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Greenpeace and tissue giant Kimberly-Clark: from enemies to allies

Erica Gies talks to directors from the NGO and the paper manufacturer about their frenemy stance, and how they learned to just 'take the call' with humor and honest communication

Erica Gies
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Kimberly-Clark's harvesting of old-growth forests, like this one in Ontario, put them at odds with Greenpeace. Photograph: Marshall Ikonography/Alamy

Ten years ago, Greenpeace launched "[Kleercut: wiping away ancient forests](#)", a campaign to draw attention to paper goods giant Kimberly-Clark's practice of felling ecologically important boreal forests in Canada. At the time, the company, which manufactures Kleenex, already had a sustainability strategy that included protecting some forest, sourcing pulp from sawmill waste, and engaging third-party certification. But Greenpeace, claiming that the devil was in the details, labeled the company a greenwasher.

It looked like a classic fight between an international mega-corporation and a hardline NGO. But in 2009, the two enemies made peace. Kimberly-Clark agreed to increase its use of recycled fiber, to use only Forest Stewardship Council certified wood, and to stop purchasing pulp from the 3m hectare Kenogami and Ogoki forests in northern Ontario that were the focus of Greenpeace's campaign.

While notable, the Greenpeace/Kimberly-Clark agreement is hardly unique. As transparency in business operations becomes increasingly common, a growing number

of corporations and NGOs are working together. I talked separately with Rolf Skar, Greenpeace's forests campaign director, and Peggy Ward, Kimberly-Clark's director of sustainability strategy, to learn how they turned their antagonistic dynamic into a partnership. Their comments have been edited for space and clarity.

Rolf, Cut and Run, a report that Greenpeace published in 2008, alleged that Kimberly-Clark's sustainability policy amounted to greenwashing. If Kimberly-Clark was already "talking the talk", how did you convince it to "walk the walk"?

That report talks about endangered forests that were still ending up in their tissue products. It's an absurdity to think that old growth should be wiped away for tissue products, and just about every consumer agrees with that point. It made it quite easy for us to attack their brands, their most valuable assets after their people.

Peggy, Kimberly-Clark already had a sustainability policy at the time of this campaign. How did it feel to have Greenpeace basically say that you were lying about your sustainability commitments?

We've always felt like we did things in a very responsible way. When Greenpeace launched the KleerCut campaign, we thought, "Who, us? We're already doing a lot in this area."

Rolf, Greenpeace and Kimberly-Clark were at a standoff for years. How did you get past that?

The breakthrough really happened because of trust. Scott Paul, the former forest campaign director at Greenpeace, and Drew Barfoot, the Kimberly-Clark vice president of environment, energy, safety, quality and sustainability, started talking off the record and translating what each side was trying to say to each other. I can't underscore this enough for companies. Are you wondering how to deal with NGOs? Have the right people in the room. If you send in your lead attorney or PR firm, odds are slim that trust will be built.

Peggy, how did you move from feeling unfairly attacked by Greenpeace to feeling like it was a useful partner that could help you achieve your sustainability goals?

It was fear of engagement initially. When you're attacked in that manner, your reactions can vary. At the time, we were not willing to listen – to really listen – to what they were trying to say. After we got over the hurt feelings, we did some self-reflection and thought: "We talk to many stakeholders. Why aren't we using this stakeholder in the same way?"

We learned that there were some things we could be doing to improve our performance and to further lead the industry. In general, Greenpeace gives pretty fair warning to companies [before launching campaigns]. My advice to other companies would be: don't ignore the fair warning. Take that phone call and just have the conversation.

Rolf, how long did it take you to shift from your vision of Kimberly-Clark as a villain to that of a partner? What did it take to accomplish that?

We pretty quickly exchanged stories about what it was like on both sides, about what we were thinking, and a lot of times it was different than what we thought the other side was thinking. Once we were able to laugh about some things, everyone was able to put their guard down. And to this day we can still joke about it. That sort of playfulness has allowed us to move on a bit.

Peggy, does Kimberly-Clark have relationships with other NGOs?

We have quite a few. It's a lot better, easier, and less stressful if you're in a positive working relationship. You hear viewpoints you probably wouldn't hear otherwise. And perceptions you had about organizations disappear because you're working with them and not against them.

For example, once we understand the culture that Greenpeace comes from, we could understand why they do what they do. They are very passionate about peaceful, active campaigning on environmental issues. Now we can have conversations that aren't guarded. We understand what they're looking for and they understand the kind of work we're doing. We're working on our goals together.

Rolf, Greenpeace has made a name for itself by calling out corporate harm to the environment. Surely, even when corporations become partners, they continue practices that are suboptimal in Greenpeace's eyes. How do you talk to them about these issues?

We're not taking a stance on whether Kimberly-Clark's business model is a good thing. But its global fiber-buying policy has meant good things for forests. Their marketplace clout is huge. It's about the signals they make to the marketplace.

We don't have permanent friends or enemies. The only thing we're loyal to is the cause. If Kimberly-Clark screws up tomorrow, we'll be right back at their throats. And they know that. The fact that they've survived in a cage with a wild animal for five years means more than some green stamp by another NGO.

Rolf, what advice would you give companies for interacting with NGOs?

First, engage with the NGO. A lot of companies get bad advice from PR firms and lawyers that they hire when they're in crisis mode. The "don't negotiate with terrorists advice" just makes things worse, and it looks bad.

Second, don't greenwash. Don't go into it thinking you're going to be able to adopt some sort of business-as-usual scenario with a new face. Consumers are really skeptical.

Third, realize that we're in an era of increased transparency. If you want to connect with people on Facebook and prominent social networks, you have to realize the world is moving toward transparency. You have to throw out past rules about what you do and don't say or share and rethink that playbook. The more you share, the more you take away people's skepticism. And the more ideas you get, the more a company can be a force for good.

Peggy, what advice would you give to companies that are challenged by NGOs and for NGOs that hope to win over companies?

If you can engage and talk and try to see the perspective of that group and what they're trying to tell you, it could really benefit you in the long run. Change is being made in many industries. And those who are first adopters and movers and engage and are acting as sustainability leaders are going to benefit the most.

For NGOs, try to understand the company and their culture and the best way to engage with them. Understand their priorities and what drives them. Acknowledge it if you believe that the company is trying to do well. And try to have a constructive dialogue and make it less antagonistic.

It's easy to say, and it's hard to do. But it's worth trying to do.

Erica Gies is an independent reporter who covers water and energy for The New York

Times, The Economist, Scientific American and other publications.

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