



MINE THE GAP

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The mining industry is at a crucial turning point. It has long been an enabler of many conveniences we take for granted – from heating to lighting in our homes – but as the global demand for metals and critical minerals surges to support the green transition, transforming public perception has become essential for the industry's success.

Despite significant investment in modern sustainable practices and ESG strategies, public scepticism persists. This stems from decades of environmental harm and social disruption that have cast a long shadow over the industry, threatening its “social licence to operate” at a time of immense opportunity.

The societal desire to mitigate climate catastrophe has never been greater, and governments are responding to the public's call. In recent years the sector has faced unprecedented government intervention. According to [KMPG](#), 48% of executives view tougher government scrutiny of ESG and net-zero performance as the biggest risk to operations over the next five years.

However, this challenge also presents a unique opportunity for 'redemption' and to redefine the mining industry's future role. By addressing the perception gaps outlined in this article, the industry can bridge the divide between consumer misconceptions and the reality of modern mining.

If done right, companies and their people can position themselves as environmental stewards and community partners that go above and beyond what has been expected of them, credibly demonstrating their crucial role in enabling tomorrow's sustainable society.

This requires not just bold operational improvements, but also a fundamental rethink of how the industry communicates and engages with the public.

THE PERCEPTION GAP: MORE THAN JUST DIRT



Today's mining companies are making strides in green mining—practices that minimise environmental impacts through reduced emissions, water conservation, and ethical sourcing. Yet, these efforts are frequently overshadowed by the industry's tarnished image.

In the public eye, mining is often synonymous with environmental degradation. This perception is not entirely unfounded; the history of mining is marred with instances of ecological harm.

The perception gap is stark. According to the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), only 32% of the public believes that mining companies act responsibly.

In a survey by the [ICMM and Globe Scan](#), the mining industry was seen as among the lowest performers of all 18 sectors tested when it comes to fulfilling societal responsibilities.

A lack of comprehension exacerbates this problem. A [University of Queensland](#) survey revealed that while 65% of respondents were aware of general environmental issues, only 34% could accurately describe sustainable mining practices. The public fails to grasp the vital role of mining in powering modern society, highlighting the need for better education on green mining and stronger connections between the sector's efforts and decarbonisation goals.

WHY MINING COMPANIES HAVE FAILED TO CONVINCE THE PUBLIC

“The scars left by past mining activities are not just physical but deeply psychological,” says Dr. Maria Santos, an environmental scientist at the University of Cambridge.

“Communities and ecosystems have endured so much that current efforts, however genuine, are often met with scepticism.”

Historical legacy of environmental damage

One of the primary reasons mining companies have struggled to change public perception is the industry's historical legacy of environmental damage. Massive open-pit mines, deforestation, water pollution, and toxic waste dumps are indelibly etched into the collective memory.

These past misdeeds continue to cast a long shadow over present efforts, making it difficult for the public to trust that genuine change is underway.

Failure to engage local communities

Another critical misstep has been the failure to engage meaningfully with local communities. Mining operations often impact local populations directly, yet many companies have not prioritised building strong, positive relationships with these communities.

As a result, local opposition has become a significant barrier, fuelled by a deep sense of mistrust. Given community impact is the ESG factor that faces the most scrutiny from investors in 2024, according to [EY](#), the industry will need to take another look at how it can best engage with communities.

Failure to address the ‘Dirty Miner’ image



The industry’s failure to address its ‘dirty miner’ image exacerbates its talent shortage, especially among women, who hold only [14% of jobs worldwide](#). The lack of inclusion and STEM talent makes the transition to automated and AI-enabled operations challenging, compounding attraction and retention issues.

Changing this perception can widen the talent pool, making the industry more attractive and desirable, and helping to attract and retain the necessary talent for future advancements.

Failure to engage the youth

A particularly concerning issue is the mining industry’s failure to engage with the youth. According to the “[Gen Z Perceptions of Mining](#)” report, 73% of young people believe that mining does more harm than good. This perception is driven by a lack of awareness about sustainable practices, negative media coverage, and a disconnect with youth values, especially regarding climate change.

This distrust poses significant risks, including weakened public support and future talent shortage. Data from [McKinsey](#) confirms the issue: 70% of its 15- to 30-year-old respondents said that they “definitely wouldn’t” or “probably wouldn’t” consider working in the mining industry.

The disconnect between corporate communication and reality

Many mining companies have attempted to shift public perception through logical arguments and data-rich reports. However, these efforts often fall flat because they fail to address the emotional and experiential aspects of public opinion. People’s views are shaped by gut reactions and personal experiences, not just facts and figures. The communication strategies employed have frequently been too technical, impersonal, and disconnected from the everyday concerns of the public.

“Our conventional approach to changing hearts and minds about mining has been to emphasise the need for mined products, and that’s at best incomplete, and at worst, counterproductive.”

“Here are some reasons why:

It is a logical answer to an emotional question. People’s feelings about mining -particularly if those are negative - are formed in their gut and possibly personal experience, and we’ve been trying to appeal to their heads.

Gut always wins and for every one piece of educational content that reaches people, they can find a thousand pieces that reinforces what their gut says.”

notes [Rohitेश Dhawan](#), President and CEO, ICMM

MINING NEEDS A CHANGE OF NARRATIVE

The key to bridging the perception gap will be addressing both rational and emotional public concerns through authentic, transparent, and resonant communication. An approach that emotionally connects what really matters to people with the ‘mining world’.

The industry has often relied on communication strategies that have failed to shift its negative public image. To de-risk the future and win the public’s backing for the era of critical minerals, the approach needs a fundamental change. With accelerating regulatory, investor and buyer intervention, the pressure is on.

In a recent survey by the [ICMM](#), the public overwhelmingly expressed a willingness to reconsider their views of the industry if performance improves. This is a positive and strong signal to the industry that there is a way forward.

Shifting to an effective marketing and communications approach will not be an easy task. Here are some ideas to consider:

Telling the new story of mining

Craft robust narratives that detail your journey with proof points, highlighting the tangible benefits of transformative initiatives towards net-zero. Particularly, how mining is part of people’s daily lives. Avoid tokenistic actions that could undermine your efforts. When done right, the benefits are clear: trust increases among those aware of specific green mining initiatives, as shown by the Edelman Trust Barometer.

Leverage creative marketing to transform your narratives into inspirational stories. Centre your messaging around a compelling core idea and amplify it across social media platforms to shift perceptions on a large scale.

Community and cultural engagement

To get closer to those most affected by mining, start with listening. Get to know their concerns, cultural values, and behaviours. Use this knowledge to help people understand the positive impact mining can have on local communities.

Collaborate with local storytellers and use credible testimonials from community members to create content that reflects the community's voice. This adds authenticity, emotional resonance and weaves the company into the local cultural fabric.

Act and campaign like a brand

The industry has long undervalued the power of its brands. By building positive brand equity, it can emphasise its role in supporting modern life and sustainable development. This includes brand messaging, tonality, and look & feel to reflect a commitment to positive change.

Secondly, companies should take a cue from big consumer brands. Bring your initiatives to life in unexpected ways. Create 'wow moments' that capture attention. Translate complex topics into simple, powerful advertising or experiential ideas that people can understand. Amplified with PR, media relations, or coverage by influential figures, your ideas of regeneration and commitment to the environment will spread.

Attract and promote with employee stories

To the public, humanise the industry by spotlighting the people behind the operations. Share stories of employees who are passionate about sustainability and making a difference. A series of short films following a day in the life of a sustainability officer, or a pioneering female engineer can create a personal connection with the audience.

To the future talent your company needs, highlight inclusive cultural practices where diversity is valued and respected. This includes zero-tolerance policies towards discrimination and harassment. Celebrate achievements and highlight role models.

For example, through inspirational profiles of successful women in the industry that highlight career possibilities and inspire others.

Gen Z and Millennial engagement

As stated above, the industry faces a two fold challenge: counter mistrust and position itself as an attractive employer. To address both, the companies should create content that resonates with Gen Z's values and interests, particularly around sustainability. Campaigns on platforms like TikTok, rooting mining in their culture (or sub-cultures), the role of critical minerals in their future life and why working in mining offers attractive employment opportunities with perspective to grow, can capture their attention and support.

Counter established misconceptions

The mining industry should address misconceptions by transparently sharing accurate information and dismantling false online statements. Traditional approaches often fail due to disconnects between company's corporate functions and the public. Leveraging marketing to make arguments understandable and distributing them through popular touchpoints will foster trust and shift public perception.

Transparency through data storytelling

In the last decade, the sector has dramatically improved its reporting on strategic initiatives, its journey and ultimately the performance across all areas of DEI and ESG. Instead of hiding away positive movement in the right direction in Excel spreadsheets, the sector should allow the public to get close to the data. Using data storytelling or engaging social content will demystify the mining process and highlight green initiatives.

Collaborations and influencer partnerships

Partner with influencers who genuinely care about sustainability. Their authentic endorsements can significantly boost credibility. A campaign where influencers visit mining sites, interact with the workforce, and share their experiences can create a ripple effect of positive perception.

CONCLUSION

The era of critical minerals and green mining presents a transformative opportunity for the mining industry. A recent [McKinsey](#) states the opportunity: Mining companies that systematically pursue excellence in marketing and sales can achieve revenue improvements of 3 to 5 percent, with some companies seeing increases of up to 8 percent.

To seize this opportunity, mining companies must first secure the trust and support of the public. If the public care, so will the decision makers. This means that public sentiment will investors and governments, improving investment appeal, expediting the permitting process, and attracting governmental support.

By embracing authentic, emotional, and social media-native communication strategies, and actively engaging with the community, the industry can bridge the perception gap and ensure its pivotal role in a sustainable future.

If you want to hear more about transforming your company's communication approach, contact SPQR.

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