



MARKETING: THE INCREDIBLE FUTURE OF THE FOREST INDUSTRIES

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MARKETING

"THE INCREDIBLE FUTURE OF THE FOREST INDUSTRIES"

INTRODUCTION

There may be varying opinions in the community as to the competency of foresters and the forest industry to manage and utilise Australian forests. There can be no doubt about our capacity to market forestry and the forest industries, or our understanding of politics. Our marketing has been abysmal and we have been politically naïve.

In the not too distant past, most public forest agencies and forest companies provided nil, or negligible funding, to marketing the forest and the industry.

We also have had an incredibly hypocritical view of the training required for effective marketing. If a journalist or graduate in marketing was appointed as a mill manager or a district forester, there would be an outcry. But it has been common practice in forest managed agencies and forest industries to assume that foresters and mill managers can automatically become specialised practitioners of the science and art of marketing.

Until recently, our principal contribution to the political debate was to whinge about politicians and the political process.

THE POLITICS OF FORESTRY

Politicians don't rate highly in public popularity contests, but anybody who has worked with them regardless of their Party affiliation, would have to concede that they have an incredibly difficult job. It is easy to say that we should be able to do without politicians or, for that matter, the Westminster system of democracy. But proponents of that option should remember the words of a very distinguished British politician who made the observation that although the Westminster system of democracy wasn't that great, the alternative was a disaster.

There are occasions when politicians, because of their character, or more likely because of the particular situation at a particular time, can ignore the basic aphorism of politics which was expressed in plain English by the famous, speech impaired, Senator Patrick Kennelly -

"It's the the thennn it's it's the the num num num... bers that count".

If we are to understand politics, we must understand and sympathise with the fact that a politician without a seat is like a sawmiller without logs. Consequently it is unlikely that politicians or political parties will make the "right" decisions for the forest industries if it threatens their political survival.

It is pointless to throw up our hands in despair at politicians and grumble about the political process. The forest industries have to convince the majority of the community that the position taken by the forest industries is the right one. Then automatically the political problem is solved.

THE ABSURDITY FACTOR

You may believe that I have been too charitable about the political system that operates in this country. But I am concerned that some elements of the environmental debate in this country have "Orwelian" overtones.

In the last two to three decades, we have seen the growth of legitimate concern in the community about environmental issues. I share that concern. We also have seen over that period of time a positive response by industry, government agencies and politicians to that concern, but I believe that much more can be done.

Unfortunately, there has been a minority in the community who have exploited the broad community's concerns about the environment and used it to further their own political agenda. I do believe it's time that we stopped wasting money on these groups in an attempt to seek common ground. No matter how much we improve our management of the forest environment, no matter how much we seek to compromise, they will not be satisfied. Just as you never hire a dingo hunter to eradicate dingoes, so we should never expect the extreme zealots of the environmental movement to welcome a solution to environmental problems.

Unfortunately, some of our institutions, many of which are publicly funded, have been infiltrated by zealots. For example, I believe it is absurd that taxpayers' money should be used to fund organisations that publish details of how to sabotage forest operations by "spiking" trees.

It is sad, as well as absurd, that a few scientists in academia have abused their profession to mislead the community.

I also think it is absurd that we have publicly funded broadcast organisations who have allowed zealots to use them to push their own ideology.

It is important that in our response to these absurdities that we do not stoop to their tactics. These groups are losing because at the end of the day the community will reject dishonesty.

It would be counter-productive, dangerous and wrong to attempt to censor these people.

But it is important that whenever they appear these zealots are challenged. If they are not challenged, there is a danger that absurdities will become the norm.

A different marketing strategy is required to deal with the opponents of the forest industries whose objective is destruction of the forest industries and who use environmental issues to further their own political agenda.

CONVINCING THE BROAD COMMUNITY THAT YOU ARE LEGITIMATE

If politicians are going to make the "right decisions", then there must be a broad consensus in the community that the forest industries have a legitimate place as one of the users of forests and that they make a contribution to the total well-being of Australia. The broad community includes the genuine members of the conservation movement, who are part of that movement because they are concerned about the environment and who are not using this cause as a political power base.

The critical marketing problem - "The Abattoir"

It is important that we recognise that no matter how good and sensitive and how committed we are to preserving all forest values, and how scientifically based our management practices are, we start with an immense public relations problem - the scene of devastation that appears after virtually any timber harvesting operation. Butchers should have the same problem with selling meat, but fortunately for them, abattoirs are not readily available for public viewing.

If these scenes are linked to community concerns about human survival, habitat destruction, wilderness loss, waste and there is a whiff of large corporations and multinationals ...

"The time has come to protect the relatively small areas of wilderness left in the world for the sake of life and ultimately for the sake of man. So-called forest management refers to timber production and does not recognise the destruction of habitat."

... and then put all this into a catchy song ...

*"Rip, rip, woodchip - turn it into paper
Throw it in the bin, no news today
Nightmare, dreaming - can't you hear the screaming?
Chainsaw, eyesore - more decay."*

From *Rip Rip Woodchip* by John Williamson

As John Williamson has done ... and you have a marketing nightmare.

Striking the right chords

It's quite possible that some people at this conference, because of *Rip Rip Woodchip*, have less than warm feelings about John Williamson. If you are of this view, I don't share it. John Williamson is my favourite musician. I have never met John Williamson but anybody who can write music like this -

*"Galleries of pink galahs
Crystal nights with diamond stars
Apricots preserved in jars
That's my home."*

*Land of oceans in the sun
Purple hazes river gum
Breaks your heart when rain won't come
It breaks your heart."*

From *Galleries of pink galahs* by John Williamson

- can't be a bad bloke.

But it's not only John Williamson's music that appeals to me, I believe he is a great poet. The lyrics to John Williamson's songs do the same thing to me that the words of the great bush poets in past generations did to my father and grandfather.

But I also believe that *Rip Rip Woodchip* may have been an aberration. It is interesting to study the lyrics of some of John Williamson's songs. For example, listen to the words of the third stanza of *Galleries of Pink Galahs* -

*"It takes a harsh and cruel drought
To sort the weaker saplings out
It makes room for stronger trees
Maybe that's what life's about."*

From *Galleries of pink galahs* by John Williamson

If this is not a statement about the rationale for thinning hardwood forests, I don't know what is. It also recognises that trees die from natural causes ... the first step towards an understanding that forests are dynamic ... perhaps the most important concept that has to be marketed to the community.

But even in *Rip Rip Woodchip* John Williamson acknowledges, in contrast to some sections of the conservation movement who have declared that their ultimate goal is the total exclusion of timber harvesting from native forest, that the extraction of hardwood timber from native forest is a legitimate activity. In this stanza from that song -

*"Remember the axemen knew their timber
Cared about the way they brought it down
Crosscut, blackbutt, tallowwood and cedar
Build another bungalow - pioneer town."*

From *Rip Rip Woodchip* by John Williamson

... he is concerned that we care about our forests, but there is no objection to people cutting down trees and using timber.

In his song about Mt Isa he expresses views about "do-gooders" coming into the bush, which I am sure many people who work in the forest industries in country towns would be very sympathetic to -

*"Tonight's the night of the rodeo ball
Before riders and bull and horses stand tall
While out in the park some black people sprawl
And share their money on flagons
There's so much more to be understood
Before coming out here like Robin Hood
The do-gooders do more harm than good
Without really knowing the Isa."*

From *Back at the Isa* by John Williamson

John Williamson is very sympathetic to the economic well-being of those who live in the bush. In the fourth stanza of *Galleries of Pink Galahs*, he refers to the impact of drought in country towns -

*"Winter's come the hills are brown
Shops are closed the blinds are down
Everybody's leavin' town
They can't go on."*

It would be easy to substitute "drought" for closure of the hardwood industry because that would have the same effect as drought in dozens of small country towns throughout Australia.

And John Williamson's songs of course are a great testament to that great Australian characteristic, larrikinism. Listen to this chorus from *Mallee Boy* -

*"Where you can lose an ear on duck opening day
Where slickers bring their shot guns from miles away
And shoot the life out of shags and swans that fly their way
Where a bloke grows as stocky as a Mallee bull
Where they come from miles around to see the tractor pull
When the paddocks are clean and seed silos are full
And I don't mind at all if you call me a Mallee Boy"*

From *Mallee Boy* by John Williamson

There are larrikins in the pastoral and mining industries, but the forest industries are also well endowed with them.

Finally, I think the words in Williamson's famous song *True Blue* are particularly applicable to those who work in the forest industries -

*"Hey True Blue don't say you've gone
Say you've knocked off for a smoko and you'll be back
Later on
Hey True Blue. Hey True Blue
Give it to me straight face to face
Are you really disappearing just another dying race
Hey True Blue."*

*Chorus
True Blue is it me and you
Is it Mum and Dad is it a cockatoo
Is it standing by your mate when (s)he's in a fight
Or just vegemite
True Blue, I'm asking you."*

From *True Blue* by John Williamson

True Blue has particular relevance to some of the forest industry's political problems. For example, I do not believe that it is irrelevant to point out that John Curtin, arguably Australia's greatest Labor Prime Minister, once held the position of General Secretary of the Victorian Timber Workers' Union.

I haven't spent some time extolling the virtues of John Williamson's music because I am on a commission deal with his record company. It is useful to examine why John Williamson is so successful and perhaps see whether the forest industries can learn from his success in marketing their future.

John Williamson is not only successful because his music is beautiful or that his lyrics are poetry. I believe he also is successful because his music and words strike a chord with every Australian. He has expressed in words and music what is unique about Australia. It doesn't matter that the vast majority of Australians who respond to this live on the coast in capital cities and rarely, if ever, experience the great outback. They respond because it makes them proud about being an Australian.

I wouldn't be here if I could dissect and reproduce the chords that he strikes I would be writing Australian songs.

But the beauty of the bush, its resilience, the essential goodness of country people, their capacity to work hard, larrikinism, the dominance and harshness of nature, the hypocrisy of trendy city people who bludge on the country are some of the chords which strike an appeal to all Australians.

These same chords can be played by the forest industries.

TARGETING SOME SPECIFIC ISSUES

It's not enough to strike the right chords. The forest industries and forest managers must also address some key issues that are of legitimate concern, to the community.

Caring for and sharing forests

There is no future for the hardwood industry if you do not believe that all native forest values should be sustained and their use shared, that we achieve this goal in the forests and that the community believes that we are achieving it {Shea (1992)}.

Over the last few years, the community has developed a better understanding about the security of native forests. But even now there are significant numbers of people who equate timber harvesting or, for that matter, prescribed burning, with the total loss of native forest. (This is despite the fact that the area of native forest reserved, in Western Australia at least, is increasing).

In *Rip Rip Woodchip*, Williamson does acknowledge that timber harvesting is a legitimate use of native forest but expresses the view that we should care for forests like the old axemen "*cared about the way they brought it down*".

Caring for the forest is more than making it look good and it is difficult to make a post harvesting scene pretty. But a little attention to the visual aspects of harvesting operations could improve the aesthetics of the "abattoir" considerably.

It's important also that we share public native forests. In a previous paper to this conference (Shea 1992), I have foreshadowed the need to market this concept because of the danger that sharing the forest will mean that every user will go away unsatisfied because sharing means that no single use will be maximised. But sharing is a good Australian trait, particularly in hard times. Provided people understand what's involved I am sure they will respond to it.

Explaining the dynamic forest

It has been a very successful campaign which has convinced a large section of the community that you can freeze-frame a forest. Anybody who works in the forest knows that this is not true. "Old growth" forests aren't like old buildings. The only way to sustain an old growth forest is to ensure that there is a continual recruitment of forest in the old growth stage of development of younger trees to replace the old growth as it dies. Although the concept of the dynamic forest is second nature to foresters, we tend to forget how difficult it is to convey this concept to those who are not familiar with natural forest ecosystems.

We have attempted to address this problem by employing the skills of a graphic artist which has been incorporated into a video CALM has produced to explain its forest management strategies. (The video, or the graphic sequence illustrating the dynamic forest, is available subject to payment of a small charge to CALM).

Debunking fragility

Just about any program to do with conservation and national environment invariably begins with the words "This fragile ecosystem...".

Like all successful propaganda, it has an element of truth. Some ecosystems are fragile. But the simple fact is that our forests are incredibly resilient. We certainly need to ensure that the general community helps us to protect them from such agencies as wildfire. But there is a real danger that if the idea that forests are fragile gains root, nobody will be able to use them.

The biodiversity binge

The current buzz word is "biodiversity". Again like concepts such as fragility, in it's proper place, it is a very legitimate concept. But believe it or not the concept is not new. The great Jesuit poet Gerard M Hopkins, talked about it many decades ago - *"Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: deals out that being indoors each one dwells"*.

Some of the most difficult scenes to counteract in the forest debate are those that link the tree felled by the forest industry workman with the destruction and, by implication, eventual extinction of animals and plants.

The facts are that timber harvesting in a managed forest does not threaten plants or animals. In addition to addressing this misinformation, forest industries should also consider ways by which it can make a contribution to assisting conservation of animals and plants, which are suffering from the effect of other agencies like the introduced fox.

Marketing the products

There is genuine concern in the community that in addition to all this terrible damage the forest industries are doing to our forests, they also waste large amounts of the resource and the products they produce are of little value. It's important that the concept of integrated utilisation is marketed ("the steer") and that we publicise the very significant achievements that have been made in converting an increasing proportion of the hardwood resource into attractive value added products.

DELIVERING THE MESSAGES EFFECTIVELY

Dealing with the peak media

I believe it is very important to respond to media campaigns which are not based on fact and which are directed to attacking forest management practices. In the past we have too often adopted the strategy that it is better not to respond because it will only draw more attention to the program or the article. This strategy possibly would be successful if the incidence of such articles and programs was relatively low. The facts are, just about every day in my office I am faced with a story in the newspaper or in a program on radio or television which, if unanswered, would leave in the minds of the general community that something was wrong about our management practices. Over a period of time, if we ignore these adverse programs, we will establish in the community an unfavourable mind-set based on misconceptions which will be very difficult to change.

Direct marketing

While I strongly believe it is important to adopt a high profile in the public arena, all this will do is to ensure that we will keep our head above the water.

The true story about forest management is complex. You can't explain nutrient cycling in a 30 second grab on television. It is also inevitable that the media will tend to focus on bad news stories, rather than good news stories. Consequently the only way that the forest industries and forest managers can probably market their story is by direct marketing. It is the same tactic that politicians have used - that is why a door knocking campaign is an absolute prerequisite to electoral success.

I have never yet taken anybody to the southern forests of Western Australia, including some of our most ardent critics, and exposed them to people in the forest and who have not come away with a convert.

ALCOA is a company which I believe has had incredible success in marketing its story. Bauxite mining in native forests, particularly those which protect Western Australia's water supplies, could easily present a very difficult marketing problem. Yet ALCOA has been extremely successful in convincing a large proportion of the general community that they have a legitimate place in the jarrah forest of Western Australia. I can comment quite objectively because you can imagine as a forester I was not enthralled with the idea of an alumina company bowling over significant areas of jarrah forest in my own backyard. ALCOA has been successful because they have a good story, they are professional and have integrity, but most important of all, over a period of decades they have escorted thousands of West Australians through

their rehabilitated minesites. This direct marketing strategy has worked because they now have a significant number of people in the community who, through their own eyes and ears, have seen what is going on. These members of the community have been inoculated against the short, sharp shot of mining induced devastation in the jarrah forest on prime time television because they have knowledge which they gained through a personal experience.

The only problem with direct marketing is that doing it the ALCOA way costs a considerable amount of money. But the forest industries have a considerable number of people working for it as do forest management agencies. So if we empower the people who work with us with information about forests and the forest industries, we have a huge direct marketing capacity.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude on what I really should have started with. It is a basic aphorism of marketing that in the long term you can never successfully market a product that you don't believe in. The forest industries won't be able to successfully market their incredible future if the people who make up the forest industries don't believe they have a future.

But.....

Here is an industry which is based on a resource that is sustainable forever.

Here is an industry which can obtain its resource from native forests without damaging the forest or preventing forest use by other people.

Here is an industry that can obtain additional resource from trees grown on farms without affecting agricultural production, while at the same time reversing environmental degradation at no cost to the farmer or the community.

Here is an industry whose raw material is derived from the air and sunshine.

Here is an industry which is decentralised and has a huge capacity to make a major contribution to employing the next generation of Australians.

Here is an industry which has a product which is in demand throughout the world.

Here is an industry, which is one of the few in Australia, which has a comparative advantage.

Here is an industry which, if we get the settings right, by the end of the end of the first decade of the next next century could convert a current account deficit of nearly two billion dollars into an export surplus of more than five billion dollars.

It would be a tragedy if all this huge potential was lost because you didn't market properly. I use the word you advisedly because it gives me the opportunity to use John Williamson to conclude my presentation -

*"Hey True Blue can you bear the load
Will you tie it up with wire
Just to keep the show on the road
Hey True Blue*

*Now be fair dinkum is your heart still there
If they sell us out like sponge cake
Do you really care
Hey True Blue."*

From *True Blue* by John Williamson

REFERENCES

- Shea, S.R. (1992). Integration: The key to the future of the hardwood forest industries. Paper given to Forest Industries Machinery Exposition 1992 Conference.