



# BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required Peak Coverage: The Trajectory and Impact of Media Covering All That's Green

Breakout Session Summary

Friday, November 7, 2008 | 10:30 a.m.-noon

## Speakers

- **Dave Burdick**, Business and Green Editor, *Huffington Post*
- **Dorinda Elliott**, Deputy Editor/Special Projects, *Condé Nast Traveler*
- **Sarah Murray**, Author and Contributor, *Financial Times*
- **Mike Lawrence**, Executive Vice President, Corporate Responsibility & Crisis Prevention & Management, Cone (moderator)

## Highlights

- A good story, and the pitch that will make it successful, have to be framed in context and be balanced.
- It's not about *being* green—which is hard to verify—it's the *process* of getting there that will mostly likely interest reporters.
- The more that companies are transparent, and share their challenges and mistakes along with their successes, the more likely they are to get covered in the media.
- The media will continue to cover corporate responsibility, and given the economic crisis and political realities, trust issues are more important than ever.

## Memorable Quotes

- “The role of a journalist is to skip the terminology and to say what you mean ... rather than vague talk about sustainability.” —Sarah Murray, *Financial Times*
- “I'm really impressed when a company can show that they've not only done something green but they're also saving money.” —Dave Burdick, *Huffington Post*
- “Make [your story pitch] human. Corporate acts of charity are much less interesting than human beings tackling problems.” —Dorinda Elliott, *Condé Nast Traveler*

## Overview

Lawrence opened by taking questions from the audience to help guide the session. The questions ranged from why all of these issues are currently being addressed in the media and whether it will actually be influential, to new media versus traditional media, and the





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respective credibility of each. Furthermore, the audience identified the confusion surrounding what to pitch and to whom.

Murray encouraged anyone pitching journalists to go beyond vague talk about sustainability, and explain in simple terms what they're doing and how it is relevant to their specific business. She went on to say that journalists are not just trying to find the dirt, but rather trying to shed light on a really difficult decision or situation. Even though most people won't want to share the dirt with reporters, they should remember that it's still out there and it's very difficult to cover up things of this nature anymore. She suggests engaging with reporters from the beginning in a controlled way using honesty and transparency.

Lawrence then asked the panel about corporate responsibility reports and whether or not they use them as material for their coverage. The panelists agreed that a newly-published report, and the information in it, doesn't warrant media coverage—and they encouraged people not to pitch journalists a story about a report itself. Rather, it's most helpful to highlight sections of the report that journalists may find interesting, as they are more likely to use the information for reference when covering broader stories in the future.

Elliott stated that it's a challenge for editors to sort out what's greenwashing and what isn't greenwashing. She suggested some tips for people when pitching potential stories: 1. Give the journalists some dirt. 2. Highlight the drama or controversy. 3. Be transparent and share your mistakes. 4. Make it human. The panelists agreed that it's helpful to localize a story, for example by linking the issue to a specific city if possible. Murray added that, to warrant coverage in the *Financial Times*, there must also be a clear global implication.

Burdick noted that he is impressed when companies can save money while saving energy and water, making them a good example for others to follow. He also stated that he loves to see companies beat the government to things, noting that there's currently a great opportunity for any company to make its vehicle fleet hybrid and natural gas before President-elect Obama does so with government vehicles, as he has pledged to do.

During the Q&A period, Kara Hartnett Hurst, Managing Director, East Coast, BSR, asked whether or not we will see an increase in media coverage that makes the connection between climate change, human rights, and poverty alleviation. Murray responded by saying that she's currently writing an article on the food crisis and poverty. Elliott said that she too is looking at such big picture issues in the travel industry and that these are the kinds of stories that will be found more and more.

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This summary is also available on [www.bsr.org/bsrconferences/2008/session-summaries.cfm](http://www.bsr.org/bsrconferences/2008/session-summaries.cfm).

