

The influencers are all around

Changes in the business-consumer relationship mean two-way dialogue is the only way forward

This time last year, in an essay written for *PR Week's Future of the PR Agency* supplement, my colleague Deborah Saw wrote: 'As we look forward to an uncertain future, public relations has a critical role to play but we, along with everyone else in business, have to recognise that the rules have changed – probably forever.'

What a year it has been. UK taxpayers are now the reluctant owners of 70 per cent of the Royal Bank of Scotland and 43 per cent of the Lloyds Banking Group. Our pension schemes are worth a third of what they were, and our houses...let's not think about that. But for those of us in jobs, our mortgage payments are a lot less than they were 12 months ago.

Do you remember how the pages of our newspapers were full of comment about the future of capitalism and what would have to change if we weren't to repeat the same mistakes again? The *FT* asked 50 of the world's most influential politicians, economists and business leaders to opine. But somehow that ferment of ideas has boiled down to pious posturing about bankers' bonuses.

Equity markets have revived and economic data signals suggest that the famed green shoots of recovery may have taken root. Is the right reaction to breathe a sigh of relief, tighten up regulation and carry on, albeit in a chastened but wiser way?

What happened to the debate about what sort of economy and society we want to have? President Obama's chief of staff, Rahm Emmanuel, got it right when he said 'you never want a serious crisis to go to waste' – but maybe the corporate world is doing just that?

Some companies have recognised that not only has the consumer changed, but so will business philosophy. Charlie Mayfield, chairman of the John Lewis Partnership, has articulated the case for more employee ownership of companies, highlighting that they generate not only sustainable economic



Views in brief

Give an example of how an enhanced corporate reputation has boosted sales/profits/another corporate objective

Over the past two years, Lloyds pharmacy's corporate reputation programme has been heavily focused on heart health. The business has set out to become a leading commentator on heart disease detection and prevention in order to enhance its reputation as a leading player in community health among stakeholders and consumers. Over this period, the number of cholesterol and heart checks performed in Lloyds pharmacy branches rose by 400 per cent.

growth but also greater accountability.

We all know that dialogue with stakeholders is the way forward. The old 'we talk, you listen' style of company communication is gone. Chevron's 'Will you join us?' campaign in the US is a good example of dialogue. It doesn't seek to avoid the difficult questions facing the energy industry, but asks the public to join the debate on a website with a moderated discussion board.

Not only do companies have to absorb the lessons of dialogue, they also

have to recognise that information about what they think and do is getting easier and easier to obtain. The rise of digital media has changed the way people form opinions and make decisions. The first stop before we buy is now the online review site. But it goes further. Digital media allow the individual specialist to become a mass communicator. One recent example is GoodGuide (www.goodguide.com), launched by University of California professor Dara O'Rourke. The website and iPhone app

allow consumers to enter a product's name and discover its health, environmental and social impacts.

The decline in newspaper readership shows people are losing interest in hard news. How can it be that *The Daily Telegraph*, which scored one of the biggest scoops of all time with details of MPs' expenses, has lost 11 per cent of its print readership over the past year (NRS)? Not only are newspapers undergoing radical rethinks of their print and digital offerings, but so are mainstream broadcasters. Companies have to change their prime focus from influencing the media, to identifying who the influencers are in every industry, interest group and community, and how they interact with one another.

This makes the job of the professional communicator much more complex, but it is also a huge opportunity for companies that don't stand on the sidelines.

Jonathan Flint is managing director, corporate, at Citigate Dewe Rogerson