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AN IMAGE FOR THE FUTURE

The forest products industry is adrift in negative images. From early childhood, all through primary and secondary education, and even as adults, we are bombarded with negative images of the forest products industry. My 8-year-old son was recently in a school play, in which the theme was the environment. The symbol that was chosen to represent the environment was a tree, and the message was "it is bad to cut down a tree." Nothing was said about forest rehabilitation, nor about the thousands of wood products we depend on, nor about the environmental impacts of substituting other materials for wood. The image the kids and the parents were left with was cutting a beautiful tree and leaving a stump.

This was not a play sponsored by some radical environmental group. This seemingly harmless image was derived straight from the minds of a group of highly educated school teachers, who have accepted this image as truth. The kids accepted it and hardly a murmur was heard from the parents in the audience. This image and many others that we acquire during our lives shape our value judgments. If one were to keep score, I wonder how many images the forest products industry could chalk up in the positive column and how many in the negative column? To be sure, the forest products industry has its share of palpable problems. Why worry about something so subjective as image? The answer is simply that the vast majority of people have very little access to tangible information on which to base value judgments. In a free society, those value judgments will ultimately drive the economy and set gov-

ernment policy. To borrow a phrase, "image is everything."

What bothers me is that the forest products industry has allowed itself to be battered and abused by negative imagery. Let's take stock of some of the images that are perpetuated to represent the industry—fields of stumps, polluted streams, homeless owls, belching smokestacks, invisible carcinogenic gas (formaldehyde), old-fashioned—all of these and more for a product that many perceive to decay on contact, repel all attempts at painting, breed termites, and be suitable only for disposable (packaging, newspapers, etc.) or nonpermanent applications. All of these negative images have dictated to me at one time or another as someone's perception of the truth. In these circumstances, I then take the offensive and try to present my version of the truth, which incidentally is not always a glowing recommendation of the industry. The point is that the industry must come to grips with its identity and take responsibility for generating its own positive images.

Granted, images are not reality. In most cases images are fragments of truth mixed with strong emotions. As a scientist, I would like to believe that I'm immune to the influences of images. As a human being, I know that all of us are moved in subtle ways by images. (If you don't believe this, then you don't believe in the advertising industry.) From a political or business standpoint, facts are often of little consequence when the facts contradict the image held by the majority of the people. In this regard the forest products industry is at an ex-

treme disadvantage, since the public tends to have strong feelings (images) concerning the use of public lands and the environment. Those images will take time to change, perhaps measured in generations rather than years.

What can be done? I don't know of any easy answers. Positive image building is essential. The industry must build on the public trust. To do this, certain value judgments of the public must change. For example, if a higher value is placed on protecting the environment, then the public must be willing to bear the cost. Alternative harvesting methods, reduced raw material supply, best available technology for pollution control, and increased use of recyclables are real costs that the industry must pass on to consumers. The public expects these changes, among others, but has no intention of paying for them. Why? The image (true or false makes no difference) of decades of below-cost timber sales from public lands being gobbled-up by powerful timber barons will not garner much sympathy. The public perceives a porkbarrel of government subsidies. Would you buy into that?

We must be careful not to confuse positive image building with deception. The public is not ignorant, and a deception will usually be uncovered, leading to more harm than good. The forest products industry does not have a

perfect environmental record. For that matter, what industry does? What should be emphasized is that certain segments of the forest products industry have made great strides to make up for questionable business practices in the past. Energy self-sufficiency and dramatic improvements in wood product yields are tremendous success stories. Wood is a versatile and renewable material, which is unique in all the world. Forest growth and many forms of wildlife habitat can actually be improved with a well-managed harvesting and rehabilitation plan. Positive image building can be achieved through education, both through the mass media and in the classroom. Positive image building will require a long-term commitment by the industry and the academic community. It is no longer enough just to convince the stockholders and persuade a few key individuals in state and federal government. The industry must convince the public and the public believes in images.

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