Today, some 50 years after the environmental movement started to become a real force in the world, most companies and large organizations still view it as a threat. They look at examples like Brent Spar and GM foods – not to mention something (once uncontroversial) like building a road or a house – and see only opposition. An opposition that seems to have the power to subvert the democratic will. Politicians seem powerless to act and, in some cases, seem to side with the green movement.

But where there is a threat, there is also opportunity. The world is now becoming dominated by brands. Companies that can deliver genuine environmental attributes and ethical qualities to their brands will have a huge advantage over those that cannot.

The threats

But managing reputation in an environmentally conscious world is not easy. Certainly, there is a need for direction and leadership from top management; certainly, it needs to involve employees, but it is not something that can be done in one fell swoop by a simple template which can be laid over the company.

It requires what most companies have the greatest difficulty in delivering – flexibility. Not just flexibility in work practices, which is now common, or flexibility in responsibility (empowerment was the buzzword of the last decade), but flexibility in three important areas:
1. **The organization’s goals.** Is it hell-bent on a 100 percent success or can it be flexible and work on the principle that 99 percent of a good win is better than 100 percent of a loss?

2. **How it achieves its goals.** Can it be flexible enough to change, to take inputs from outsiders, many of whom it may regard as little better than nuisances?

3. **Who it uses to help it achieve these goals.** Organizations – and in particular large corporations – often have a machismo which tends to make them shun help. This is foolish. In the world of controversial issues, third party advocates – those who can speak on your behalf – are not just powerful, they are essential. This is a key tenet of this book.

To counter the threats and take advantage of the opportunity that the environment brings also takes total attention to detail. Throughout this book, about half the examples are at the local community level. It is here that problems arise which quickly escalate into national crises.

It is at this local level that the first tarnishes can begin to appear on the corporate image which can quickly spread to ruin the whole. Would Brent Spar be the issue it was had Shell not been in such a hurry (for very good reasons) to dump it, or would the UK’s Newbury bypass (badly needed) have been such an issue if some local people had not supported the tree-dwellers?

In the world of issues management, no detail is too small.

**The opportunities**

The classic example of a company with strong environmental credentials is The Body Shop, which – almost totally without advertising and through strong linkages into green issues – has built a powerful brand.

Even something as mundane as do-it-yourself has seen the value of this approach: the UK chain, B&Q, has spent ten years devising an ethical and environmental stance for its brand – and shouting loudly about it. Why? Because it will increase sales and profits. The company takes great pride in the action plans it has devised and implemented.

A successful brand name and image enhance the value of a product, boost public confidence in that product and, consequently, boost sales and share prices.

Brand names are often more important than the actual product. Richard Branson’s Virgin brand, for example, is synonymous with high quality and