



# Journey to a New Kind of PR in Sweden

**An indication of the Swedish public's wariness of PR and lobbying is the long and difficult debate on regulating lobbyists**

**A number of clients have called on Weber Shandwick Sweden over the past year for help with crisis communications. One testing issue we have advised on is the size of CEO bonuses, for example. Although our clients are all different, they share the same expectations of us: to influence media coverage of their situation and lessen negative publicity.**

What senior business leaders must realise with situations like these is that communication can accomplish very little if you don't change your behaviour. This is particularly true in a small media market like ours. Sweden has few trend-setting media channels (two morning newspapers, two tabloids, one 'serious' private TV network and no challengers to public radio's news coverage). The room for dissenting voices is as a result quite limited.

Besides having a small media market, I would describe Sweden as a somewhat immature PR market. Compared to other disciplines, PR is still frowned upon by many journalists and politicians alike. As a matter of fact, in a recent poll 'PR consultant' was considered one of the least prestigious jobs, with only the military perceived as worse.

The concrete manifestations of these characteristics are easily seen in Sweden. For instance, it's very uncommon to see a consultant assisting a client directly in an interview situation. Additionally, it's also a regular procedure to coach a client before making a call to a political contact rather than making the call oneself for the client.

An indication of the Swedish public's wariness of PR and lobbying is the long and difficult debate on regulating lobbyists. Some opponents actually argue that a register of lobbyists would make lobbying more legitimate through public recognition – as if the right to put forward a reasoned case in a democracy were a bad thing!

The people of Sweden are noted for their great environmental awareness, trust in public authorities and the widespread belief that 'the Swedish model' (albeit somewhat tarnished in later years) is superior to the welfare system found in most countries.

Combined with the limited media landscape, this presents challenges and affects the way PR is conducted in Sweden.

Even though press clippings are – and for the foreseeable future will remain – the bread and butter of our business, accomplishing such a seemingly simple task as media coverage is proving to be ever more difficult today. With few traditional media channels and sceptical journalists, there is only so much space in which the vast number of interest groups and corporations can secure publicity for product and service launches and so forth.

In response, we recommend that clients move PR efforts from purely traditional media outreach to active participation in the surrounding society. If you have an executive bonus issue, you must address the matter at the company level before communicating and responding to the media about it. If you have a problem with climate impact,

you must do something about your emissions before trying to change media perceptions.

When your actions mimic your words, powerful communication can result. A good example is set by one of our clients, Max hamburger restaurants (a family owned business and the second largest hamburger chain in Sweden after McDonalds). In recent years, Max has raised its own climate awareness and taken a number of substantial steps towards sustainability, such as carbon offsetting and carbon labeling on all products on its menu. Max leadership has repeatedly taken part in the public debate, calling on other businesses to assume the same degree of responsibility and thereby to behave as good 'corporate citizens'.

One thing the Max example shows is how consumer PR can extend into public affairs and corporate communications.

The Max case is a prime example of how to brand a consumer service through public participation.

However, this entails a change in the relationships we have with our clients. Yet it is my firm belief that these new sorts of relationship are necessary in order to excel in PR in Sweden.

PR professionals still offer and perform well on the basics, but we have started a journey together with several of our clients where PR is closely knitted into their core businesses. For such clients, PR has become an integrated part of the business strategy, directed by the top management, rather than being a simple product that the marketing department buys off the shelf.