CHAPTER 19
Issues management

Introduction

Cigarette smoking, global warming, the future of the rain forests, obesity, healthcare costs, DNA, stem cell research, waste management, the trade in endangered species, intensive farming, child labour: these are just a few of the subjects that have influenced the way in which business operates over the past 30 years. They all began as debates and/or research studies among scientists, technologists, economists, politicians and/or intellectual 'think-tanks'. They then entered the public domain via special interest groups, the media and, increasingly, the internet. Once there, they triggered a cascade of questions from a variety of stakeholders who had never been involved in the debate before, but who were now intensely engaged in monitoring or influencing the outcome. This multi-stakeholder engagement is at the core of twenty-first century issues management.

Issues management practice is the 'identification, monitoring, and analysis of trends in key publics' opinions that can mature into public policy and regulatory or legislative constraint of the private sector' (Heath 1997: 6). This chapter argues that the successful issues manager recognises when an issue has changed or has the power to change the context in which business operates; is able to pinpoint a specific threat or opportunity to a specific industry, company or product, in a specific part of the world at a specific point in time; and can execute a series of actions to do something about it while remaining vigilant for any shifts in interpretation that need new thinking.

This chapter begins by reviewing the literature on issues management. The rest of the chapter will be organised around issues management principles based on an

understanding of the 'tipping point': when an issue in an organisation's external environment becomes a concern for public policy. Key steps are provided showing how an organisation can influence the ensuing public debate and these are illustrated with mini case studies.

Issues management: defining the field

Origins of issues management

Writing from a US perspective, Heath (1997) observes that issues management arose from the need for private business to protect itself against public criticism and legislation. While the activities and policies of big business had been of public concern since the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1960s that widespread socio-political concerns about the state of the planet, and the effects of consumerism, began to gain momentum. A possible turning point was the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, which highlighted the potential side effects of insecticides and herbicides on the food chain. Corporations, meanwhile, were widely criticised for being untrustworthy, irresponsible and wasteful, giving rise to both consumer and environmental pressure groups. The US lawyer and politician Ralph Nader played a key role in championing the rights of consumers against manufacturers, following some landmark court cases against automobile makers in the 1960s. (See Box 19.1.)

Defining issues management

Robert L. Heath, one of the leading scholars in the field of issues management, observes that issues management has been defined in a number of ways according to the particular preference and prejudice of those defining it. One of the first exponents of issues management, Howard Chase (1982: 1), first used the term in the mid-1970s, describing it thus:

Issues management is the capacity to understand, mobilize, coordinate and direct all strategies and policy planning functions, and all public affairs/public relations skills, toward achievement of one objective: meaningful participation in creation of public policy that affects personal and institutional destiny.

Here, issues management is conceived as a strategic planning function that encompasses both public affairs and public relations skills in influencing public policy in regard to institutions or organisations.

Academic debates continue as to whether issues management is a sub-function of public relations or an umbrella term that incorporates it (Heath 1997). Grunig and Repper (1992) argue that the issues management function is part of strategic planning as well as public relations and tends to be synonymous with strategic public relations. Heath (1997) identifies four functions of issues management. These are to:

- anticipate and analyse issues
- develop organisational positions on issues
- identify key publics whose support is vital to the public policy issue
- identify desired behaviours of key publics. (See Think about 19.1.)

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box 19.1 **The environment – how one issue developed**

From the 1970s onwards, a 'macro' issue called 'the environment' became a series of 'micro' issues under a single banner known as the green movement. It gave rise to an endless number of debates in the consuming countries of the developed world, crossed oceans to the producing countries of the developing world, went through a number of cultural filters and eventually prompted a global reaction.

The repercussions are still being felt today in, for example, the sort of timber we buy, the amount of waste we recycle, the size of car we buy, the public transport we choose, the wildlife we protect, the dolphin-friendly tuna that supermarkets sell, the fish stocks we preserve, the energy-efficient household appliances we manufacture, the way we control oil and gas exploration, the use of unleaded petrol, the way we farm, the way we manage exports, the amount of packaging we use, the investment activity of the World Bank, the use of chemicals, and so on.

The growing evidence of damage to the ozone level and the effects of 'global warming' are causing governments around the world to consider how to – or whether to – change their policies and practices.

(See the 'Surfers against sewage' case study in Chapter 29, which illustrates how an environmental issue became a campaign.)

Issues management and strategic public relations

Examine the four functions given by Heath (1997). Why is issues management regarded as synonymous with strategic public relations?

Feedback If we take a systems theory perspective, for example, it is easy to see how the issues management function fulfils the 'environmental scanning' role discussed in earlier chapters. This fits in with the first function 'to anticipate and analyse issues'. What other evidence is there of strategic public relations in these four functions?

Relationship with crisis management

Howard Chase also referred to issues management as the highest form of sound management when applied to institutional survival (quoted in Seitel 1989). This leads to a debate about its relationship to crisis management. There is clearly a connection, but the two specialisms are not the same.

Regester and Larkin (1997), in their issues lifecycle, suggest that issues increase in intensity through three phases (*potential*, *emerging* and *current*), reach maximum intensity in the fourth phase, *crisis*, and depressurise dramatically in the final phase, *dormant*, when they are finally resolved. This seems to imply that, unmanaged, all issues eventually turn into crises and do not necessarily involve a high degree of pressure until they do. Experienced issues managers might well disagree with that interpretation.

Gaunt and Ollenburger (1995) and Seitel (1989) argue that crisis management is about solving a problem the moment it occurs and after it has become publicly known and is therefore *reactive*; issues management, contrariwise, involves pre-crisis planning, communicating openly and anticipating potential threats that a company is facing and is therefore *proactive*. This distinction suggests that issues management cannot be reactive, an idea that is unsustainable in, say, the case of a new and unidentified risk that had never been suspected or even considered a possibility. The emergence of a new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) in humans as 'mad cow' disease (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or BSE) that crossed the species barrier is an example. It is likely that most crisis managers would describe the proactive definition given earlier of issues management more accurately as pre-emptive crisis management.

The difference between the two specialisms is probably less to do with the style of response than with the situation: crisis management is about dealing with the impact of a sudden adverse event that fractures the core of a company's operation and represents an immediate threat to its ability to stay in business; issues management is about dealing with an evolving public policy debate that, over time, shapes the way in which a company is permitted to operate. Aircraft crashes, their cause and the way victims are treated are *crises*; the size of aeroplanes, the location and expansion of airports and the amount of available air space are *issues*.

Crisis management tends to be about the now and is largely tactical; issues management tends to be about the future and, as we have seen from earlier discussions, is largely strategic. Traverse-Healy (1995) talks about the importance of thinking ahead as a means of predicting what issues may influence and affect companies.

It is, of course, true that a crisis can trigger a change in public policy. At the point that the shift or change happens, the rules of the game also change. It is no longer about reacting and responding, but about shaping the future by helping to create, in the words of Chase, 'public policy that affects personal and institutional destiny'. (See Think about 19.2.)

Context of issues management

The 'tipping point'

If Howard Chase is right – and there is plenty of evidence to suggest he is – issues managers need to

How issues develop into crises

Think about some big issues that you know about (perhaps the BSE/CJD case cited above or another of interest to you). Do an internet search and see if you can learn more about the history of the issue, when it became a crisis and what impact it had on public policy.

understand and manage the context in which destinies change, often due to forces beyond the immediate control of the organisations involved.

Public health is probably the next big issue and appears to be echoing the way green issues began to make things happen three decades ago. The public health issue is discussed in detail towards the end of this chapter. For now, students of issues management should explore the history of environmental activism to search for the point at which 'the reasonable person' was persuaded to care enough to do something and acted in a way that created enough momentum for others to follow.

This momentum is called the '*tipping point*' (Gladwell 2000): the moment when a debate that has been slowly evolving for many years among the scientific, medical, technical and/or academic communities enters the public domain via the media, adopts a political and social agenda and prompts a fundamental shift in government thinking. Such a shift, in turn, leads to legislative and regulatory change that reshapes the business landscape.

It is important to recognise that the tipping point does not create the debate. It may simplify it, give it some meaning and apply an emotional charge that fires the public's imagination, but it is not the trigger. That comes much earlier and it is the core role of an issues manager to know when an issue has begun to develop and where it is heading.

> **Definition:** The '*tipping point*' refers to the moment when a debate which has been evolving enters the public domain and ultimately leads to change. This phrase has emerged from an influential book (Gladwell 2000).

A simplified model for monitoring emerging issues is based on the idea that all issues tend to follow the same six-phase evolutionary sequence. Issues often begin with a study, prompted by the natural desire of scientists and academics to research areas of uncertainty (the *initiation* phase). As the research continues and findings are published, other experts, typically from industry groups, government and specialist *non-governmental organisations (NGOs)* with a particular interest in the subject, study the data and add their own opinions (the *interpretation* phase). At some point, this sharing of data and interpretation between specialists begins to coalesce around a specific opportunity or threat about which 'something must be done'. This is especially true when people feel they are being exposed to a risk over which they have no control and with which they are unfamiliar. For example, the perceived risks from nuclear facilities, smoking, chemical manufacturing plants and chemical ingredients in everyday products have been studied by psychologists and behavioural specialists in Europe and the USA (e.g. see Slovic 2000). This list is likely to increase as a result of freedom of information legislation, increased transparency and global communications.

> **Definition:** *Non-governmental organisations* (NGOs) are groups without governmental affiliation that have a particular interest in a subject. Examples are organisations such as charities and campaign groups.

If an NGO or a media commentator can articulate a clear actual or perceived threat, identify a victim and expose a possible culprit (the *implication* phase), negative news coverage and/or a public campaign
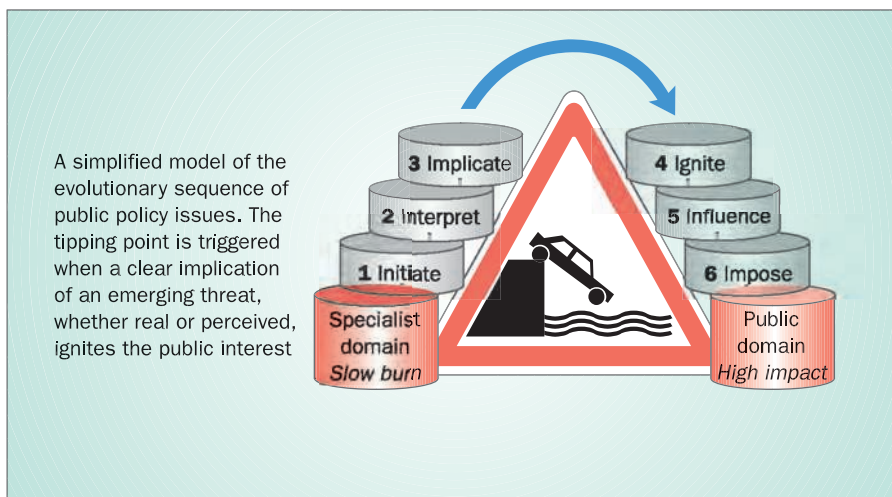

FIGURE 19.1   Simplified model of the evolutionary sequence of public policy issues

becomes a high probability. The tipping point is reached, public interest is fired (the *ignition* phase), the lobbying of policy makers begins (the *influencing* phase) and regulations are introduced (the *imposition* phase). (See Figure 19.1 and Box 19.2.)

The effect of context on issue development

This model tends to confirm what Howard Chase seems to imply in his use of the terms 'institutional

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box 19.2   **The tipping point in action: GM crops**

The following outlines the history of European opposition to the introduction of genetically modified (GM) crops:

- Scientists initiate research on how to manipulate genes.
- Agricultural specialists learn how to use genes to make plants pest resistant.
- A US company develops a seed that is resistant to its brand-name pesticide which, they say, will allow farmers to be more efficient in their use of chemicals in the field.
- Activists say the science is unproven and, in any case, consumers have the right to choose whether their food is from GM crops or not.
- The public debate ignites around the issues of choice and the environmental risks involved in cross-pollinating GM and non-GM crops.
- The EU applies the precautionary principle and decides it cannot allow the importation of GM crops until it has created an appropriate regulatory regime.

Key learning point: If the debate is scientific (genetic modification) and the tipping point is political (freedom to choose) then the issue may become emotive. Public concerns are legitimate and must be addressed as part of a long-term goal to create trust. A rational debate about the use of a scientific or medical procedure that makes people anxious cannot take place until a climate of trust has been properly established.

PICTURE 19.1   Activist groups have been raising questions about the dangers of GM crops cross-pollinating to non-GM crops. (*Source:* Nick Cobbing/Rex.)

survival' and 'institutional destiny' (see earlier references): issues management is more about the pace and extent of change than about the fact of change. With that in mind, two questions must be asked, the answers to which will dictate the speed at which an issue moves and the amount of difference it is likely to make over time. The first concerns the political, social, economic and cultural context; the second concerns who, or what, is the dominant power broker making something happen?

Context explains why some issues, such as the debate over whether mobile telephones affect the brain, have little impact on behaviour and sales, while others, such as the debate over genetically modified crops (GMO), are capable of polarising opinion. This happened: with GMO to the point where the EU introduced a de facto moratorium (un-negotiated suspension) on the importation or growing of GMO-derived crops in 1998 until suitable regulations could be put in place; where Argentina embraced the technology while its neighbour Brazil did not; where the USA asked the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2003 to investigate the effect of the EU position on US/Europe trade; and where some UK supermarkets removed GMO products from their shelves in the wake of consumer fears over alleged long-term risks to health.

It also explains why some issues, such as the use of animals in medical research, are primarily of interest to one country (in this case, the UK) while others, such as those triggered by allegations of chemically induced risk, cross-national borders and continents within the space of a day. And it explains why, for example, the employment of children is attacked by the USA and some European commentators as child exploitation (i.e. cheap labour) but condoned by some Asian countries as child protection (i.e. alternatives to working are likely to be worse).

Power, whether elected, appointed or self-styled, is rooted in coalitions. A simplified view of the author is that the world is split into three natural, stable, self-regulating and largely introspective coalitions, each one of which is populated by stakeholders who share similar visions, beliefs and behaviours:

- for-profit coalition (business, industry groups)
- not-for-profit coalition (NGOs, voluntary sector, special interest groups, academia, independent experts, media commentators)
- government coalition (ministers, legislators, regulators).

Issues tend to emerge from players in one of these coalitions and will typically find 'common cause' with players in a second coalition before players in the third coalition become intimately involved or even aware. If we examine the history of relation-ships between these coalitions, we find that until the 1970s, the government coalition and the for-profit coalition tended to operate as close allies.

It was a relationship between the so-called '*first estate*' and the '*second estate*' that came under increasing criticism from trade unions and other groups on the 'outside', most notably students who rioted in Paris in 1968. The not-for-profit coalition, often now seen as representing the '*third estate*', was barely recognised.

> **Definitions:** Within a monarchy, '*first estate*' traditionally referred to the church; '*second estate*' traditionally referred to the nobility; and the '*third estate*' traditionally referred to the common people.

The environmental debate changed all that. Over time, the not-for-profit coalition led the way, first by attacking and then by working with the for-profit coalition on solutions that the government coalition had seemed powerless to create and impose.

Now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the wheel seems to be turning again as the not-for-profit coalition and the government coalition unite to build a framework of regulations and legislation to control what they regard as the excesses of some business. Examples of this partnership in action are the emerging rules on corporate governance, exemplified by the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation in the USA (2002) and the EU's 8th Directive on company law (2005) and voluntary codes of business practice covering the treatment of workers by factories in Asia supplying western companies.

The ideal issue management programme will strive to create common cause among stakeholders in all three coalitions. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is certainly attempting to do that in using a multi-stakeholder approach as part of its global strategy on diet, physical activity and health (see health example later in the chapter, p. 388. See also Activity 19.1 and Box 19.3).

activity 19.1

Influencing public policy

Go back to some of the examples listed earlier (GM crops, nuclear power, childhood obesity) and try to identify the players involved and the way in which they drove the issue past its tipping point and into a public policy result. The internet is probably the best place to start your search. It is a great source of information and insight on issues. For example, do a search on 'Jamie's school dinners' and see what story unfolds.

Debating an issue: technology

Here are some questions that you could use to get below the surface of a debate. Consider the ethical issues raised by these questions:

- How much hard scientific evidence is there that mobile telephones have an effect on the brain? How do you think people balance risk/benefit when the risk is not yet obvious but the benefit is clear?
- How much personal control do you have over your use of your mobile telephone and how does that affect your attitude to risk?
- Conversely, how much control do you have over the technology used to produce what you eat?
- How does that affect your attitude to production methods when there is no perceived benefit in terms of price?
- Why should a part of the world that has no experience of widespread hunger prevent the use of a technology that might help farmers in parts of the world that face regular famines?

Feedback
These sorts of question can tie up a company in an intellectual debate for weeks, months or even years. They are critical to a proper analysis of an issue. However, a time limit has to be set (in days) to work through a process that will help define a plan of action rather than a subject for endless discussion. The 'tipping point' is no respecter of time.

Action planning: a framework for managing issues

Woody Allen once said: 'The world is run by the people who turn up' and these words encapsulate the reality of modern business: the outside world knows your name, understands your business and thinks it has the answer to everything. It doesn't, but an issues manager needs to start on the outside looking in, not the inside looking out.

The management framework outlined in Box 19.4 is not the complete answer, but it provides a useful template for a more detailed examination of issues that are already in the public domain. Given that it is highly unlikely that any organisation would discuss the detail of its issue management strategy and action in a public forum, this framework helps to identify a series of defining moments in the evolution of selected issues.

The framework is broken down into two sections that are described on the following pages with examples. The first section covers Steps 1 to 5, which are primarily concerned with thinking and planning; the second section covers Steps 6 to 10, which are centred on activity. Each step includes a commentary that, combined with personal experience, key learning from elsewhere in this book, regular study of the media and organised discussion groups, will help the reader to fill in the background.

Framework section 1: thinking and planning

Step-by-step issues management framework

Framework section 1: thinking and planning
1 Get focused.
2 List key players.
3 Assess momentum.
4 Check reality.
5 Assess pace.

Framework section 2: action
6 Clarify the part you want to play.
7 Be realistic.
8 Build case.
9 Commit action.
10 Make it make sense.

Step 1   **Get focused**

The issue as defined by the outside world is the issue that needs to be managed. Clarity can be achieved by the answers to two key questions: who, or what, put it on the public agenda? What are the best-case and worst-case outcomes of the issue as currently defined?

The key here is the tipping point. For example, the notion of wellness, as opposed to illness, has been

around the corridors of power in various countries for many years, partly because of the truism that prevention is better than cure and partly because state-funded healthcare is finding it prohibitively expensive to cover the cost of disease-and-treatment systems.

The need for improved nutrition as a key feature of disease prevention is being driven by the WHO with the help of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and is best illustrated by the campaign to increase intake of fruit and vegetables launched in 2003 (go to www.who.int/en/ and search for the WHO global strategy on diet, physical activity and health). Yet nothing really fired the public imagination until obesity became an integral part of the equation. The tipping point was when the office of the US Surgeon-General put a figure on the problem, and declared in a statement prepared by a sub-committee of the US House of Representatives in 2003 that the total annual cost of obesity was $117 billion, only slightly less than the $157 billion economic toll assigned to smoking (US Department of Health and Human Services news release, 2004).

When that happened, 'something had to be done'. Eating habits had to change . . . fast food companies had to rethink their menu options . . . Schools had to increase physical activity . . . Companies had to consider providing fitness rooms for staff . . . Food manufacturers faced voluntary or mandatory restrictions on the amount of salt and sugar in their products . . . Detailed product labelling of both ingredients and countries of origin emerged as practical illustrations of transparency and openness. (See Activity 19.2.)

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activity 19.2

Context and perspective on issues

Compare and contrast two websites: www.mcdonalds.com and www.mcspotlight.org. What are your key findings?

Step 2 List key players

Identify people and organisations who are likely to have an informed view on the issue as currently defined. They should be clustered on the basis (a) of their 'membership' of the three natural coalitions summarised earlier, and (b) of the extent to which the definition of the issue makes it directly relevant to their day-to-day interests or responsibilities.

The key learning point here is that best-case and worst-case planning is not about the issue, but about the *impact*. If the US Surgeon-General says obesity is an issue that needs to be addressed, it will be addressed. The symbol has been identified and all that matters from this point on is who, or what, is seen as part of the problem and part of the solution; that is, where the issue manifests itself and where it has a direct impact.

This, in essence, is an exercise in: locating opinion leaders and decision makers; making some assumptions about their motivations and, therefore, their likely behaviours; and deciding where they fit in relation to the tipping point and the six-phase evolutionary sequence summarised earlier in this chapter.

While a list such as this is necessarily based on generalisations, it is important for issues managers to distinguish between a person and an institution with a broad agenda (e.g. a doctor in general practice, a consumer organisation or a prime minister), and a person and an institution with a narrow agenda (e.g. a heart surgeon, an environmental activist group or a government minister with specific responsibilities). Their interest, knowledge, experience, credibility and motivations – and, as result, their impact – will be different. The obesity debate, for example, could produce initial assessment (which would need to be fully validated by research) as shown in Table 19.1.

An instant diagnosis of this table identifies three key points:

1 The potential for creating common cause (bringing players together) is high.
2 As a result of the first point, the development of a multi-stakeholder programme should be straightforward.
3 Existing shared interest across all three natural coalitions can be mobilised to facilitate agreement on a broad public policy agenda.

A stakeholder analysis, using Johnson and Scholes' power/interest matrix, could also be conducted at this point (see Chapter 10).

The way in which this thinking is used in an issues management programme is illustrated in some detail under Step 8 (Build case) of this framework, again using obesity as the example.

Brent Spar – the oil installation that was to be dumped in the North Sea by Shell until Greenpeace campaigned against it – is probably one of the best examples of how a single decision can give an issue momentum (see case studies in Chapters 12 and 18).

The Brent Spar case study demonstrates how the pace of an issue is often set by the way in which it is

TABLE 19.1   Opinion leaders and decision makers in the obesity debate

Player	Natural coalition	Assumed motivation
Doctors in general practice	Not-for-profit	Improved patient health
Diabetes experts	Not-for-profit	Disease reduction
Consumer group	Not-for-profit	Informed consumers
Nutrition associations	Not-for-profit	Healthier eating/lifestyles
Government leadership	Government	Healthier citizens
Health ministry	Government	Disease prevention
Food producers	For-profit	Innovative, saleable products
Food retailers	For-profit	Sustainable customer base
Celebrity chefs	For-profit	Personal positioning

Step 3   Assess momentum

Be aware of what makes a good target. Three questions can help organisations assess whether an issue that is in the public domain, or is about to enter the public domain, is heading in their direction:

■ Is the business a symbol (e.g. of junk food) or is actual activity under threat?
■ Does the issue as currently defined resonate with other debates (e.g. obesity–junk food–physical activity–cosmetic surgery)?
■ Do the forces that drive the issue have the authority to engage and maintain the public interest?

defined – and, therefore, what it symbolises – as it enters the public domain (see Step 3). However, the decision to dispose of Brent Spar at sea rather than on land is regarded by some specialist commentators as the more environmentally friendly option. It did not matter: once emotions were running high and the

Step 4   Check reality

Make sure there is a real and measurable threat or opportunity. Again, three questions can be used to help organisations to make a decision:

■ Is the issue as defined favourable or unfavourable to our business plan?
■ Why should we become directly involved?
■ Can the issue be redefined or reframed?

issue was on the move with an identifiable victim (marine life) and a likely culprit (Shell) in plain sight, the chance for rational debate had gone and the voices of support were drowned out. They were heard only when the decision on Brent Spar had been reversed and when the media frenzy had died away. (See Think about 19.3, overleaf.)

The challenge is whether you can 'make the case' or argument for the reality *as you see it* of any given situation. Are aeroplanes about increasing pollution or shrinking the world? Are disposable nappies (diapers) about convenience or waste mountains? Is genetic manipulation about playing God or, in the case of GM seeds, feeding the world? Are cosmetics about feeling and looking good or the ingredients used to make them? Is driving a car about convenience and enjoyment or damaging the environment? Is this chapter about manipulating people or shaping opinion? (See Think about 19.4, overleaf.)

These arguments naturally raise the whole question of morals and ethics and whether the issue manager, as a professional communicator, is using the power of persuasion to win a specious argument (see also Chapter 15).

Issues management is, at its best, an exercise in public advocacy. Wilcox et al. (1998: 492) define public advocacy as an attempt by a corporation or organisation to influence public opinion on a political or social issue. Issues management demands a robust point of view and a rigorous assessment of the evidence that supports it. A robust point of view on its own, however, is not enough. For 40 years the tobacco industry argued that cigarette use was an issue of consumer choice while being cautious about the research showing the detrimental effects of tobacco use on public health. The industry has faced lawsuits from individual smokers, fines by state governments and

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think about 19.3   **Whom do you trust in public debates?**

Greenpeace is a formidable public campaigner that has built up an enormous amount of public trust and goodwill over many years. Its motives in the Brent Spar case were not in question and it is important to understand why that was, and probably still is, true. Why do people put their trust in activist groups more than in governments or business? Why do we question the research figures and findings of industry, but rarely those of activists?

Feedback   To answer these questions, look for regular surveys that measure public confidence, especially those that rank the people whom the public generally trust to tell the truth. Doctors, teachers, academics and religious leaders tend to head the lists; business leaders, politicians and government ministers tend to be at the bottom. The World Economic Forum published a report on trust in 2004 (www.weforum.org) and the MORI polling organisation publishes a regular league table of people who are expected to be truthful (www.mori.com). The key learning point is that what really matters is not whom people trust, but whom they do not.

PICTURE 19.2   Greenpeace campaigners leafleted drivers at Shell petrol stations across Europe urging them not to buy the company's fuel in opposition to the Brent Spar disposal plans. (*Source:* EPA/Empics.)

restrictions on marketing and advertising practices (Pratt 2001). Pratt argues that if issues management principles had been adhered to (i.e. responding to consumer interest in a manner that promotes dialogue and negotiation) then the consequences would not have been so drawn out and costly. Rather than influencing public policy by acknowledging the health risks of smoking, the tobacco industry has been engaged in an ongoing battle with governments and pressure groups to restrict its market dominance.

Issues management also demands the ability to gain the support of key opinion leaders and decision makers, many of whom have been referenced earlier in this chapter and all of whom will test the strength and/or the independence of any data and research that is deployed to make the case. The issue manager, while believing passionately in the case they are making, is able to identify flaws in the arguments being put forward and decide if wisdom dictates a shift in strategy. You cannot simply create a reality; it can only exist if there is powerful evidence and widespread support to prove your point of view. (See Box 19.5.)

The activities outlined in Step 2 and the case outlined in Step 3 of this framework are key to understanding the process of 'case making', and it is worth going back to them now to understand their value as an initial check on strategic planning.

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think about 19.4   **Animal rights issues**

Spend some timing thinking about how you define the animal rights issue:

- Is it about giving animals the same rights as humans or treating them as inferior?
- Is it about animals being sentient or incapable of feeling emotion?
- Is it about keeping animals in captivity or letting them roam at will?
- Is it about condemning a shark for attacking a swimmer or condemning the swimmer for invading the shark's territory?
- Is it about the right to keep pets at home or the campaign to close zoos?
- Is it about using animals to advance medical research and create new or better medicines or about breaking into research laboratories and setting them free?
- Is it about protecting animals from humans or about protecting humans from animals? Is it about destroying habitats or farming the land?
- Is it about animal welfare or the price of meat?

Feedback   The answer is: all of them. This means animal rights activists could potentially become involved in a wide range of related issues. The same applies to various health and environmental issues. This shows how important it is to define the issue accurately.

box 19.5 **Roles and responsibilities of the issue manager**

The role of the issues manager is fivefold: a strategic analyst, a tactical programmer, a facilitator of opinion, an advocate of facts and a counsellor on whether the strategy is likely to achieve the objectives set for it. That is their principal professional responsibility.

The ethical dimension of issues cannot, of course, be ignored. It is important for two key reasons. First, the moral and ethical climate of public opinion is a fundamental subset of the context in which public advocacy takes place and will influence both the impact of an issue and the way in which it needs to be managed. That is an objective assessment that the professional issue manager will make and counsel accordingly.

Second, an individual's personal moral and ethical code can make it uncomfortable for them to work with certain companies, industries or countries. That is a personal decision and the professional issue manager should not lead, or be expected to lead, an issues response strategy that runs counter to strongly held personal values which will clearly reduce their effectiveness.

Then go forward to Step 5, which focuses on another critical reality check: is the issue at, or near, the tipping point?

Step 5 **Assess pace**

Be aware that not every issue in the public domain is in motion or is capable of moving. Issues managers will know they are at, or near, the tipping point if the answer to all of the following questions is yes:

- Would a 'reasonable person' be able easily to identify a section, or sections, of the population who could be affected by the issue as currently defined?
- Can the issue be visualised?
- How strong is the driving force behind the issue?

The 'reasonable person' test is the litmus test for public issues. If the ordinary man or woman in the street cannot see, hear or feel a connection to an issue, it will remain static. It will be debated, but nothing much will happen and companies need to beware of adding pace to an issue that has no recognisable shape.

Take the issue of mobile telephones and the link to brain damage, mentioned earlier. Some of us will never know anyone with brain damage and even if we did, we could think of many likely causes that have nothing to do with making telephone calls. In any case, we cannot see inside a person's head and we know that the science of neurology is relatively new. Is this not just another scare story? Given the millions of telephones in use and the billions of calls that are made every day, surely we would have seen some hard evidence of harm by now? And so the debate goes on. The mobile phone example illustrates how some issues, despite being in the public domain, seem to be contained at the initiation phase of the issues evolutionary sequence. However, if the debate ever gains momentum, the pace will accelerate, probably triggered by a reputable scientific and medical source with unimpeachable credentials. If this happens, it will provide an interesting study into the way a market and an industry react to a changing context for such a widely used product. (See Activity 19.3.)

The issue of ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun which are reaching earth unfiltered by high-altitude ozone, and the consequential rise in the likelihood of skin cancer, brings its own expectations of what a responsible government and industry can do. The issue began to attract broad public interest in the 1990s and has triggered a number of public information campaigns and evaluation studies (e.g. Sinclair et al. 1994; Dickson et al. 1997).

One of the first major campaigns was in Australia, a country synonymous with beach life and surfing, where sunbathing became a questionable activity. Suntan lotions were reinvented as sun-block lotions; beach holidays, and everything associated with them, came under scrutiny. Skin, and how to protect it, gave the medical profession a new cause and a

activity 19.3

'The reasonable person' test

Make a list of similar issues that are already on the move. Make a note of the speed with which events happen as the issue reaches the tipping point and enters the public domain via 'the reasonable person' test.

Feedback
The key to understanding the test is that it is governed by national and cultural behaviours. There is no universal definition of 'reasonable', a fact that requires issues managers to develop a political antenna as part of their skill set.

welcome boost in some parts of the world to the emerging science of cosmeceuticals (cosmetic products that claim a health benefit). Australia's 'slip, slop, slap' slogan encouraged people to slip on a T-shirt, slop on a hat and slap on some sunscreen.

The reality of issues such as this is that the fear of certain diseases has the power to drive action at a pace that is sometimes difficult to control. Cancer is one of them. So is Alzheimer's disease. Issues managers need to be alert for a high-intensity rollercoaster ride when a connection is made to a situation that drives emotional reactions. (See Think about 19.5.)

Yet while the *need* for change is global, the *pace* of change is national or regional. A popular slogan with green activists is 'think globally, act locally'. An issues manager who defines need but does not control pace is unable to influence the outcome. This is where the action is, and it is discussed in the second section of this management framework, covering Steps 6–10.

Framework section 2: action

Issues management is not primarily about winning. As Woody Allen suggests, it is all about getting a seat

Step 6 | **Clarify the part you want to play**

From the evidence available, decide how the outside world views your role. Two questions to prompt a discussion and a decision:

- How likely is it that you will be seen to be responsible for creating the problem, resolving short-term concerns or building long-term solutions?
- How do you react?

activity 19.4

Understanding and communicating with different publics

After reading Mini case study 19.1 about the oil, gas and chemical industries, look for other examples of industries that have learnt to speak the language of the end user (consumer) rather than the language of the supplier (manufacturer, producer).

mini case study 19.1

Oil, gas and chemical industries

Oil, gas and chemical companies tend to be cast as villains, principally because public opinion tends to focus on their 'downstream' operations (e.g. oil fields, drilling rigs, production platforms, oil tankers, spillages, industrial sites) rather than the output (e.g. energy supply, plastic products, components in household appliances, clothing materials).

The industry is correcting the balance with a number of public communications initiatives, focusing principally on operations that have more resonance with the public in general and reflect consumer needs. This is especially true of oil and gas suppliers who are repositioning themselves as energy companies, not only as a long-term strategy to create greater public confidence and trust, but also as a platform from which they can play a leading role in the debate over alternative forms of energy that do not use fossil fuels.

think about 19.6   Who has real power?

If a strategic goal is to move an organisation from being part of the problem to being part of the solution, think about the roles and responsibilities related to issues management: which one of the following change agents has the real power to make something happen:

- a government that writes policy?
- an activist group that organises campaigns?
- an industry that supplies goods and services?

Feedback If the WHO wants us all to eat healthier food, will the solution be provided by the food industry or, say, a country's chief medical officer? The answer demands an honest appraisal of what is practical and who is best placed to deliver it. The case study exercise outlined after Step 7 of this framework exemplifies this approach in action.

at the table when decisions are made in response to a new context and a changing climate of opinion. It is about being part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Manufacturers of electronic equipment operating in countries where issues surrounding the effect on humans of radio waves, microwaves and electromagnetic fields have surfaced are focused on resolving anxieties that their industries have raised. They do not believe scientific evidence proves the existence of a real problem requiring a long-term solution, but it is clear that a perception of risk has the power to impact their business. They understand that legitimate concerns exist, recognise the degree of emotion involved and have activated programmes of reassurance to address them. That is what their customers expect.

Look for other examples of reassurance strategies in your own markets, country or community. You may find programmes designed to build trust in communities around chemical manufacturing plants or in reaction to recent consumer scares about product safety. (See Mini case study 19.1, Activity 19.4 and Think about 19.6.)

mini case study 19.2

Issues management practice at a chemical plant

A chemical manufacturing plant is situated near a residential estate. The plant is owned by one of the world's largest chemical companies and is critical to the company's production targets. The plant is required by law to inform residents of the extent to which they will be affected if there were a release of chemicals from the plant or, in a worst case, the plant exploded. A major release of chemicals or a major explosion is unlikely, but talking to the community about either of them is likely to spark serious concerns. A community meeting is organised.

A family living near the chemical manufacturing plant is concerned about safety at the plant and worried that leaking chemicals are responsible for their son's asthma. They cannot afford to move house. The family and their neighbours have just been invited to a meeting at the plant.

What can be changed and what cannot be changed? In this case, the law is here to stay (it was a response to a real incident in the USA and has now been adopted elsewhere), the plant is here to stay, the family is here to stay, the asthma is probably here to stay and the meet-

ing needs to happen. Everything else is open for debate. That is the reality the issues manager has to deal with.

Feedback

This is based on a real case study. The company adopted a reassurance strategy, focusing on demonstrating its ability, via state-of-the-art technology and a battery of warning devices and cameras inside the perimeter fences, to ensure that nothing it manufactured could leave the confines of the plant. The plant manager explained the emergency shutdown procedure, the direct links to the fire service and medical teams and the government regulatory process that controlled the company's day-to-day operations.

The issue was not whether the chemicals being manufactured were hazardous (the plant manager recognised that they were) but whether the risk of escape was fully recognised and managed. Whatever the cause of the asthma, it was unlikely to be connected to the plant.

Regular on-site community meetings are now a key feature of the plant's communications programme.

Step 7 Be realistic

Focus on what can be achieved:

- If a company is involved, what is its position and what can it make happen?
- Is it possible for a company to change fact or change perception, or both?
- Are the company's business interests better served by changing fact or by changing perception?

As an example see Mini case 19.2.

As discussed earlier in Step 4, redefining or re-framing an issue is the crux of issues management. It is about identifying, educating and mobilising stakeholders to become advocates for your point of

Step 8 Build case

Create your own circle of influence by informing and educating natural supporters and by identifying and gaining the support of potential supporters.

view. It is about building and maintaining a body of opinion around a common agenda that is relevant enough, powerful enough and tangible enough to make a difference. It is about creating a single campaigning idea – the core proposition – that galvanises people into action.

The focal point is the proposition, not the issue. The difference is important because the way an issue

Positive

- Independent fitness instructors
- Government leadership
- Nutritionists

Note: This is the core stakeholder group. Although independent fitness instructors are for-profit, they are more likely to be seen to be providing an advisory service that reflects a not-for-profit style. It is therefore reasonable to view this core group as a combination of members of the not-for-profit and government coalitions that will have a natural affinity with like-minded players

Neutral

- Schools
- Diabetes experts
- Health ministry
- Doctors in general practice

Note: All have a considerable interest in the issue, but this proposition does not, at first glance, reflect their main focus

Uninterested

- Local community

Note: This proposition does not, at first glance, have any connection to their aims

Negative

- Private fitness centres

Note: This proposition, at first glance, could represent a threat to their business by targeting parents who are current or potential members
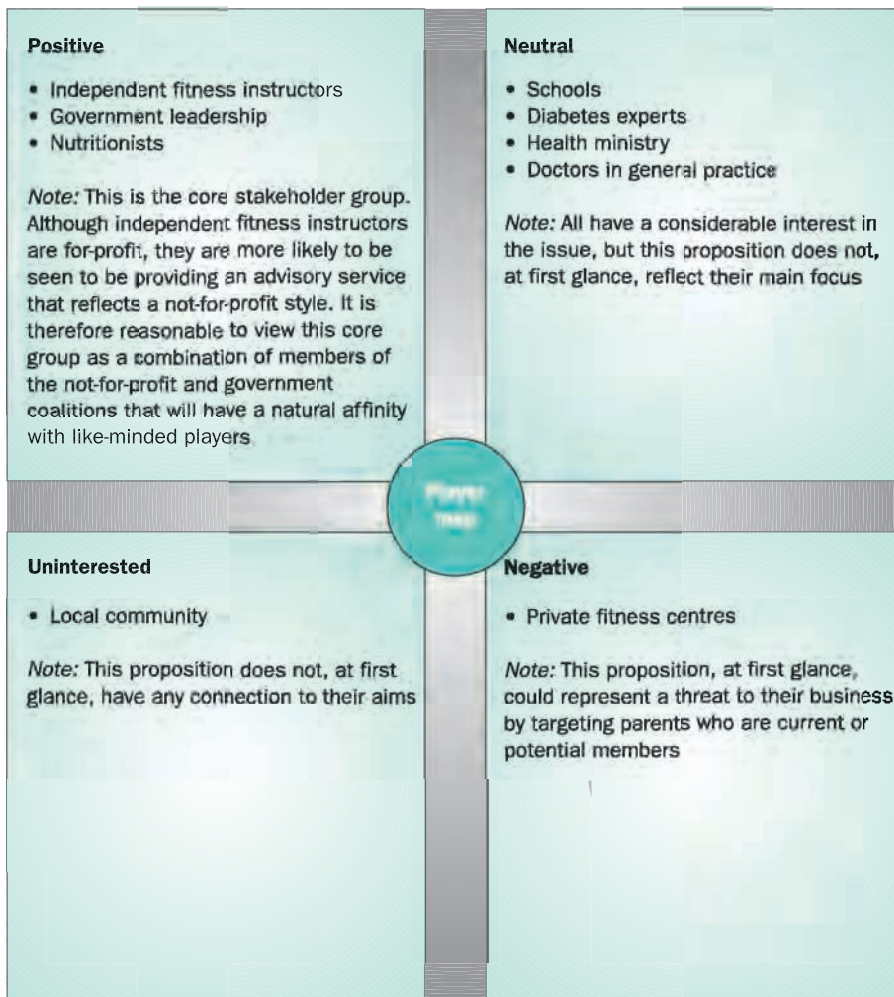
FIGURE 19.2   Probable current positions

is defined tends to generate *interest*; the way a proposition is constructed tends to generate *action*. That was certainly the case with obesity. A simplified view of how the debate might have evolved in one particular aspect – the need for greater physical activity – is used here to illustrate the process for activating an issues management programme.

As you will have seen from Step 1 of this management framework, the external environment was quite clear in 2003 that obesity was a major issue about which something had to be done. But what exactly? What idea or proposition could engage the public interest, create a common agenda involving a broad range of stakeholders and generate support for a long-term, multifaceted programme that could address this issue?

The players listed in Step 2 of the framework are examples of people who clearly share an interest in another aspect of the obesity issue, the move towards healthier eating habits, but why would they need to go beyond their natural coalitions to make something happen? Why, for instance, would a doctor specialising in diabetes want to talk to a farmer about the quality of his livestock?

In essence, it is all about making people aware of their role in being part of the solution to an identified, current and burgeoning problem. In this case, a simplified view is that obesity is a marker for diabetes; obesity can be managed if people follow a healthier diet; people find it easier to follow a healthier diet if they know what to look for and if it is widely available; and if people like meat, it is healthier for them to choose lean meat or white meat; if a doctor gives dietary advice, it is likely to be accepted (see reference to trust in Step 3); if there is an increased demand for lean meat or white meat, the farmer will want to be able to respond; and if the response resonates with other aspects of an existing problem that a large section of the population agrees needs to be resolved, it will be better understood and received. *That* is why the diabetes expert and the farmer need to talk about what they might do together to make people generally better informed and to create the conditions under which they can make the choice that is right for them. You should apply the same thinking as you consider the example on physical activity in Box 19.6 on p. 394 (see also Figures 19.2–19.4 and Table 19.2).

TABLE 19.2   Core proposition and key players

Core proposition
We need to take action to make sure that all schools, both state funded and private, provide the means for children and their parents to have at least 60 minutes' physical exercise during the school day. It is essential that children develop habits that avoid weight-related diseases later in life

Key players	Motivations
Schools	High standards of education
Doctors in general practice	Improved patient health
Diabetes experts	Disease reduction
Government leadership	Healthier citizens
Health ministry	Disease prevention
Nutritionists	Healthier eating/lifestyles
Private fitness centres	Increasing membership
Independent fitness instructors	Design of tailored fitness programmes
Local community	Safe, friendly neighbourhoods

Likely top-of-mind response of key players to core proposition			
Positive	**Neutral**	**Negative**	**Uninterested**
Independent fitness instructors	Schools	Private fitness centres	Local community
Government leadership	Diabetes experts		
Nutritionists	Health ministry		
	Doctors in general practice		

Positive

· Independent fitness instructors
· Government leadership
· Nutritionists
· Schools
· Doctors in general practice

Neutral

· Diabetes experts
· Health ministry
· Private fitness centres

Note: This combines members of the not-for-profit, the government and the for-profit coalitions and creates the potential for a future relationship and improved mutual understanding

· Local community

Player map

Uninterested

Note: Players in the uninterested and neutral zones always have the potential to become negative and issues managers must remain vigilant for activity that signals a change in behaviour

In this case, a temporary drop in business would make private fitness centres question the proposition, but a possible tie-in with a school would help them to be more positive about the long-term benefit; they would be unlikely, therefore, to rush to judgement. It is worth stressing that, in any case, a lone negative voice would not be able to compete with the combined power of the positive players listed here

It also often makes sense to create common cause with players from the uninterested zone if possible. In this case, a local community leader might be attracted by evidence that a neighbourhood school would enhance its reputation for educational excellence with this proposition and could become an active supporter of the campaign
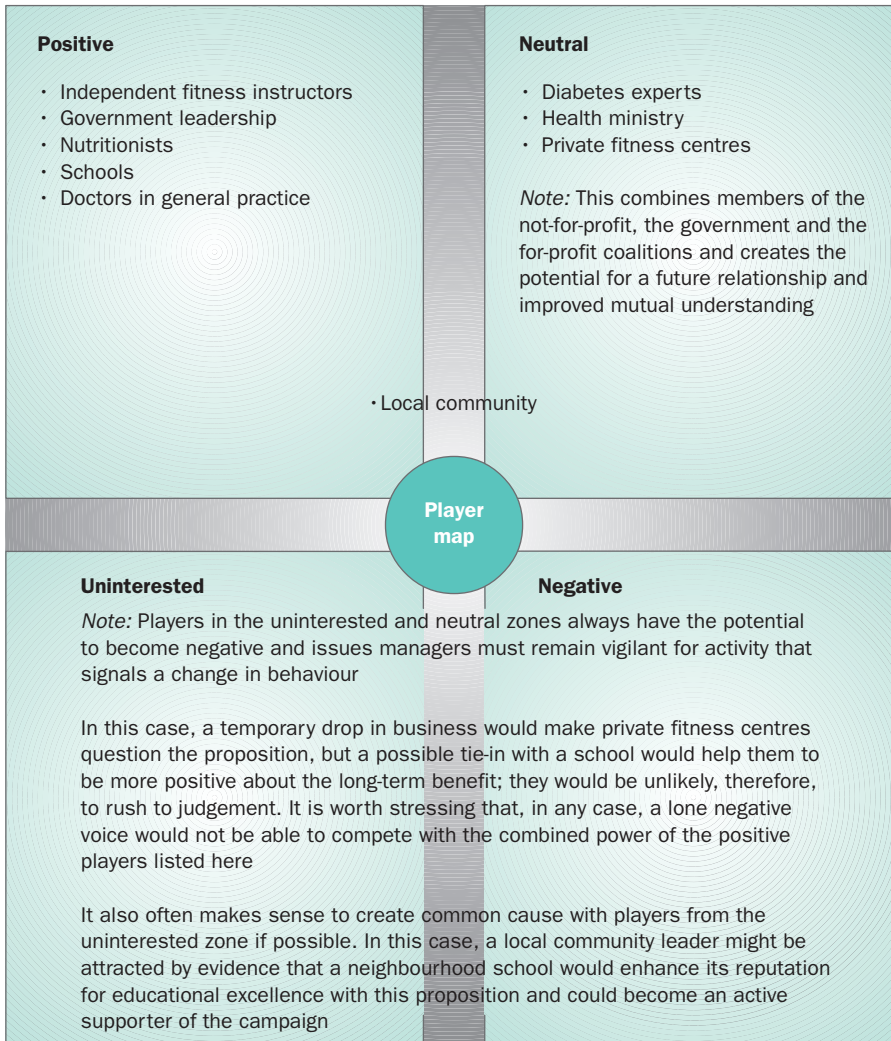
Negative

FIGURE 19.3   Desired best-case positions

Once you have reviewed this exercise, go back to the environmental debate and apply some of the core propositions to this process and the templates (Table 19.2 and Figures 19.2–19.4). You will need to start by searching for specific subjects that are of interest to you and that you can easily research: the list is endless, ranging from wind farms and whale hunting to maintaining fish stocks and protecting rainforests.

Issues management usually demands more resources than people expect. It is a voracious user of time and people over a long period. For this reason, issues managers need to pinpoint and measure a series of defining moments rather than a single far-off result that might need to change over time as the issue evolves.

Progression in the issues business is often more motivating than perfection: if the target under the Kyoto Protocol is to reduce emissions by, say, 20% over the next 10 years, you will need to demonstrate commitment by publishing annual figures. If, as suggested in the discussion points in Step 4 of this framework, you want eventually to replace the use of animals in medical research, you will need to show examples every

Step 9 **Commit to action**

Set milestones. Be clear about what you are trying to achieve, establish a measurable objective and be realistic about the time and the resources it is likely to take.
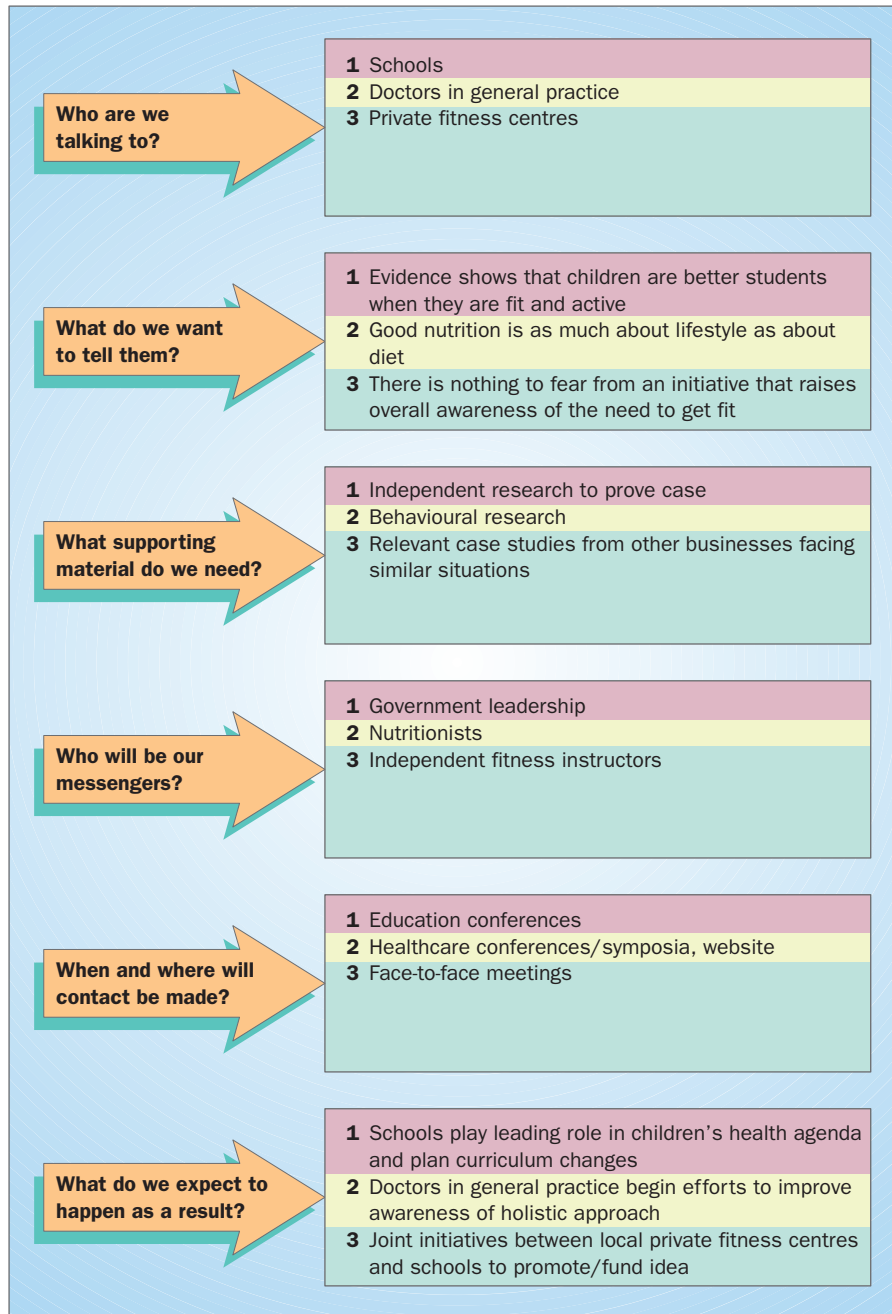
Who are we talking to?	**1** Schools **2** Doctors in general practice **3** Private fitness centres
What do we want to tell them?	**1** Evidence shows that children are better students when they are fit and active **2** Good nutrition is as much about lifestyle as about diet **3** There is nothing to fear from an initiative that raises overall awareness of the need to get fit
What supporting material do we need?	**1** Independent research to prove case **2** Behavioural research **3** Relevant case studies from other businesses facing similar situations
Who will be our messengers?	**1** Government leadership **2** Nutritionists **3** Independent fitness instructors
When and where will contact be made?	**1** Education conferences **2** Healthcare conferences/symposia, website **3** Face-to-face meetings
What do we expect to happen as a result?	**1** Schools play leading role in children's health agenda and plan curriculum changes **2** Doctors in general practice begin efforts to improve awareness of holistic approach **3** Joint initiatives between local private fitness centres and schools to promote/fund idea

FIGURE 19.4   Issues management plan

Step 10   Make it make sense

Public advocacy and 'case making' is not the same as legal argument. Logic, not law, counts.

year of how you are using alternatives. And if you promise to cut the cost of obesity over the next decade, you will need to show it decreasing year on year.

This level of communication is dictated not so much by the need to articulate a commitment as by

activity 19.5

A final task

Go back to Step 4 of this framework and ask the questions about animal rights in a different way. Does it make sense to apply human rights to animals? Does it make sense to swim in shark-infested waters? Does it make sense to stop using animals for medical research until we are sure alternative methods are acceptable? Does it make sense to destroy the natural habitats of endangered species? Does it make sense to take animals out of their natural habitats and put them on show? Does it make sense to release a captive-bred animal into the wild where it might not know how to deal with natural predators? Does it make sense to keep animals in cages so small that they can hardly move?

Feedback

If you can make it make sense, you can probably begin to argue the case. If you find a flaw, be prepared to acknowledge it and consider your options.

It may not make sense to continue.

the need to reassure people that the end point is demonstrably attainable. The former is about communicating an intention; the latter is about communicating an action, which, in issues management terms, is the only thing that really matters.

So, if it makes sense that the world is run by the people who turn up, it probably also makes sense to ask the following question every time an issue gets into the public domain: *'What would the reasonable person expect a responsible company or institution to do in this situation?'* Answer that and you are well on the way to recognising the context and power that shapes destinies. (See Activity 9.5.)

box 19.6 **A 10-point issues planning process for promoting physical activity in children**

The following 10-point checklist summarises the issues planning process and allows you to complete the boxes in the figures (templates) on the following pages. The figures are only part-completed here and are not based on an actual plan; they are for illustrative purposes only.

1 Decide your core proposition (see Table 19.2).
2 List potential key players in the debate and decide whether they are likely to be positive, negative, neutral or uninterested in response to the proposition as you interpret it. Complete a one-page map of positions (Table 19.2 and Figure 19.2).
3 Prepare a communications plan that has four objectives designed to achieve the desired best-case positions (Figure 19.3):

  ■ to create common cause with positive players
  ■ to build bridges to neutral players
  ■ to prepare a response for negative players.
  ■ to stay vigilant for shifts in the opinions of uninterested players.

4 Decide what messages will drive the objectives (Figure 19.4).
5 Decide what evidence you need to support the messages (Figure 19.4).
6 Decide who is likely to be the most effective messenger (Figure 19:4):

  ■ The core stakeholder group, i.e. those who have a stake in the specific proposition, not the general issue, will emerge from among the positive players, and is best placed to take on the role of thought leadership via, say, articles in the media or public speaking engagements.
  ■ Specialist experts from the core group are typically regarded as key opinion formers and have a natural affinity with other experts who they might want to recruit.
  ■ An opinion former who can argue both logic and emotion is an ideal spokesperson for handling adversaries.

7 Decide the most effective communications platform (Figure 19.4): conferences, public meetings, website, media, advertisements, leaflets, etc.
8 Establish a desired and measurable outcome (Figure 19.4).
9 Commit to action (see Step 9 of the management framework).
10 Be prepared to review and fine-tune your plan at any stage (see Step 10 of the management framework).

Summary

This chapter has contextualised the specialist area of issues management in public relations by discussing its theoretical underpinning as well as practical applications. Discussion has revolved around defining and explaining the tipping point with a six-point model of the evolutionary sequence of issues in public policy. A framework has also been described that is a 10-step action planning framework for managing issues, split into two sections, 'Thinking and planning' and 'Action'. Within the framework, techniques have also been identified to support understanding of issues management processes, including who we trust in public debates, the 'reasonable person test' as well as identifying the tipping point within the framework.

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