

Charles Laroche

Reaching out to consumers

The president of Europe's soap and detergents industry association reflects with Ian Mundell on how chemicals and consumers can co-exist

Charles Laroche, Unilever's head of external affairs in Europe, sits down to talk with just a blank sheet of paper in front of him. "I prefer to be spontaneous and not too prepared," the avuncular Belgian says, "otherwise it would not be lively enough."

He need not worry. After seven years in the job (and 32 years with the company) he doesn't need notes to discuss the detergent industry and the environment. But the comment reflects his marketing background and his belief that whether you are selling soap or environmental policy, you need to understand your audience.

Environmental issues are also central to Laroche's other job as president of AISE, the European umbrella body for the soap and detergent industry. This was no more so than during the debate over the EU's Reach chemicals policy, in which Laroche has tirelessly tried to inject the consumer's viewpoint into discussions.

He has an advantage in this. The detergents industry is a sector where substances turn into brands and the chemicals industry interacts directly with the public, he explains.

"As a business we cannot take any risks with the trust consumers have in our brands, and that is what has forced us, ahead of other sectors upstream in the chemicals industry, to listen more carefully downstream to our customers."

This prompts a different approach, for example, when it comes to using scientific evidence: "Sound science is extremely important, but justifying everything you do on the basis of sound science is not reassuring enough for the public, because the public knows that science is moving. You have to be prepared to open dialogue and to listen to people's concerns."

Laroche thinks the upstream industry may have finally got the message, thanks to Reach. As well as being a bruising lesson in public opinion, the debate revealed how far consumer decisions extend along the supply chain.

He recalls an analysis of substances that were disappearing from company inventories, which was carried out by chemical manufacturers' association Cefic. "They concluded that more than half of the chemicals that were decreasing sharply in terms of business were not doing so because of regulatory requirements, but because downstream users were saying they would not buy the substances any more and were reformulating to use alternatives because of public pressure."

For Laroche, public opinion is intimately linked to the regulatory environment. "When consumers lose trust, regulators start losing trust, stakeholders start losing trust,

and the public becomes convinced there is a problem and that the sector needs to be regulated," he says. "Building consumer confidence is a way to secure independence as a business."

Under Laroche, AISE has launched several initiatives to help the industry "master its own destiny".

Some have been aimed at influencing the regulatory process. Once called Hera developed risk assessment methodologies for detergents in collaboration with manufacturers in Cefic. "That experience helped us enormously, when we were in the middle of the lobbying on Reach, to see what was really critical for our industry, where we wanted to have some changes and where we were OK with what was proposed."

Others have been voluntary initiatives designed to enhance the sector's reputation. A code of good environmental practice launched in the late 1990s was superseded in 2004 by a charter for sustainable cleaning. Laroche says it is important for these to be as inclusive as possible, to improve the reputation of the sector as a whole rather than draw attention to the trendsetters.

But self-regulation is not always enough and some voluntary initiatives are undermined by "free-riding" companies. "That's where, in my opinion, we need a legislative framework," Laroche says. He sees the authorisation and substitution of dangerous chemicals called for in Reach as a good example.

"I'm convinced this will become a positive incentive for people who are prepared to invest, to be progressive and proactive. The legislative framework will make life harder for the free-riders who are slowing down the whole move to more sustainable alternatives."

A third approach has been to get the public to use detergents in more environmentally responsible ways. The Washright campaign of packet labels and TV adverts encourages consumers to use smaller doses of laundry detergent at lower temperatures. A similar campaign has just been launched for dishwashers.

But while the public is becoming more sensitive to environmental issues, Laroche says performance and cost still influence product choice. "This is something we experience a lot in the detergent industry. They want to be citizens, as long as it doesn't interfere with their consumer benefits."

The challenge, then, is to create consumer-citizens. "Consumers still feel that 'citizenship' is the responsibility of industry and the legislator. They feel quite isolated, they don't feel powerful enough. We have to help them realise that they are extremely powerful."

