

Substance or spin?

One of the most common criticisms of marketing or public relations work is that it is often hard to distinguish between what is fact and what is spin. Over time an increasingly sceptical public, subjected to so much hype and so many overblown claims by both politicians and corporations, is starting to turn off from mainstream media and distrust anything it hears from our business and political leaders.

This in itself is a problem. Those responsible for the steady stream of stories promoting themselves, their products or their policies need to think carefully about the ultimate effect of their work. Just as with Peter and the wolf, there is a growing danger that people won't listen when there really is something they need to hear.

A classic example of this is in the trend for companies to commission detailed research into a particular issue and then use the results to promote their own position. Quite a lot of this is purely promotional – for instance the recent survey by a firm of divorce lawyers claiming that a majority of married couples would separate if it weren't for the children or their finances. The research gets published, a company spokesperson goes on the radio and is quoted in the press and the company gets hours of free publicity and brand promotion. Nothing whatsoever is added to the sum of human knowledge.

Or take the endless stream of government pronouncements about health and modern lifestyles. If we were to take every such announcement at face value we would have to conclude that we were living impossibly sad, bad and destructive lives. We eat the worse diets, drink more, exercise less and are subjected to more violence and fear than any previous generation. We are depressed. Our children are unhappy. Our elderly people poorly treated.

And there is a grain of substance to each story. But how much – and how do we make a judgement as to which of these announcements we should take seriously?

An interesting example of the debate about substance and spin came forward last week with the announcement by Marks and Spencer that it was imposing a 5p charge on all sales of plastic bags.

On the one hand this sounds like an announcement with substance. Marks and Spencer isn't just proclaiming its environmental credentials. It is taking action.

On the other hand, as journalist and commentator Rod Liddle noted on Newsnight, the company's action is very small beer. They haven't banned plastic bags. And the decision costs the company nothing. What's more charging customers for plastic bags will have minimal impact on climate change and the environment so long as Marks – along with all our leading retailers – continues to

shrink-wrap everything it sells – including coconuts and cucumbers! It is the huge mountain of packaging that needs to be shrunk, not the wrapping.

So an example of promotional spin then? M&S jumping on the environmental band-wagon, claiming the headlines and not actually addressing the issue?

Perhaps – but perhaps not. For on this occasion there is some substance behind the story. M&S's approach to plastic bags is just one part of their Plan A, a series of environmental commitments that aim to make a difference – both to the way that they do business and to the environment. The plan commits them to becoming carbon neutral, sending no waste to landfill and increasing sustainable food sourcing by 2012.

All of which sounds very good and gives us an interesting dilemma to consider. If there is so much substance behind M&S's commitment to the environment, then why have they made so much of just one initiative, and one that probably makes the least real impact? The answer of course is all in the headlines. Some initiatives - however worthy - are far less likely to grab attention and boost the company's profile than other more eye-catching, but less substantive announcements.

If substance doesn't always grab the headlines, then how are we to manage the conflict between substance and spin? The answer has to be through a far more responsible line being taken by all involved. Those wishing to promote their companies need to take more care to ensure that what they are saying is backed up by real facts and commitment. And those responsible for writing newspapers and producing radio programmes and web-sites need to ensure that the public have the whole story, so that they can judge for themselves whether what they are hearing is worth paying attention to.

Richard Astle is Director of Athene Communications, a Peterborough based consultancy specialising in change and project communications.