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# Communicating with passion

**C**hemists not only need to be proud about what they do for a living, but they also need to be prepared to stand up and say so more loudly, writes Nick Andrews.

I'd like to introduce you to Karen. One Sunday morning, Karen got up very early – not something she would normally do – painted herself blue, donned a green wig and took the first train to London. Once she got there she joined thousands of similarly attired people in a march against government response to climate change. Karen, you see, feels passionately about this. She cares deeply, she has a cause and she doesn't care who knows about it.

On one level, Karen is not unusual. There are hundreds and thousands of Karens in the UK alone who are members of environmental NGOs and who will gather and march and petition. What is interesting, however, is that you don't find many of these people in industry, and certainly not marching for industry. And it also raises an interesting question which I have been putting to everyone I meet in the chemical industry: 'Are you proud of what you do? When someone asks you what you do for a living at a dinner party or down the pub, are you proud to say you work for the chemicals industry?'

The reason I ask this is because over the years I have had a large number of discussions with chemical industry executives who believe, rightly in my view, that their industry has an image or reputation problem and that its immense contribution to the general good is at best under-appreciated and at worst actively denied. This matters because reputation is a business asset and should be actively managed. Done properly, reputation creates value; done badly, value can be destroyed. Reputation is, however, hard to manage. Like an enormous sand dune, reputation is the sum of all the myriad grains of opinion and impression that

millions of people have of you. It can appear solid and it can exist for a long time, but equally if the winds all blow in one direction it can suddenly shift, often with calamitous effect.

Frustratingly for science-based industries, it also doesn't really matter whether what people believe they know about you is true. The fact that they think they know it, or even that they think other people know it, is enough. In a recent survey of European policy makers conducted on behalf of Cefic by Fleishman-Hillard, we found that over 80% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'there is a general feeling of mistrust around chemicals'. It is much harder for regulators and

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other influencers to support an industry that they believe is unpopular or mistrusted. This is a reputation problem and one that needs tackling.

So how best to do this? The first step is to be able to outline the position of the chemicals industry within a better future. The car industry has done this well. We all know that driving is bad for the environment, but because the car industry has shown us a future of pollution-free motoring – through electric cars, fuel cells and the like – we are comfortable in our cars. We know they are not there yet, but because we believe that the car industry is working tirelessly to deliver this future we are happy, for now, to put up with a polluting present. Equally, the aviation industry has committed to be carbon-neutral by 2050, a

better future which they can be seen to be striving towards, which frames their activity and which helps safeguard their reputation. It is interesting, therefore, to ask the question of the chemicals sector. What is their better future? More chemicals, less chemicals, different chemicals? How will it look, and why should people believe in it?

Armed with this, the second important step is to present it, confidently, consistently and communally, across the full spectrum of those who are interested in, or concerned about, what the industry does. With the rise of social media and the Internet this has become exponentially more complicated but also, in many ways, easier. The nature of communications has changed. It used to be extremely declamatory – advertising is shouting, and advertising-based communications is basically shouting in the hope that someone is listening. Now, however, communications is all about the conversation. Social media has created a million conversations, many of them are about you, or your company, or what your company is doing, and the conversations will take place whether you are in them or not. Taking part, therefore, is important and using this to explain and promote, challenge and defend, your own vision of the future is essential. It is also cheap and relatively easy as long as the time and commitment is there.

Which brings us back to the question of pride. There is a touching faith within science-based, empirical industries in the power of the fact – 'we need to get them to understand the facts' – but facts are only useful in so far as they support a compelling argument; and nothing is more compelling than belief. If the chemical industry wants to address its reputation, it needs to lay out a future in which others can believe, and do this passionately, over time. Are you proud of what you do? Prove it. ●