

Do You Want To Win?

How often do we hear the lament that it is ‘challenging’ to attract young people into the Paper Industry; a challenge that is becoming increasingly relevant as the ‘auld gits’ (*like myself*) approach the end of their working lives.

Those of us who have worked in Pulp & Paper for the majority of their careers (*nearly 40 years in my case*), relish the variety and breadth of disciplines that papermaking embraces. One day you might be discussing the mechanics of securing a roll weighing several tonnes and rotating at speed in situ and a few hours later you are considering the impact of nano-sized fibres on paper quality (*and that was only yesterday!*).

Sometimes though, it is not a bad idea to take a peek over the fence and listen to what the sort of people we are trying to attract to join The Industry actually think about us and that is exactly what Kevin Bussey (*Smurfit Kappa Townsend Hook*), Stuart Thomas (*Axchem*) and I did when we met up with several teams of MSc Students from Kent University (studying Finance and Management) and gave them the challenge of improving the image of Paper Mills.



The Winning Team - definitely a group who want to win!



Stuart Thomas & Anders Astrom reflect during an earlier session

Coming from within the industry, we all know that the white plumes rising from the machine hall are condensing steam rather than smoke; how many of us have used this as our first indication of what the day has in store as we travel into work of a morning? But, as was forcibly pointed out to us, not everybody realises that this is merely water vapour and some members of the public view any visible emissions from a factory site as ‘pollution’. Equally, there are still those who believe that paper is made exclusively by cutting down vast tracts of forest, as the link between recycling of paper and paper production is clearly not fully understood and that paper mills (traditionally sited beside rivers) are vast consumers of water.

These are not my words - these are the views reported by the thirty MSc Students taking part in the ‘Corporate Challenge’ and, arguably, these budding, young corporate managers are typical of the very group that our industry needs to attract. Faced with the challenge of improving the image of a local paper mill, several of the teams had started by reviewing the information available on the internet and, worryingly, much of it was negative encompassing areas including safety (*based on reports of fires and accidents*), employment opportunities (*based on reports of mill closures*) and the environment (*based on reports of complaints and incidents*).

It is hardly surprising that these young professionals found it so easy to find these negative reports on papermaking; the good news about ‘bad news’ is that it sells - recent media studies¹ show that reports of bad news far outweigh good news by as much as seventeen negative news reports for every individual good news report.

¹ *Psychology Today / November 2014*

PITA Special Report – Kent University ‘Corporate Challenge 2017’



Kevin Bussey announces the winners!

So arguably, as an industry we need to be, at least, seventeen times more proactive in promoting the positive aspects of papermaking; which has no doubt been a factor in the success of the Two Sides Project (*and this year’s Paper Industry Gold Medal Award Winner, Martyn Eustace*) and their efforts to promote the positive aspects of paper (*note that I say ‘paper’ and not ‘papermaking’*).

Amongst the challenges that face our industry moving forwards is how we can change the public perception of papermaking, especially amongst this younger age group who are urgently needed to ‘fill the boots’ of those departing the industry in order to develop a sustainable paper industry for future years.

It is not very often, indeed if at all, that PITA gets ‘political’ - we very much prefer to let (*and are indeed eternally grateful to*) our colleagues in the CPI for dealing with that side of the business; but it has been interesting to note how recent years have seen Governments become increasingly slaves to public opinion and if the Paper Industry is to develop we need to influence those who influence the Government. If the public perception of papermaking can be raised, this will greatly support CPI’s activities in Westminster and make us more attractive to potential employees.

During their presentation, the winning team reported apparently never ending negative reports about the Paper Industry in Kent, prompting one of the judges to chide them with “Do you want to win?”. Before the last syllables of the question had died away in the room, the lead speaker for the team threw the question straight back with their response “**No, do you want to win?**” – silencing the judges and making the point with greater clarity than any convoluted argument could ever hope to achieve. If we are seeking to improve the image of papermaking in the UK and attract young people, there is a group of students at the University of Kent and, as a starting point, we could do a lot worse than listen to what they learnt during this year’s Corporate Challenge exercise.

Congratulations to all involved!

Barry Read
April 2017



The Corporate Challenge - Kent University MSc Students