

GAME CHANGERS: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN DRIVING THE ENERGY TRANSITION



The underlying background to the Energy Game Changers community is that the current pace of the energy transition is far from fast enough for a net-zero energy system by 2050. We see from the DNV Global Outlook for 2023, which was launched in Paris 2 weeks before the panel, that global energy-related CO2 emissions in 2050 is forecast to be 46% lower than today, and by 2030, emissions are only 4% lower than they are today. Therefore, the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C is less likely than ever.

It is not easy to accelerate the energy transition as it's very complex. Energy professionals can have a crucial role in the solution. Society must be open to change, due to the lack of knowledge and cooperation there is overwhelming resistance. Communication professionals (including branding, marketing, public affairs, corporate communications, and journalists) can be crucial for change and play a role in getting the ball rolling with the transition.

There were similar Energy Game Changer panels and roundtables in 2022 bringing professionals together to discuss ideas e.g. sharing interesting and positive stories, communicate the benefits of the energy transition and focus on science-based rationale. There was more talk than action, so the focus of the 2023 discussions is to find concrete actions so we can take this agenda further together, as a community of energy communication professionals.

PANEL DISCUSSION

CHARGE BERLIN ON

OCTOBER 23, 2023

MODERATED BY

Caroline Kamerbeek, VP
Marketing, Communications &
Public Affairs for Energy Systems
at DNV

PANELISTS INCLUDED:

Nótt Thorberg, Director, Green
by Iceland
Joyce Lee, Head of Policy and
Projects, Global Wind Energy
Council (GWEC)
Catarina Barradas, Head of the
Brand Global Unit, EDP
Katja Metz, Team lead Global
Marketing Campaign, E.ON

The first panel question, directed at EDP and E.ON, asked how an energy company's branding and marketing function can do more for the energy transition and how, in turn, this can help the company. Katja Metz noted that the narrative and messaging can be simpler and clearer as the energy industry is complex. We as an energy industry still communicate from the outside in, which is a technical engineer perspective. Katja agreed with previous discussions that, the industry needs very clear, simple, and positive storytelling and narrative.

Catarina Barradas added that to build credibility and transparency, stories are told after the project. In EDP, the whole company are involved in sharing their projects, from engineers to the sustainability departments, so positive stories can be built around them. For example, EDP are closing their coal power plants. Street artists were invited to the communities where EDP are re-skilling and teaching new skills aligned with the energy transition. The artists chose pieces of the coal power plants and crafted them to make an underwater exhibition on the coastal area of Puerto Rico. This is the first underwater exhibition to tell stories of the challenges of the planet with pieces of the coal power plants. The art was chosen specifically not to harm the environment, and it will be a coral reef named 'EDP reef'. The art breaks language barriers to engage people in a different way, capturing emotions.

The next question to Joyce Lee brought the conversation to policy, by asking 'what can we do to motivate policymakers to take action?'. Joyce stated that resistance can come from community level, state authorities, sometimes even national authorities. But at the macro level, GWEC do see broad public support for renewable energy ramp up, countries submitting more renewable energy targets; an uptick of shareholder activism and climate legal action and more countries holding renewable energy auctions. However, the message is missing urgency and scale.

To meet the energy-related CO2 emissions, the wind industry, having just passed the one-terawatt milestone, needs to scale that up to 3.5 terawatts by 2030. Policymakers don't quite get the interventionism that is required to deliver this huge ramp up of wind and renewables. Instead, the way of thinking has been called 'cakeism', that they want cheap and fast renewable generation with minimal interruption to the incumbent system.

In the past 2 years economic security and energy security (given geopolitics) have been two levers that have accelerated legislation. Messaging may need to be confrontational with the use of aggressive language around what are the benefits of clean energy. In addition, we should be less shy about communicating stranded assets and market power risks of not moving fast enough. The energy system can be securitised through renewables.

Green by Iceland work with government, public sector and scientists, so Nótt Thorberg was asked 'how do you see those parties cooperate to accelerate the transition?'. Nótt likes to look at what unites all parties and the overarching theme of mankind's journey. We should move away from the technical jargon of things and humanise the discussion to achieve inclusion and engagement.

PANEL DISCUSSION

CHARGE BERLIN ON

OCTOBER 23, 2023

To the subject of leadership, the panel were asked ‘what does it mean for leaders to take the lead and how can communications professionals support them?’. The panel believed that any leader tackling the uncertainties that we’re facing needs to approach the work with a degree of vulnerability and sensitivity. And that’s being sensitive to global differences, the global north and south contexts, as well as the increasingly global nature of the transition.

EDP’s current CEO was previously in the CFO role. When Catarina’s team presented the rebrand strategy to meet goals and commitments to be all green by 2030 he said ‘let’s do it’. On the international stage he’s now an activist. The other quality that the panel want to see is optimism. Whether CEOs are prepared to message around overshoot, and to continue communicating that change is still possible is going to become increasingly important. Pessimism around the transition and what’s been called ‘climate nihilism’ is only going to increase as we get closer to 2030.

There are a lot of journalists who are very eager to convince everybody that we need to move faster, should energy professionals also work with journalists and politicians? Collaboration should be across all stakeholders, whether that’s the government, or the journalists playing important roles when it comes to sharing the stories. In the past, companies have shied away from the negative stories and feared journalists.

Looking at the world right now we have lots of trending topics like the war in Ukraine, Israel and Gaza strip, poverty, diversity, and immigration. These topics take the stage from the energy transition, so ‘how should we communicate the energy transition when there are also very serious issues?’. We need to look at things from a policy makers perspective, or a household perspective, and think about the bread and butter issues for them. The transition, luckily, is equivalent to net gains for biodiversity and GDP growth. The IEA grid report just recently came out showing grid build out in developing countries intensifies GDP growth. So fortunately, the transition should be seen as a pathway to broader prosperity, equity, justice, and principles that can help to propel us forward. But are we communicating it in a translatable way? We have the data, trends and power to do so. If we are successful with the energy transition it will bring so much wellbeing. It will have so many other rippling side effects than the bottom line for the boardroom like prosperity for the employees, societies, countries and nations.

ACTIONS

- Communications professionals must be proactive in finding the right positive stories and projects. Don’t wait for engineering colleagues to ask you to write a standard press release.
- We should look at communicating the risks of not acting.
- Support technical engineers with their storytelling
- Join the LinkedIn Energy Game Changers page
- Initiate or join roundtables in other areas of the world