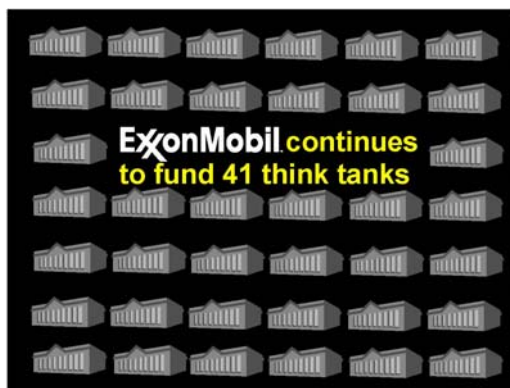
Singer also failed to mention that he has a personal relationship with the *former* associate: it was his wife, Candace Crandall.

Another great tool for generating echoes is the think tank. Here’s a short list of think tanks that question climate change, and the amount of money that ExxonMobil paid each of them in the last seven years.



Last year, London’s prestigious Royal Society asked Exxon to stop funding this think-tank war on science. Exxon later agreed announcing that it had cut off three think tanks, including the most prominent the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

The energy giant failed to mention that in 2006 it still gave \$2.1 million to 41 climate-change denying think tanks ...



... raising its 10-year investment in disinformation to \$23 million.

By the way, the website ExxonSecrets.org shows Fred Singer to be on the payroll of 15 of these organizations.

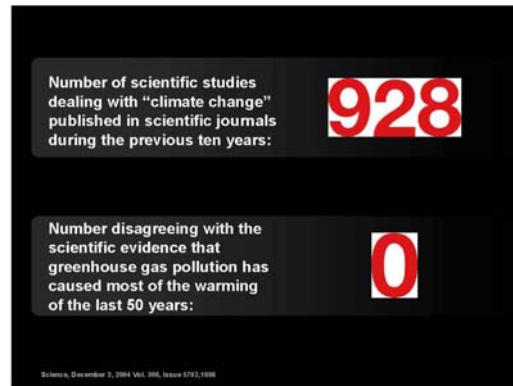
Now, I'd like to talk you a bit about media vulnerability about something that predisposes the media to abuse and manipulation.

Reporters who are too busy to gain expertise in every contentious issue often try to cover themselves by quoting "experts" on both sides. We all expect that reporters are weighing carefully the relative credibility, qualifications, experience and motivations of their chosen sources. But in this case, that expectation falls down.

Consider the climate change "debate" in the scientific literature where all articles must stand up to peer review. Peer review is a professional assessment of whether new material is based on clearly stated evidence and accepted scientific method.

Naomi Oreskes, a Professor of History and Scientific Studies at U.C. San Diego, randomly selected 928 climate change-related journal articles between 1993 and 2003. She found this relationship:

Not a single peer-reviewed journal article challenged the scientific consensus that human activity is causing climate change.



At the same time, researchers Boykoff and Boykoff looked at the “prestige press” the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* between 1998 and 2002. They found that in 53 per cent of the stories, reporters gave ink to one “expert” affirming that climate change is a problem and one “expert” denying it.



So the mainstream media was presenting a controversy that doesn't appear in science usually without mentioning when skeptical experts were unqualified or were associated with Exxon-funded think tanks.

I want to say one last thing about climate change.

The earth has just come through a long period of climatic stability 10,000 years of moderation during which species diversity has exploded. This has been the golden age of human civilization.

As the climate begins to change every model suggests that we will face unprecedented extremes events that will strain human populations and wipe out other species altogether.



Even without the melting of polar icecaps climate change gives you more water where you don't want it ...



.... and less water where you need it most.



So, this is not *just* a public relations problem.

It's not just a science debate or an economic issue. It's more than an ideological or political squabble. Climate change is an issue of human welfare.

If we act upon it if we, in this most privileged country, rise up and assume our responsibilities we have a chance of saving the earth as we now know it and saving millions of lives in the process.

I don't believe there's been a time in the history of PR when the discussion of ethics was more important. We in our industry the people in this room have a unique power to influence public opinion.

That power comes with a responsibility to do what's right.

And *that* must take into account our responsibility not only to our clients but also to our communities, our planet and our collective future.

Think about that in the context of what we all do every day.

As PR professionals, we communicate. We put people in touch with one another. We establish and protect reputations. We build relationships. We educate.

We help our clients become better understood and we assist them through the odd crisis in public confidence. In the best cases in my favourite cases we give advice that actually changes corporate behavior in a progressive and beneficial way. In the worst cases we buy into our clients' biases without doing the requisite research.

In the *very* worst cases some people use the kind of Jurassic public relations techniques I've been talking about today. And they do our reputation a terrible injury in the process.

There is a better way.

In 2003 our agency won the Silver Anvil for the best Crisis Communications Strategy in North America. We won that honour by following three rules; rules many of you also follow, even if you don't articulate them this way. If you want to establish – and keep – a good reputation, I have found that this is a good prescription.

The rules are these:

Number one: Do the right thing.

Number two: Be seen to be doing the right thing;

And number three: don't get 1 and 2 mixed up.



The premise here is that, ultimately, you get the reputation you deserve. If you want to be regarded as credible and reliable you need to do the right thing. But you also need to let everyone know about the right things you do.

You can't do one without the other. You can't just do the right thing and hope people will notice. And you can't pretend you're doing the right thing, or do something just because it *looks* right.

People recognize authenticity.

At least, they do in the long term. Philip Morris proved you can win with spin –for a little while.

But you can't spin Mother Nature.

Climate science isn't a troublesome piece of legislation that the government might change. With climate, the change is coming and if we stay on the sidelines denying or spinning it we will miss an important opportunity. And, I fear, we could destroy what's left of our professional reputation.

So, here's my challenge.

We, as public relations professionals, need to stand up and distance ourselves from these public relations practices that don't serve the public interest. We need to speak out calling unethical tactics for what they are. And we need to encourage our clients to act decisively and honorably.

In the long run, nobody wins – not the client, not the public and not the PR profession – if we try to spin our way out of responsible action. As professionals, we have privileged access to the executive offices and boardrooms of the country.

At critical times, we have an opportunity to give advice that could make a real difference in how Canadian industry conducts itself. It can be hard to give good advice to someone who doesn't want to hear it. It can be hard to walk away from a job when a client refuses to listen. But if we don't do this we risk putting ourselves out of business.

If we cannot recover our professional credibility then hiring a PR firm could soon be seen as a corporate liability.

So please think about this.

When you come back to hear the Tisdall lecture in 10 years, do you want to listen to a sad epitaph for a once noble calling.

Or would you like to hear about a profession that has matured from “spin doctors” to a more honorable group of communicators. Who like physicians respect the age-old rule: first, do no harm.

Charles Tisdall always said that our profession was all about relationships. About telling the truth and learning from success and failure. He also said that we should never forget that like journalists professional public relations people serve the public interest as much as their employers.

That truth has never been more timely – more urgent – than it is today.

Thank you.