# Breaking down the wall

Stefanie Kaiser on shaping perceptions of the forestry and wood sector and, overleaf, looks at some communication tools

People gather in front of trees – the people are in a group, the trees form a green wall. Green, yes, but a wall nevertheless.

I decided to use icon art to start this article. Icons – commonly used in infographics and animations – are a simple and direct way of saying little but communicating much.

Walls are not good for relationships. If walls between people exist, effective communication cannot happen. We often wonder why 'others' (ie someone we talk to, the general public etc) just do not seem to get the most obvious messages. Do they lack intellectual capacity? No, it is as simple as this communication model shows:
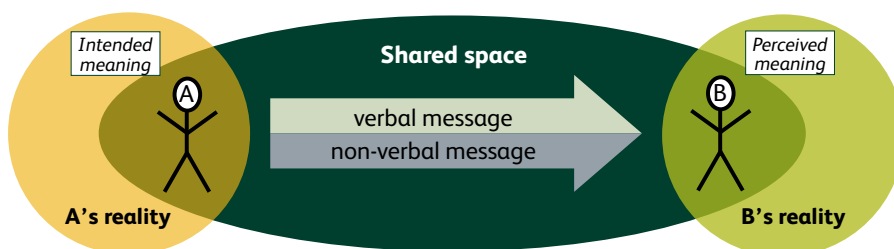
Germans use the phrase '*to have a wire to someone*', meaning '*to have an open communication channel, a good connection with someone*'. Bottom line: it's not all about **what** we communicate, but **how** we do it.

Forestry is THE sustainable industry of the XXI century – don't you get it?
For many of us foresters it is difficult to comprehend why the general public might not always see productive forestry as a green sector that addresses the challenges of our times, ie creating economic value while generating environmental and social benefits at the same time,

contributing to public goods. Our arguments of why commercial forestry makes economic, environmental and social sense are strong, 'no brainers', some would say. However, it is at an intellectual level where those messages are most convincing. What we are struggling with is how the layman interprets the message based on their pre-existing opinions and perceptions.

Perception happens at a more emotional level and once established, it cannot be changed easily by presenting convincing arguments alone. Perceptions are often formed early in life, by experiences. And, as it happens, for a lot of us, the concept of productive forestry that we were exposed to in our childhood is very different to the model of contemporary forestry that is a reality in the UK nowadays. In addition, we all have seen our share of horrifying television images of Brazilian rainforests being destroyed by massive machines – clearfelled. So, no wonder that clearfells are not something that a lot of people would intuitively perceive as pintoresque or even sustainable. However, they do get a cosy feeling when driving past a wheat field (an unsustainable monoculture at best) being harvested by a tractor – it reminds them of the "good olden times" when we were all happily living as farmers... Back to forestry: we know that "clearfell is not clearfell", and we can present good arguments for why clearfell harvesting practices in the UK are in line with sustainable forest management *(see p49)*. But how can we challenge the feelings that the image of a clearfell evokes in people?

American psychologist Jerome Bruner, who passed away last year, developed a model of perception. If a person has still not developed an opinion on a target, it is easy to shape their perception. This is heavily exploited in politics, not always with the best intentions. At this stage, they can receive and assess different arguments. They then start to form an opinion and will tend to accept information that confirms their view of the subject. A more consistent perception is shaped in their heads – at this stage, messages that stand in contrast to their perception will most likely not affect their perception anymore.

This is the challenge the productive forestry sector often faces when communicating with external stakeholders. Among a large part of the population, maybe not so much the youngest generations, there are certain perceptions

of the commercial forestry that have partially been shaped by less sustainable land use practices of the past, when tax considerations heavily influenced forest design. I would dare to say that the sector of renewable energies, for example, has an advantage in this respect: it is a fairly new sector that has started with a clear promise of sustainability; their image is that of a green and modern sector, although in reality, forestry is way ahead of it when it comes to sustainability at all levels.

As a first step, Confor is now more inclined to use the term 'productive forestry', rather than using the adjective 'commercial', which for many people has a slightly negative connotation.

> **How can we challenge the feelings that the image of a clearfell evokes in people?**

Learning from Branding
So, before we start trying to 'teach' people anything or appeal to their intellectual reasoning, we need to change the way they feel about things.

A brand is a set of marketing and communication methods that help to create a lasting (and desired) impression in the minds of an audience (eg costumers, the general public).

We can learn a lot from the publicity sector when it comes to changing perceptions: what are the tools we can use to make the general public see our sector as we do, as a sustainable, innovative and modern industry? It is not only about using modern media platforms that people are familiar with (social media, animations etc), but also using the right colours, words, layouts or symbols to set the right context for our content.

In 2016, it would be slightly odd to receive a client in an office with a clear, in-need-of-modernisation and not-quite-retro-yet design, with brown curtains, 70s tapestry and crochet doilies – unless of course we are a creative agency that consciously goes for a vintage look-and-feel. In the same fashion, we need to pay attention to seemingly trivial format details – such as the seven 'tools' listed in the tag cloud illustration on the next page – to ensure that our corporate image, our 'brand', is perceived as contemporary, and therefore our sustainability claims are taken seriously.

The circular economy illustration (right) shows a style that people can easily associate with the concepts of green, sustainable or circular economy, or ethical markets.

A certain palette of muted colours are used, soft edges, shapes with no outlines, iconic art, sans-serif fonts – we see such a style everywhere nowadays: when products receive a branding

cutting edge
quality products
responsible
renewable
career
innovative
modern
high net-worth
green
diversity

How would you use the seven tools listed below to depict a modern forestry sector that can be described by the key words in the tag cloud?

1 Typography
2 Colour and colour combinations
3 Infographic and iconic art
4 Simple designs
5 Simple messages and slogans
6 Contemporary design elements
7 Avoiding words with negative connotation.

makeover, when Greggs changed its branding to appear more middle class and healthy etc.

Nowadays, icons and infographics with a contemporary look are freely available online.

The circular ecomomy model: taken from: www.sandbirch.com

Simple and more informal, amicable wording and formats are often used to suggest transparency and effectiveness. *What you see is what you get.* Our forestry has gone with the times, but if its branding stays behind, so will people's associations of our industry.

❝ What you see is what you get.

Addressing misperceptions
Excerpt from Confor's 2015 communications strategy

Three common (mis)perceptions that we aim to challenge followed by the accurate perceptions we want to help to shape

1 "New planting is bad for the landscape, wildlife and local people and involves change (from bare land to forest, then to large clear-fells), which is not desirable. Commercial/productive forestry means square blocks of dense conifer monocultures, which look threatening and unnatural, and are most likely unsustainable."

New planting is a positive opportunity to create value in the form of rural economic development and the delivery of higher-value ecosystem services, in particular carbon. Modern commercial forestry is multi-purpose and takes into consideration aspects of landscape and access, environment and wildlife. We can be proud that UK forestry is guided by very high sustainability standards.

2 "Forests are for recreation or wildlife and managing them, especially harvesting trees, is damaging to the forest (trees don't get old and die or blow over)." Clear-fell, especially, is seen as bad as it has a negative visual and wildlife impact. "Conifers are bad."

All forests have been subject to human intervention, and responsible management benefits a forest for wildlife and for people. This can include anything from thinning to create light, to clearfell of some areas for timber and replanting that creates habitat

for particular species. Income from sales of wood provides resources for public access and thinned forest has more light and is more attractive. Both broadleaved and conifers have a reason to exist, the mix should depend on the site and the purpose of the forest. Productive (still mixed) forests produce a valuable, everyday product – wood. Modern design ensures they are attractive in the landscape and protect water. Some of the most intense management produces very high wildlife benefit, eg coppicing.

3 "Forestry and wood processing is an old-fashioned, low-value and low-skill industry." People do not have a visual image of how the forests that are being planted, following best practice, will look like or the benefits they will provide; it is an out-of-date style of forestry that keeps informing their perception. A main challenge is that many high-impact mature forests that people see now, are the result of planting policies of the 70ies and 80ies. Nowadays, such forests would include a certain amount of mixed species and areas managed for wildlife, and landscape factors would be taken into account.

Forestry is a modern, innovative, cutting-edge and (in rural areas) relatively high-value sector. It produces high-quality 'green' products and offers interesting and diverse employment opportunities.

More than words

Visual communication tools and beyond

Video

Video is a staple comms tool nowadays, but its only as good as its content. Videos can be incredibly boring and can, in the worst case, create an image of an organisation, company or sector that is dull and outdated. On the other hand, it can be used to surprise audiences with fresh and contemporary content. Branding tricks can help here too – choose the right typgraphy for titles, an interesting mix of people that represent the 'vibe' you want to communicate, the right shots, length, and so forth. Sounds difficult? Work with a trusted production company and make sure you are involved in the production process to make sure they fully understand not only the messages you want to convey, but also the look-and-feel you want to achieve in the final product.

Engaging your audience

by **Toby Trueman**

Our experience of working within the forestry sector has seen us partnering with project teams from Confor, Forestry Commission, ICF, Scottish Natural Heritage and SEPA, and on a number of key focus points from large-scale industrial processes to environmental issues. These projects have given us reason to research the sector and examine how it currently markets itself in the digital space.

There are opportunities to develop content that is more aligned with the modern viewership; films that respect the viewing preferences of the audience while keeping a focus on engagement. If Facebook is your key distribution channel, then your film should be no longer than 60 seconds and able to work without sound, seeing as 85 % of videos viewed on Facebook are watched silently as people quickly browse their feeds. If you've got a larger project to house on your website and play out at conferences, then you could take a more documentary approach and go for a longer run-time, knowing you'll have a more targeted audience base or you want to make something that can be used as a resource.

Whichever direction you want to go for your project, a key aim is to consider your story and your production values, which doesn't necessarily mean bigger budget! The forestry sector in itself is very visual, and easily lends itself to great content. Even so, a key narrative is important, as is keeping information clear, concise and relevant: an audience can only absorb so much information, so don't try to put too much into your film.

We approach filmmaking by making sure we first understand the topic, needs and the audience. A certain creative direction might work for one project, but not for another, so it's important to approach every film with fresh eyes. In collaboration with the client, we chip away at the core messaging until it's down to the bare essentials, then focus on how best to bring these to life.

Remember that once your video is out there, promote it. Engage with people on social media and repeatedly push it out across your network. If people like it, they will share it, so don't sit back and hope people will stumble across it by accident. The audience is central to every consideration in filmmaking; make films for them, and not for yourself. We can help with that.

Toby Trueman, creative director at Heehaw, an Edinburgh-based production company

www.heehaw.co.uk

A still from the Confor video Our Forests, Our People
www.confor.org.uk/our-story/our-story/

> "It only takes us 150ms to process a symbol and 100ms to attach a meaning to it."
> *NeoMan Studios*

In the link below, you'll find a great example of an effective infographic that could easily be turned into an animation. It explains why infographics are so successful.
http://neomam.com/interactive/13reasons

Infographic animation

Infographics and infographic animations are often used by communicators to provide audiences with an easy-to-understand graphic representation of otherwise complicated data. Typical corporate explainer animations use elements of iconic art and infographics, but more bespoke artistic styles, from stop-motion to hand-drawn illustrations can be used. Animations are a very direct way of communicating, because we are visually wired and are constantly being overloaded with information. This means that animation and infographics have an impressive potential to help us with effective communication, including the tackling of entrenched public perceptions. But the tool itself does not do the job – it is the art of designing the right content and style that allows us to make full use of this potential.

In the case of the Confor animation, the infographics helped us get across the bigger picture of the forestry and wood story, and 'tick' many of the secondary messages we want the public to understand: the connection between forest and product, management and biodiversity, among others. We also want our audiences to understand why we produce wood and how that relates to the forest, touching on important aspects such as wood as a sustainable material, carbon benefits from wood and forests, modern forestry practices, the economic contribution of forestry and the need for planting to satisfy demand.

In case you did not have to chance to see the animation commissioned by Confor for the forestry and timber sector:
www.confor.org.uk/our-story/animating-forestry

3D visualisation and beyond

While foresters are well known for their attachment to 2D maps, these aren't always helpful in explaining the impact of landscape change to all stakeholders. 3D stills or animated sequences can be an effective way of showing stakeholders where current forests come from, how they are changing and what they will look like in the future. Public opinions on landuse are often based on perceptions, rather than objective analysis.

"Photo-realistic computer visualisation is a powerful new tool, allowing the silviculturalist and forest manager to analyse the time dimension of management proposals and engage in effective participatory decision-making with a range of non-specialist stakeholders", says Dr Scott McG Wilson, Chartered Forester and Surveyor based in Aberdeen. Steve Conolly of Cawdor Forestry adds that "visualising what our planting or felling proposals are likely to look like in the future is especially important in sensitive landscapes".

Community engagement consultant and FC Commissioner Amanda Bryan agrees: "This use of modern technology could revolutionise the way in which the sector communicates, emphasising benefits and potentially minimising any concerns," (more on page 24).

Forestry companies and organisations all over the world are already producing visualisations, using 3D landscape design & visualisation softwares such as Visual Nature Studio, for which a forestry edition exists. FCS are currently working to develop a new computer generated visualisation system named 'Prospect'. The aspiration is that by early

Use of landscape visualisation for woodland expansion planning. Images previously created using the 3DNature Visual Nature Studio software, employing Ordnance Survey Land-Form Profile contour data under OS Licence No. 100042781. Copyright: Dr. Scott McG. Wilson.

2017 the forestry sector will have access to a relatively inexpensive and effective visualisation software capable of – importantly – contributing towards the design process and visualising forest management proposals, for the benefit of all forestry stakeholders.

As with all communication productions, the question of how best to disseminate it is key to achieving a good return on investment. In the case of visualisations, websites are the obvious choice to host impactful images and animations, but for larger projects, there are more cutting-edge solutions to engage audiences in a truly impactful way. Immersive experiences and virtual realities will soon be booming – the ultimate way to emotionally connect with your audience and create long-lasting impressions.

Information as an experience
– the ultimate key to shaping perceptions

by **Tam Treanor,** of Beebionica

Methods by which we engage and inform our audience are changing fast. Brochures, social media, video all work fairly well at getting across information. But are there more engaging ways of reaching people? I suggest the answer is yes, there most certainly are. We are embarking on an era where we do not simply digest information, we experience it. From virtual reality headsets to immersive and interactive multi-sensory installations, the tools, techniques and expertise are fast developing to make experiencing information the new reality.

The construction industry have been quick on the uptake using immersive rooms to virtually explore large architectural builds before commissioning them. Forest and harvesting managers face the same challenge of having to justify propositions involving large-scale landscape changes to both the public and civil servants.

Imagine exploring forests through an immersive 360° video display of forest growth sequences, modelled in 3D. Now add the possibility of sounds coming from different directions – as it would in real life. In the real world we digest an incredible amount of information very efficiently through all our senses at once - this is why well-guided trips to the field so often result in people making "if I had known this before…" concessions. By modelling the sounds and graphics we can not only create a very good representation of future realities; we can also orchestrate an environment that reinforces positive messages at an emotional level – this is important when we are dealing with long-term landscape-level changes that cannot easily be shown in real-life.

Virtual techniques allow us to display the reality in a controlled way. Imagine wanting to raise awareness of the importance of conifer forests for biodiversity. In an immersive room or pod we could, like in a museum, accompany an impactful image or video with voice-overs and spatialised sound to give a sense of the pulsating forest life most of us weren't aware of.

Nowadays, there is no need to come up with the funds to build a private IMAX theatre. More portable or bespoke solutions exist and it is more about how we use the concept of 'immersion' in a creative way to suit our purposes.

BeeBionica is an Immersive Experiences and Interaction design studio.
www.beebionica.com

> **Very soon we will move through digital information not just with our eyes and ears but with all our senses: I call this 'experiential information' – the ultimate way to shape perceptions and public opinion.**