

# Facing contentious issues head-on may be best approach for industries under siege

Submitted by: BlueSky Public Relations Ltd

Tuesday, 25 October 2016

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Denial and resistance in the face of public pressure on industries is ineffective, according to Professor Robert David of Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University.

In many industries, contentious issues – such as pertaining to the environment, corporate governance, or social equity – can incite media attention and public pressure on organisations to change their behaviour.

David says: 'At first, organisations may react defensively when faced with public pressure. They tend to revert to established routines and procedures rather than new or exploratory search efforts to reduce the threat to their legitimacy, business operations and profitability. Yet denial and resistance are poor strategies compared to accommodative signals like acceptance of responsibility, admitting the problem exists and acting to remedy it.'

In a study of how the aviation industry responded to charges of environmental degradation, David and his co-author Jean-Baptiste Litrico of Queen's University, Kingston, found that public criticism was first met with denial and inaction. But a growing threat of external regulation, peer pressure from within the industry and sustained public attention led to a shift in attitudes.

David says: 'Climate change emissions and noise pollution spawned growing pressure to mitigate environmental impact. Aviation officials eventually realised that they were becoming pariahs for their perceived contribution to climate change. They realised that this pressure was garnering much public support and was unlikely to disappear, and so even airports aligned themselves with the masses asking airlines to do something.'

Organisations in contact with concerned audiences (in the way that airports and airlines are in contact with the public) often worry about becoming 'collateral damage' if the issue is not settled and so also seek action.

David says: 'The aviation industry eventually accepted that the issues of noise and emissions were not going to go away, and so must be brought into the industry's core. A commitment to reduce emissions by 50% by 2050 was made; a challenging target that the industry must now determine how to meet.'

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For more information, a copy of the study, or to speak to Professor David, contact Natalie Bishop at BlueSky PR on [natalie@bluesky-pr.com](mailto:natalie@bluesky-pr.com) or call +44 (0)1582 790 709.