



In a 24/7 information world, where hard-won reputations can be lost through a single misjudged social post, we all need to be able to take the rough with the smooth says **David Lee**

In recent months, the forestry and wood industry has had one of those rougher patches, where a range of different criticisms have been levelled through traditional and social media, and sometimes both simultaneously. These attacks have mainly related to Scotland, which is to be expected as almost 80% of new planting is happening there. However, the lessons about handling negative coverage are generic, and can apply to all kinds of forestry in all parts of the UK.

#### **How to constructively respond to negative media attention?**

Confor is well aware that such attacks can lead to businesses who have consulted closely with communities and followed stringent UK Forest Standard guidelines (to the letter and well beyond), to tear their hair out. But how should we, and how do we, respond?

In summary, we engage. We will call out unfounded criticism and counter it with

evidence, and will consistently share clear and positive messages about modern, mixed-species and multi-purpose forestry.

We will talk about the climate change benefits of both tree planting and wood use - and will continue to do so even more loudly as COP26 approaches. We will deploy clear evidence, such as the recent paper by Bangor University which said that commercial forestry can deliver significantly more net carbon benefits than more natural broadleaf systems in the same time period, up to two and a half times more in some cases.

We will talk about the opportunities for forestry and wood to lead a green recovery from Covid-19. We talk about the £1 billion contribution to the Scottish economy that our sector makes, and the 25,000+ jobs it supports.

And we will be positive about the need for a mosaic of new woodland types, but stress that large-scale productive planting has to be part of the mix if we want to make a real positive difference to our

environment and economy.

Global demand for timber is soaring and the UK should boost its domestic wood production to avoid an even higher reliance on imports. Currently, over 80% of the timber we use is imported and we would not want this figure to increase. By producing more timber domestically, we retain more control over sustainable forest management and future timber supply. No-one needs to be told that timber prices are rising rapidly - and at a UK level,

IT'S SO IMPORTANT THAT THE INDUSTRY RESPONDS IN A STRUCTURED, INFORMED AND PROFESSIONAL MANNER TO CRITICISM; WE MUST NOT BE AGGRESSIVE OR OVERLY DEFENSIVE.



## MEDIA CRITICISM HAS MAINLY RELATED TO FOUR SPECIFIC THEMES

- 1** An alleged lack of consultation with local communities ahead of planting schemes.
- 2** Claims that the standards applied to modern productive planting are not stringent enough.
- 3** Repeated criticism that Sitka spruce is still over-dominant in planting schemes.
- 4** Attacks on ploughing, with claims that it releases carbon and negates the climate benefits of planting schemes.

the Government must take more responsibility to grow more of our own wood in the coming decades.

### **Proactive and reactive media work go hand in hand**

These messages (and many more, depending on the outlet) are constantly reinforced through Confor's proactive media work (see p11) - and when responding reactively to critical articles. The proactive and reactive work must go hand in hand; if we go entirely onto the defensive and spend all our time putting out fires, then we play into the hands of our critics, we move onto their territory.

Yet at the moment, the need to react to negative coverage of our industry is an immediate priority for Confor. And we recognise that when those criticisms are

levelled at members, not everyone is well-equipped to cope.

It's so important that the industry responds in a structured, informed and professional manner to criticism, using consistent messages and language; we must not be aggressive or overly defensive.

### **Crisis communications toolkit for members**

To ensure this happens, Confor is working with members to provide a crisis communications toolkit. This is to allow members to think about the basics when faced with negative criticism - and to respond appropriately.

There are lots of very simple things you can do to begin with; just having clear contact details on your website so a journalist can send an email or make a call

to a person who knows what to do. We have seen examples where email baskets are not monitored, where there is no clear policy. In those instances, calls and emails can end up bouncing around a business, spreading panic and frustrating the journalist as their deadline approaches.

Tone is also really important - a journalist is always more likely to respond positively to someone who is friendly, approachable and helpful, rather than defensive. There can be a tendency in our industry to assume that journalists have deep knowledge of forestry - in almost all cases, they don't. Most journalists who have contacted Confor recently are generalists and know very little - which is why it is important to always use straightforward, high-level messages about why forestry and wood matters so much to our economy >>





>> and environment.

The crisis communications toolkit also aims to ensure that members and Confor work together effectively. Some queries will be very specific and best dealt with by an individual business, with Confor kept informed and offering support as necessary, whereas others will clearly focus on industry-wide issues where Confor will take the lead.

**Disparate attacks rather than a coordinated conspiracy**

One tricky challenge is that the criticisms can sometimes morph together - across social media and traditional media, with a dollop of environmental campaigner and celebrity critic (often Chris Packham) thrown in.

When this happens, it is easy to think that there might be a coordinated attack on productive forestry. Confor does not believe this is the case and thinks there are actually a wide range of different motivations for the criticisms - ranging from very localised concerns about tree planting of any kind, to dislike of specific practices (like ploughing) to a simple visceral dislike of conifer species.

Some attacks are designed to undermine productive planting by proxy - for example, the criticism of ploughing on peat soils is often loudest from those who seek to promote greater native planting at the expense of new productive woodlands. Ploughing is a way in, a 'hook' to promote a specific agenda in the media.

Confor's view is that criticism should never be downplayed, and should always be countered effectively - but that a range of disparate attacks must not develop into a sense of conspiracy, or a feeling that everyone is against us.

**A reality check**

To put things in perspective, well over 30,000 hectares of new woodland have been planted in Scotland over the last

TONE IS ALSO REALLY IMPORTANT - A JOURNALIST IS ALWAYS MORE LIKELY TO RESPOND POSITIVELY TO SOMEONE WHO IS FRIENDLY, APPROACHABLE AND HELPFUL, RATHER THAN DEFENSIVE

three year, with a large productive component - and a strong pipeline of further planting is in place. Members were understandably concerned by the departure of Fergus Ewing as Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy, as he had been such a staunch supporter of our industry.

However, Confor has had very constructive early engagement with the new minister responsible for forestry, Mairi McAllan MSP, and hopes she will visit a planting site and wood processing facility soon.

Engaging closely with politicians of all parties - and with environmental groups, farmers and indeed all those interested in rural land use - is absolutely vital and must run in conjunction with our proactive and reactive media work. We have to talk to everybody and as Stuart Goodall said in his latest article in the Press & Journal, Confor's doors - and its email baskets - are always open.

Let's not kid ourselves that this criticism of forestry and wood will go away. In the era of 24/7 information overload, it will keep coming.

We just need to be sure that we are readier than ever, with strong and positive arguments, a structured, industry-wide approach - and a real sense of purpose.

## ENGAGING WITH JOURNALISTS

What are the best practices for your crisis communication? During these times, it can be stressful and easy to jump to a decision that could cause more harm than good.



- > Have obvious contact information for media or public enquiries on your website - be transparent and approachable
- > Choose a suitable first point of contact and brief them!
- > Use layman's language when dealing with journalists or the public, and find out what their previous knowledge is; it's probably very limited
- > Use evidence and data to substantiate your claims
- > Seek advice from others, strengthen your response by bringing in others within the industry
- > Use positive and optimistic language



- > Be defensive or apologetic
- > Expose unprepared staff members to interrogation by confrontational journalists or members of public
- > Have a blaming or polarising attitude
- > Use very technical language or assume any level of knowledge from journalists
- > Voice opinion/views that are personal to that company or individual or are irrelevant to the situation