Even the most electrifying PR is still not new2s

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EVEN THE MOST ELECTRIFYING PR IS STILL NOT NEWS

PROFESSOR JIM SAKER is director of the Centre for Automotive Management at Loughborough University’s Business School and an AM Awards judge. He has been involved in the automotive industry for more than 20 years.

One of the things I have learnt over the years is that it is always good to know your audience. A couple of weeks ago, I was asked by the university to write a short piece on what has become loosely termed the ‘electrification’ of Volvo.

It followed an announcement by Håkan Samuelsson, CEO of Volvo Cars, that its products from 2019 will all include an element of electric vehicle (EV) technology, which ‘marks the end of solely combustion engine-powered cars’. The statement was taken up by social and print media and I was asked to comment on its significance.

Like many in the industry, I expressed my admiration for the effectiveness of Volvo’s marketing and PR, as much as the announcement appeared to have gained a disproportionate amount of news coverage.

The fact that Volvo is going down the hybrid and EV route is not major news – most manufacturers have been going in that direction for years and Volvo itself recently introduced hybrid versions of the XC90, XC60, S90 and V90.

Let’s not forget that Toyota, which has about 80% of the global market for hybrid vehicles, launched the Prius Hybrid in the UK in 2000.

The significant part of Volvo’s statement was that it would no longer offer cars powered solely by internal combustion engines (ICE).

My piece asked why Toyota or another mainstream manufacturer had not proposed the same thing.

The answer lies in the fact that the major part of Volvo’s sales take place in Europe, the US and China. These markets have the potential for the basic infrastructure to support electrification of vehicles.

In other parts of the world, such as Africa and South America, a regular supply of electricity for basic needs is more of a priority than facilities to plug in an EV.

To some extent, Volvo’s announcement is an admission that it has limited plans to expand in developing markets. A cynic might also suggest that the move helps the company to meet new, more stringent EU emissions targets due to be introduced over the next few years.

People from the industry who read the piece agreed that Volvo had done well with its PR, and that it was barely newsworthy as this was the direction of travel for most manufacturers.

However, those outside the industry suggested that I was a ‘Luddite’ and ‘didn’t know the future was electric’

I was pleased I got a response because it proved that at least someone had read the article, but I was left wondering about our ability to process the information we receive. Donald Trump has introduced us to the concept of ‘fake news’ – we need a term for when something is not news at all.

"THOSE OUTSIDE THE INDUSTRY SUGGESTED THAT I WAS A LUDDITE... AND THE FUTURE WAS ELECTRIC"