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**THE WORLD IN A CUP OF COFFEE:**  
**a case study in opinion moulding from Sweden**

Calle Åkerstedt



# *The world in a cup of coffee*

– a case study in opinion moulding from Sweden

By Mr Calle Åkerstedt, Spokesman of Swedish Coffee Information

Mr Chairman:

Swedish Coffee Information is the Swedish Coffee Roasters' Association. Our main task is to provide education and information about coffee (which explains the name), but of course we also protect common interests of the coffee industry.

A typical example of what we do can be seen in the current public discussion about coffee and the environment. We participate in the discussion and help work out policies, and so on. I myself am engaged by our association to be its spokesman in environmental and fair trade issues. That's why I'm here.

When this seminar was planned in September of last year, one of the background papers to the discussion paper submitted by the executive director was a letter to the ICO from Swedish Coffee Information.

In this letter and in similar letters to the coffee organizations of our most important countries of origin, the Swedish roasters express their positions in regard to the growing of coffee, to environmental issues and to human rights issues.

Our purpose with these letters was to start up a dialogue over these issues. Thus we are very satisfied with the ICO for having arranged this seminar. We are pleased to have the opportunity to present our experiences and opinions in these difficult matters.

The purpose of this speech is to give you the background and the arguments for why the Swedish roasters think it is important that coffee people world-wide realize the strength of the Environmental Movement, and in order to affect the development in favour of preserving the quality do participate in the public discussion about coffee and the environment.

In Sweden – as in many other Western industrialised countries – the public debate over environmental matters is periodically very intense. Opinion moulders are strong and well-organised, and the response among average consumers is not too bad. The success of the opinion moulders depends very much, of course, on the press and on other mass media, which are, in general, positive towards the environment and negative towards industry.

Sweden is a small country with less than 9 million inhabitants, but we are heavy coffee drinkers. Together with the Finns, we are on a cup basis the absolute top coffee drinkers of the world. Consequently, coffee is an important product in the Swedish housewife's shopping basket. Coffee is next to water in being the most consumed drink in Sweden and is often called *The National Beverage*, which perhaps will astonish you if you think about the amount of coffee grown in this country.

Not surprising, coffee is very often in the focus of the media. Coffee is of interest to everyone. That means that news about coffee is hot stuff, and if there is no other news, you can always write about coffee (or the Royal Family, or slimming, or sex, and a few other subjects).

The title of this speech is *The world in a cup of coffee*, a case study in opinion moulding from Sweden. To explain that, I have to introduce you to the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, a nation-wide, big, and well-known organisation with a very good reputation.

During the eighties, the Society initiated what became something of a popular movement in Sweden. It started with a campaign against the use of chlorine to bleach paper. Effluents from the bleaching plants of the pulp industry were harming the marine life. A number of environmental organisations demanded an end to the emissions. Consumers were encouraged to stop buying chlorine-bleached paper. The effects were rapid and dramatic. The pulp industry was forced to retool its production lines, and within three years, emissions of chlorinated compounds were cut in half.

This success inspired the start of project *Buy Environmental*, a nation-wide network of environmentalists ready to participate in campaigns. The environmentalists behind it reasoned that, if the consumers could force one of the country's major industries to change, then anything was possible. Since then, the society has arranged a campaign every year called *Environmental Week* and they have been very successful.

Environmental Weeks have been held annually with a variety of special themes. In 1991, the Society urged consumers to boycott *Via* laundry detergent, not that it was worse than other detergents but because it was the market leader. In 1992, they worked to remove a number of other products from the store shelves that they found bad for the environment. Among these was Klorin, a liquid bleach, which more or less disappeared from the market. In 1993, packaging was the theme.

In general, the environmentalists have been successful in forcing the industry to change its behaviour, product compositions, etc., into a direction good for the environment. And the main reason for this is a clever utilisation of the media. GREEN PEACE is another internationally well-known exponent of these new opinion moulders.

Last year's Environmental Week (Autumn 1995) focused on how consumption in the North affects people and the environment in the South. The campaign dealt not only with coffee but also with bananas and Jumbo shrimps. But the theme of the campaign, the headline for which was *The world in a cup of coffee*, was apparently not chosen by chance but with a very good feeling for what works in the media. And what the press focused on was, of course, coffee, which became the scapegoat. Not very many care for shrimps, but coffee is close to our hearts.

Of course, there are big differences between the natural product coffee and those typical chemical products like detergents or Klorin, the liquid bleach, but I've given this background to make clear that the environmentalists have been clever and that public opinion, sometimes, if you push the right buttons, can be very easily affected. Thus the coffee industry had good reason to take the campaign seriously.

This campaign, *The world in a cup of coffee*, became a sort of alarm clock. Up until this point, the environmental issues for a coffee roaster had been mainly a question of packaging material and perhaps some pollution in the neighbourhood from the roasting machines. The public discussion over the environment in the South was mainly restricted to a question of preserving the rain forests. And what was sound and environmentally correct could be measured in the coffee bean itself and was not a matter of the conditions under which it had been grown.

The environmentalists coined an expression, *Ecological Footprints*, as an effective summary of their global focus on the effects of the industrialised countries' consumption of agricultural products from third world countries. These effects include soil erosion, monoculture effects, pollution, and pesticides.

In addition, the focus was widened to include social and human rights issues – often called fair trade matters, to which I will return later in my speech.

The targets for the campaign were set up:

- Let people know about the dark side of conventional cultivation
- Let people know what concrete means exist to take action and improve the world (that's mainly to demand organic coffee)
- Put pressure on the Swedish coffee companies to take more responsibility for the conditions under which their product is grown;
- in the short run to get the companies to be able to report on conditions at "their" farms – those from which they buy.
- in the long run to get them to encourage the use of organic Agricultural methods and to trade fairly with the countries in the south.

That's why we support the methods of integrated farming and pest control – as the way to get the greatest progress without sacrificing quality. This means that the methods used for fertilisation and pest control should preserve the land for future use to the greatest extent possible. In addition, the products chosen and used in farming should not cause health problems, either for the workers or for the end consumer of coffee. Integrated methods reduce the impact on the environment, ensure long use of the land, and protect the workers who come in contact with these substances.

Ecologically grown or organic coffee has its place as a spearhead of development. It stands as a symbol for high ambitions but cannot, in a reasonable period of time, be the solution to the pollution of the environment.

At the same time we don't think that the most efficient way to reduce negative environmental influences is a rapid conversion to organic production. The main reason for this view is our concern for the quality and for the taste of the coffee. Changes in favour of the environment must – in order to be competitive – be carried out at a pace that does not harm taste or quality in the cup. Another important reason is that we don't think organic production will account for volumes that will really affect the environment within a foreseeable future.

The Swedish coffee roasters don't want to be in opposition to the environmental and consumer movement. First of all because we do sympathise with their motives, secondly because we are convinced that there are no other ways to go than towards a more sustainable use of our earth. That's why we feel that cooperation would be more beneficial to all parties (and not least of all to the environment), and would help lead to improved conditions in the countries where coffee is grown.

But beyond our general sympathy, we soon realised that we had not given these issues enough attention and that we lacked a lot of knowledge. Frankly, we were not well-enough prepared and had to work out policies in different areas. However, we very soon created a platform of some basic policies.

The Swedish roasters sympathise in principle with the motives behind the campaign and agree that, in the long run, there are no alternatives to an environmentally sustainable agriculture. At the same time, we don't think that coffee growing causes more severe problems – either environmentally or socially – than farming any other crop does. Rather, we think the opposite. That's not because we think coffee producers are very much better people than others but because of the economic importance of the product – for the producer and for the country in which it is grown. Coffee has been focused on mainly because of its economic importance and because of interest from the media.

The Swedish government and the Swedish roasters were all the time supporters of the International Coffee Agreement. One of the best ways to support growers is to pay a fair price. A higher and more stable price to the growers would give them resources for new and better agricultural methods. The consumers' gain will be that the coffee they pay a little bit more for not only has a high level of quality but also contributes to the improvement of conditions in the coffee-growing countries.

Thus, we support ICO and the work to reintroduce a higher price to the producers. Another interesting matter is if there are other ways for the ICO to promote the development desired. That is perhaps a subject for the Expert Panel tomorrow.

Back to the campaign which focused not only on the environmental issues but also on the social and ethical ones. Since these values are shared by most people, it was not too difficult to create policies that everyone could support. This work was facilitated by the fact that the campaign pamphlets contained a lot of grave overstatements.

We, of course, support the United Nations Commission for Human Rights including

- the Convention for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,
- the Convention for Citizen and Political Rights,
- the Convention for the Rights of Children.

It is important to us and to our customers

that the environment is not harmed unnecessarily,  
that natural resources are not wasted,  
that we do not contribute to the use of child labour,  
that laws for minimum wages and limited work days are enforced,  
that employees have the right to form unions,  
that educational opportunities are available for workers,  
that job security is enforced, and not least, -  
that things develop in a positive direction.

The Swedish roasters' viewpoints were summarised in the platform as follows:

To bring about improvements in the environment and in social conditions, coffee-growing countries must obtain a better price for the coffee. That is why the Swedish coffee roasters support ICO, the International Coffee Organisation and did support the price control agreement drawn up by the governments of the consuming and producing countries. This agreement was, as we well know, discontinued a couple of years ago. Without being able to specify how a new price level could be reached, within a new agreement or in some other way, the Swedish roasters support:

- \* a higher and more stable world market price, which gives the growers better and safer conditions,

No one wants to support this sort of thing. And yet that is exactly what we do – day after day – by the ordinary act of drinking coffee.

The strategy of the Swedish roasters was to start and continue this dialogue to the environmentalists and to bring facts and knowledge into the discussion and to maintain it at a serious level without heavy overstatements. To give you an idea of what I mean by heavy overstatements, I'll quote some lines from the national leader of the campaign just described:

In real life, people die growing coffee. They are poisoned by pesticides. If they try to better their situation, they are fired or even murdered. And the land fares no better, subjected to a program of spraying and fertilising that may in fact rob it of its fertility.

And that means that we should gain confidence and respect by maintaining a high level of information and a continuous dialogue between all parties about what can be reasonably done.

That means that all reasonable possibilities – economic and quality-wise – to reduce the pressure on the environment should be utilised.

It is of vital importance for all of us that coffee is not associated with a negative influence on the environment. That's why the debate and the motives must be met seriously and with great respect.

Of course it is, but after analysing the situation, we are convinced that this is the way to accomplish this goal in the long run.

Why all this? Isn't the goal of the companies just to make a profit ?

\* long-term co-operation and a continuous dialogue with the producing countries. This makes it possible for us to deal with the questions of education, alternative agricultural methods, and social rights. The public opinion in Sweden and other consuming countries determines the success of this.

\* meeting the demand for products, ecological or green-labelled, according to the consumers' demand for taste and quality.

We also want to work for

\* research and development of agricultural methods and production techniques suitable for the environment.

\* integrated cultivation, which is less harmful to the environment than traditional cultivation, and



I think it is not quite wrong to say that we have a part to play in this dialogue...

I could cite a lot of other rough overstatements, but I don't intend to, because my point is not to paint the environmentalists in black colours, but to draw your attention to the fact that they and we have different roles, different purposes and different knowledges.

If you are in opinion business, you must get headlines and you must satisfy your grassroots. This means simplifications, sometimes overstatements and not always the best knowledge – also when your purpose is the best and worthy of every respect.

This understanding of the different roles and basis of the game gives the explanation why we find it so important to participate in the discussion, to bring facts and knowledge, to correct misunderstandings and so on.

And it is also our experience that what emerges as an unverified statement next time can turn up as a so called "proved fact" with reference to a source which turns out to be not more than the first unverified assertion.

Back to the Environmental Week. Having created policies and worked through these issues, I think you can say that we were reasonably well prepared to meet the campaign. What we also did was to distribute our platform to all known opinion builders, to the authorities, to the mass media, and to all our customers – not just to the consumers but to the retailers and catering companies, as well.

Our idea was not to duck or pass but to stand up and be visible.

We had personal meetings with the management of all the biggest retailing chains, to inform about our points of view.

We participated actively in the public discussion on television, on the radio and in the press, thus showing not only our positive attitude but also our concern that quality and taste should keep us from being too hasty.

We took part in seminars arranged by the Society and we established an open telephone line so that customers and others could reach us immediately and get our points of view.

In summing up the campaign week, we noticed that the campaign got even more space in the media than we had thought, but most of the attention was harmless to coffee consumption, such as the reports from shops where consumers could taste organic coffee and so on.

Concerning the targets of the campaign, the Society was satisfied with the attention the campaign had received and also with the targets concerning the coffee companies which had assumed their responsibility for providing better information about the green coffee.



We think that the only way to avoid environmental badwill for the product and for the coffee industry is to be able to demonstrate progress in a green direction, whether it is progress in big steps or in small ones, as long as it is still progress.

We know for sure that the so-called green or environmental values are gaining ground, especially among women and, of course, very important, among younger people, as well.

In a new study called Opinions and Values of the Swedish People (and I'm sure that these main tendencies are the same all over Western Europe), you can learn that as many as 80% of Swedes react very positively, or quite positively, to the word "environment".

Even more – about 90% – think that it is very important or an absolute must that pollution of the environment should be reduced.

More than 70% think future pollution of the environment is a very severe or strong threat.

More than 60% think the same about wasting the resources of the earth.

And about 60% say it is very important or an absolute must that the company in which they work is conscious about the environmental issues.

And – back to detergents – today, two thirds of fine chemical consumer products are green labelled – in spite of having about a 20% higher price than the non-green-labelled ones.

I will not tire you with more figures. I'll just remind you that all these values tend to be stronger among younger people and thus will probably be even stronger tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.

There are other, parallel trends, such as the demand for more information about the origin of consumer products – especially food stuff. It is not only to be able to evaluate the risk for the mad cow disease that consumers ask for information about the origin of meat products. Very often it is in order to assure themselves that the animals have been fairly handled.

Other phenomena working in the same direction are the development and extension of different programs or systems for certifying quality or environmental facts – like EMAS or the ISO 14 000. These systems will – generally speaking – increase the demand for information about the raw material, origin, production conditions, etc. This information will gradually be standardised and picked up as purchase conditions.

*Our conclusion is that there is only one direction to go – towards a sustainable agriculture.*

Not because it is politically correct, which it is, or because it is in accordance with a lot of international declarations, but because it is or will be a commercial necessity.

At the same time – you may not go there faster than you can manage with respect to the quality of the product. There are Scandinavian roasters who have noticed that some producers – more keen on taking care of the environment than others – have paid a high price in terms of lower quality. Under those conditions, the producer doing nothing for the environment will be more competitive.

The environmentalists vary often focus on ideal solutions – for instance ecologically grown or organic coffee. The best thing becomes the enemy of the good one. Our experience is that the average consumer does not demand the ecologically grown product. What she demands is a product of good quality that has not harmed the environment unnecessarily.

*Our second conclusion is that the tempo of this development must, and can be, determined by what's possible quality-wise.*

However, neither roasters nor producers have the power to control the debate or the development, or the tempo of the development. What we can do is affect the development and its tempo by participating in the discussion and by presenting facts and professional aspects about quality, etc.

Don't forget, we are the experts – if not on the environment, at least on coffee.

That means that we can gain confidence and respect by giving honest information and by keeping up a continuous dialogue with all parties about what can be reasonably done.

*Our third conclusion thus is that it is very important and in our common interest to participate in the debate in order to present facts and reasonable targets.*

Only the ostrich refuses to face facts. It is a classical mistake to duck or pass when you are attacked. I've argued that we should not repeat that mistake.

I have touched a few times on the so-called fair trade issues in this speech. These are not the theme for this seminar, but let me just point out the parallels. What we can watch is a similar movement with a few years delay. It is not easy to predict, but it is quite possible that this new one will be as strong as the environmental movement is or will be. You can also note that these two movements are becoming involved with each other.

The problems our industry has to face are very much the same, and I think that the strategies that will work will be the same, as well.

But that is perhaps the subject for another seminar.

Thank you very much for your attention.