

### **Community relations: Building masts for 3G phones**

Third generation (3G) mobile phones went on sale to the public in March 2003. Supported by generous advertising and a significant PR campaign, the handsets represented the first opportunity to retrieve some of the massive licence fees, amounting to some £22billion, demanded by the UK government. As a new niche commodity, the 3G phones were something of a challenge. Initial pricing had the NEC e606 and the Motorola A830 at £400, with other versions available at higher prices. But by May 2003, major retail outlets were discounting by 60% or more.

Hutchison 3g is a mobile multimedia company, one of five organisations awarded licenses by the UK government to run third-generation wireless services. It is the only company focusing solely on 3G, and is co-owned by Hutchison Whampoa (previously owners of Orange), KPN Mobile from the Netherlands and NTT DoCoMo, Japan's largest mobile phone company. The company's competitors include the four other UK mobile phone operators to have won the 3G licences, i.e. Orange, Mm0<sup>2</sup>, TMobile and Vodaphone. Of these, the UK quoted companies have come under strong institutional pressure to write down the value of their 3G licences, with Mm0<sup>2</sup> reducing theirs by £6billion in May 2003, and Vodaphone putting up strong arguments to shareholders for not following suit. Hutchison 3G itself had to call on a £1bn loan facility from its three main shareholders in the first quarter of 2003 (FT, 10 March 2003).

Launched in May 2002 as **3**, Hutchison 3g's goal was to be the first provider in the UK. In order to achieve its aim, **3** had to build a series of new base stations, because most of the existing ones served 2G operators and had limited capacity.

**3**'s handsets were launched in March 2003, a calculated risk, given that the handsets themselves were not actually in the shops until May that year. Prior to the launch date (set appropriately at 3 March 2003), **3** began demonstrating its handsets to industry and media analysts in January (PR Week, 4 April 2003)

Mobile handsets work by converting users' voice or data into radio waves that are transmitted to other handsets via a national network of base stations. Each base station covers a specific area and forms part of a patchwork of overlapping cells nation wide. But individual stations can only handle a certain number of users at any one time, so in order to provide efficient service and coverage, it was important that **3** had the network in place to meet demand. Base stations have antennae that can be attached to existing structures, buildings, towers or masts.

The siting of mobile phone base stations, particularly those attached to masts, has aroused considerable controversy in some parts of the country. In Sheffield, 200 residents signed a petition and raised strong objections at a public meeting, following the erection of four masts in the same street (Sheffield Star, 1 April 2002). And the visual effect of masts is not the only consideration. Concerns have also been expressed about the emissions of radio frequency radiation; the loss of value to properties; noise and vibration; the way in which planning applications are dealt with, and the inconsistencies in public consultation. For example, in some cases Hutchison 3g and other providers have 'permitted rights' under the current regulations, thereby relaxing the requirement to seek full planning permission for every new base station.

In 1999, the UK government had asked the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP), chaired by Sir William Stewart, to investigate the possible health effects of mobile phone technology, including base stations. Published in 2000, IEGMP's report indicated no general risk to the health of people living near base stations, on the basis that exposure to non-ionising radio waves was expected to be a small fraction of the limits set in international guidelines. Nevertheless, it advocated a "precautionary approach" in respect of masts, including further study on base stations cited near schools. Subsequent research into emissions from masts to schools showed that they ranged from "thousands to hundreds of thousands below exposure guidelines set by the International Commission on non-ionising radiological protection" (Manchester Evening News, April 2002). The logic of the "precautionary approach" is based on the action of power control, whereby radio frequency exposure levels are reduced, the closer one is to the base station itself. In other words, according to one review, "base stations should be placed as close as possible to schools, etc, exactly the opposite of the objectors' demands (Manchester City Council Telecom Masts Inquiry, March 2001). The Stewart Report stressed that if there was any question of a risk to health, this was posed by the mobile phones themselves, rather than the masts. Yet at five public meetings held by the Stewart inquiry, it was the fear of masts rather than phones that was raised. In addition, experts in electromagnetic frequencies at the World Health Organisation, have spoken of gaps in knowledge that "have been identified for further research to better assess health risks".

Hutchison 3g has always maintained its commitment "to open consultation with local communities and stakeholders". Where considered necessary, the company's initial phase of community consultation has included:

- letters and information leaflets to the immediate neighbours or further, depending on site specifics;
- letter and information leaflets to the community council, together with request for meeting;
- letter and information leaflet to local council member, together with request for meeting
- key stakeholder briefing session through a structured round table meeting;
- one day drop-in centres, appropriately advertised, serviced by Hutchison 3g staff involved in acquisitions, planning and community affairs

An inquiry conducted by Manchester City Council's physical environment and scrutiny committee in March 2001, concluded that, "the operators were very open about their plans and (that they had) presented detailed numbers to the inquiry"

But the commitment has been treated with some scepticism. As one radio interviewer put it to the vice chair of the IEGMP, local communities will not necessarily understand the science needed to make the appropriate decisions.

*Information supplied by community affairs department, Hutchison 3g.*

## **Questions**

- 1. There is a view that public relations should aspire to genuinely symmetrical communication. Define the terms "symmetric" and "asymmetric", and give**

**your view on how far the mobile phone operators, as exemplified in the case study, have met this recommendation.**

- 2. Discuss the term, “community relations”, identifying the relevant stakeholders and publics in the case study.**
- 3. Devise an outline community relations campaign plan based on the case study. Set objectives and strategy, showing how the results may be measured.**