

Learning communication lessons from GM, asbestos and other techno-disasters

The responsible development and use of new technologies, such as [nanotechnology](#), [synthetic biology](#), new biotechnology and genomics applications is the new CSR frontier says the think tank MATTER.

"Companies in areas as diverse as energy, cosmetics, food, coatings, medicines and chemicals are taking steps to learn the lessons of the past and consider the issues around the responsible development and use of these new technologies, particularly nanotechnologies." says Director Hilary Sutcliffe. "All companies, not just the leaders, will need to look at how they are developing, evaluating, communicating and engaging openly with their stakeholders to bring useful and safe products to market."

Learning the lessons of the past

Lessons from the introduction of other technologies, including genetic modification, nuclear power and food irradiation suggests that a more accountable, responsible and transparent approach is needed to develop appropriate products which have a positive social benefit and are safe for humans, animals and the environment.

Chris Woodcock, Managing Partner at business communications consultancy College Hill, a contributor to the think tank, said: *"In our experience, the simple rule is always to state the social benefit or aim first: for instance, population growth is forcing us to find new, sustainable and safe food sources. The public need to be treated as grown-ups and, although consultation still has a key place in communicating these new technologies, straight talking and clear rationales, in managing our less-than-perfect world challenges, are now much more acceptable."*

So what does the public actually want to know?

In the first of a three phase initiative MATTER conducted a literature review of 23 publications including public dialogues on a variety of technologies (see Appendix 1) to understand in more detail what the public wants to know, from companies in particular, to give them confidence in the use of such technologies and use this learning to explore in particular the communication around nanotechnologies in consumer products.

MATTER's Mike King, who conducted the study, explained: *"Though the question was rarely asked directly, the study identified that members of the public were excited but sceptical about the potential for new technologies, but to be confident about their use, they want companies and governments to show they have been used meaningfully and to communicate better about how and why they are used."* The key findings of this review are:

1. Openness about when a technology is being used - a 'no brainer'

- The fundamental starting point is that when nanotechnology is being used in the development of materials or products which are on the market, companies should be open about it and make that information easily accessible by their customers. Anything else appears secretive and suspicious.

MATTER reflections

- *This seems obvious but it is rarely made clear, except where the nano component is part of the branding, most often in ASIA but rarely, if ever, in Europe.*

- Though there are at least 350 products available using nano in Europe, (See this [Nano Consumer Products Inventory](#).) a snapshot of company websites by MATTER (available on request) indicates there is virtually nothing available on company websites or social reports on where & how they are currently being used.

- "This is the fundamental starting point for Responsible Innovation and though companies are nervous of being villified for the use of what is most likely to be a harmless and useful technology, it looks secretive and suspicious in the eyes of many.

Learning for companies - access to information as early as possible

- Companies using nano and other new technologies should ensure the public is able to access easy-to-understand information about where and how it is being used, particularly where products are available to buy. This could feature on the company website, in its social report or on third party sites like www.nanoandme.org (pilot site).

Learning for public policy - incentivise transparency

- Governments should use innovative means, including if necessary regulation, to incentivise companies to disclose their use of new technologies in products, but most importantly this must be meaningful and accessible to the public.

2. **A richer picture needed about benefit**

- The review showed real concerns about *why* new technologies are used. People worry that scientists are doing it just for their own purposes, to see if they can; or companies simply to find new ways to relieve them of their cash. However, there was almost universal support for even the most 'futuristic' technologies where products, particularly medicines & energy-related products, had a compelling social benefit.

- There is an expectation that companies will communicate a richer picture about this benefit. People want to know what problem is being solved, how it improves on existing solutions, that the use of the technology has been thought through in the round in terms of social or environmental benefit and risk and clarity on the detail of what is the benefit to them and/or to society.

MATTER reflections

- If it is mentioned at all, the standard approach is likely to be a sales message outlining what new benefit this brings - energy saved, fewer wrinkles, more bacteria killed etc. But particularly where a technology is perceived as new and scary much more detail is required on why and how this approach is necessary, it's use and the research which goes into proving its efficacy, its safety and its superiority over existing solutions and other approaches.

Learning for companies - robust 'benefit assessments'

- The development of 'benefit assessments' - like lifecycle risk assessments, would be a useful tool to help companies understand this and facilitate better communication with their stakeholders.

- It is likely that the engagement with a variety of stakeholders may be useful to understand the benefit in the round and this should be embedded at various stages in the development process.

- In terms of communicating benefit, Web based communications and media relations are likely to be the focus, with consumer hotlines also useful to answer specific questions and concerns.

Learning for public policy - incentivise socially beneficial use

- Government should incentivise the socially beneficial use of such technologies through the development of a more robust vision both for the use of these new technologies and the way they encourage collaboration in solutions based research and through their own significant purchasing power.
- They should support the development of benefit assessment processes and their deployment in more fully rounded approvals and licensing procedures. They may incentivise transparency and communication in this area through purchasing and award schemes etc.

3. *When it goes wrong, who carries the can?*

- Contrary to our expectation, concerns about risk and safety of individual products and 'ologies' did not appear to be top of mind. But trust in the system was.
- People want to know that *when* things go wrong, (not *if* - they are pragmatic!), someone is responsible, and liable, and has thought about how will it be put right. The public wants to be confident that someone, somewhere, is on the case to ensure that their products are safe for them to use and for the environment. The need for good regulation which is fit for purpose and it is complied with was the focus of this.
- Though they are surprised to know that in many cases detailed regulation may lag behind the introduction of products, the public then query what processes companies and governments have in place to prove that products are safe to put on the market in advance of appropriate regulation.

MATTER reflections

- What to do when regulation lags is essential to the successful use of these very new technologies. Transparency from companies is at the heart of delivering this confidence. It has been lacking so far in the use of nano in consumer products.
- Where there are naturally going to be uncertainties in the introduction of a new technology companies need to find ways of communicating that and demonstrating what is being done to plug any knowledge gaps.

Learning for companies - 'Show your workings' - be up-front about accountability

- Companies need to have robust risk assessment process and accountability mechanisms in place to understand and minimise risks and hazards and then they need to find effective ways to communicate about their approach to the public. This should focus on how they understand hazards and mitigate risks, the testing they do to ensure product safety and efficacy and the safeguards and accountability and liability in case things go wrong. They should be innovative about how they communicate and engage about this with all stakeholders.
- Companies should share their toxicology data on specific products through publicly available databases to demonstrate their commitment to safe practice to stakeholders and to add to the body of evidence on safety.
- Good communication and quality information across the supply chain is essential to this process working effectively to facilitate the necessary traceability. Both producers and suppliers should work to ensure the information provided enables quality information and reassurance for the public.
- Consideration must also be given to developing early warning procedures for potential problems and systems for mitigation and redress.

Learning for public policy - fund more innovative approaches to info sharing

- Governments must find or fund much better and more innovative ways to incentivise businesses and other research organisations to develop and share accountability mechanisms and toxicology data which is mindful of IP issues, whilst also providing useful information to add to the body of evidence about safety.
- Governments should also communicate much more effectively about their own approach to the development of effective regulation.
- Regulators should also ensure they use the web in particular to provide much better and more accessible information on the regulatory process, its status and interim arrangements.

4. *A desire for trustworthy and independent sources of reassurance*

- Information and communication from companies is important for reasons of transparency and to provide information on specific products, though perceived to be biased.
- Though there is a desire for direct communication people also know they do not necessarily have the time, the expertise or the motivation to understand these technologies or the complex products they enable; they want reassurance from independent and impartial sources about oversight of safety, veracity on claimed benefits, robustness of liability regimes and provision of information. In many dialogues the need for independent 'technology assessment' style bodies was raised.

MATTER reflections

- This also means these sources, such as independent research or assessment bodies, NGOs, Unions and others need to communicate more effectively, honestly and openly about the evidence from their own work in this area. One of the other 'lessons of GM' which is now being highlighted is the need for NGOs and others to base their campaigns and opinions on sound science in order to demonstrate their own responsibility and not mislead the public.

Learning for companies - support independent oversight

- Engaging with other stakeholder bodies and providing clear information, either confidentially or as part of their wider engagement is an important component of responsible technology development and building the trust of the public.

Learning for public policy - fund independent oversight bodies

- It is also in government's interest to have independent oversight and reassurance for stakeholders. However, small organisations do not often have the capacity to engage at the level of oversight which may be considered necessary. Building capacity in this area is of particular importance. A partnership between business, NGOs, and civil society to create and support independent fora undertaking technology assessment should be created. Creating new QUANGOs such as the Danish Board of Technology may be financially difficult, but it is important both in the UK and transnationally.

5. *Don't force it on us - it's about choice*

- Whilst there appears to be no consensus about communications or product labelling, much of the focus of public interest, where it is expressed, is about ensuring that those who wish to, can opt out of the use of the technology.
- If the perception is (which is increasingly the case) that it is being forced upon consumers, or 'smuggled in' to products without anyone knowing this will have a negative impact on the acceptance of the product and the technology as a whole.

- However, given the generally positive perceptions of the use of various technologies with genuine benefits noted in all the dialogues, it does appear likely that people will support or buy products if the benefit is clear and easy to understand and meaningful information is available from a variety of sources.
- This also allows customers to distinguish responsible and appropriate uses of technology with those where less rigorous assessment has been undertaken.

Learning for companies - communicate better and more honestly

- The right information, presented honestly and openly, demonstrates responsibility and helps build the confidence of the public. Product information, including labelling, is only part of the larger picture of how the public can access trustworthy information. Companies should engage openly with stakeholders and other bodies to look at innovative ways to communicate and engage.

Learning for public policy - be innovative about incentives

- Government should be innovative about the incentives and support it gives to companies and other bodies seeking to support the public choice in this area. Supporting public, private and civil society partnerships for technology assessment should be a major plank in the UK government's approach together with the promotion of international fora to support this approach.

6. Dialogue - how will the public know they are listened to?

- It is not clear whether because the question has not been asked, or whether the public is not particularly aware they have an option, but people generally appeared more interested in having access to the right sort of information to make their choice, rather than proposing they are involved in dialogue or 'co-creation' activities.
- However, those who had been involved in dialogues were keen for feedback on their involvement and to be kept informed of the impact of their views.

MATTER reflections

Learning for companies & governments-how has the engagement influenced your decisions?

- Rarely does the commissioning organisation explain the impact of the dialogue and how it has influenced their actions. This is fundamental to building trust in the system of governance around new technologies. If not, it is simply market research, in itself not a bad thing, but not what was promised to most dialogue participants.
- Bringing such outputs into multi-stakeholder fora for technology assessment would ensure greater accountability, responsibility and transparency.

Please join in the debate

If you would like to contribute to this discussion, we are running a DebateGraph, which is an on-line debating tool, at in which anyone can contribute perspectives, references or ideas to contribute to our final report. Please include your views anywhere on <http://debategraph.org/whatsfairtosharedebate>

The next phases of the project will be available in late July and September.

For further information, or to be kept abreast of our work in this area, please contact Hilary Sutcliffe or Mike King on +44 207 520 9086 or email hilary@matterforall.org

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Appendix 1

Please also refer to <http://debategraph.org/whatsfairtosharedebate> for the context and further information on the project. Please feel free to add to the DebateGraph to make further contribution to the project.

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