

**"PR is like a kitchen carving knife: it can be used for creative cookery, or it can be used for murdering your wife."**

**Jonathan Wootliff, PR consultant**



PR involves taking the global view

One firm that appears to have found a place for corporate responsibility is Weber Shandwick. Its UK head of corporate responsibility and sustainability, Brendan May, has recently completed his second year at the firm, after five as chief executive of the Marine Stewardship Council.

May argues that PR corporate responsibility divisions will only work if they can advise clients on long-term strategies. He considers his role to be

acting as a broker – or “dating agency” – between companies and NGOs, advising them on how to make their partnerships work.

May says he has freedom to attract clients and run the division in his own way. And business is booming: having been brought in to work one day a week, May is now working full time.

He says his current role still enables him to be an advocate for ethical business. “It is easier to get to the decision makers – because they are the ones who usually hire PR,” he says.

Both May and Wootliff agree that for PR consultants to retain their corporate social responsibility consulting credibility, with other clients and client audiences, they must reserve the right to refuse work with recalcitrant companies.

Both agree that a responsible PR person should demand one condition from their client: that they have a willingness to engage, and are prepared to change as a result. ■

**Special Report:**

Corporate responsibility and public relations  
[www.ethicalcorp.com/content.asp?ContentID=3852](http://www.ethicalcorp.com/content.asp?ContentID=3852)

**Useful links:**

[www.webershandwick.com](http://www.webershandwick.com)  
[www.bm.com](http://www.bm.com)  
[www.spinwatch.org](http://www.spinwatch.org)

**Business-NGO partnerships**

## Battling system failures

**Bill Shireman, an activist who made little headway with the militant approach, now brokers successful partnerships between businesses and NGOs**

Bill Shireman of the Future 500, a US business/NGO partnership broker, is sometimes introduced as someone who “does stakeholder engagement between people who hate each other”.

Shireman spent his teens as an anti-urban-development activist in the US, graduating to battle nuclear power and oil companies on environmental issues. In his 20s Shireman began to become more solutions-focused, eventually fronting Californians Against Waste (CAW), a lobby group focusing on waste and recycling solutions.

CAW took on the entire bottling, brewing, wine and soft drink industry in California to try to cut waste, and promoted a recycling “Bottle Bill” for the state. CAW took on industry, “battled for 17 years and lost every time”, Shireman says. As head of the organisation, Shireman “became sick of losing” and began to seek meetings with the heads of brewing and soft drink firms to seek solutions.

**Engaged activism**

Shireman has worked with many chief executives, including Bill Coors of Coors brewing. With him, he discovered “a new approach, which has recycled 100 billion bottles to date”. The scheme was eventually expanded to other products, such as computers and tyres.

The partnership model demands innovation in the outlook of both business and non-governmental organisations, says Shireman, and CAW found that approach worked principally “because we focused on what united us rather than what separated us”.

Future 500 brings companies and NGOs and activist investors together to tackle a range of problems. These include GM, the Sierra Club, Mitsubishi and the Rainforest Action Network, and most recently Coca-Cola and social investment groups.

Shireman repeatedly returns to the theme of systemic problems that must be tackled collaboratively by governments, business and civil society to drive real social and environmental change. He is not alone: many modern thinkers, including respected management writer Peter Senge, have recently referred to the need to think harder about collaborative approaches to systemic global problems.

“If you demonise a company or group you never get to the root cause [of systemic problems],” Shireman says. He advocates three basic steps for companies that decide to get involved with such issues. First, measure performance. Second, engage stakeholders and to get a broader view of the world and the issues the company can improve on and make a difference to. Thirdly, he advocates leadership initiatives that aim to “get to the root of a systemic problem”. These might include buying sustainable technologies, such as bio-plastics, and engaging activist groups for advice on how sustainable production and market-place roll-out of new products might best be done. ■

**Useful links:**

[www.future500.org](http://www.future500.org)  
[www.coca-cola.com/citizenship](http://www.coca-cola.com/citizenship)