

Shaking off the COP15 hangover: Moving from short text to visionary narrative for cleantech

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Dec. 22, 2009

Despite the disappointing Copenhagen Accord - a short text lacking specifics, goals and deadlines - the global cleantech industry will endure. In contrast to the elusive consensus on climate, many countries now have the political will, financial capital and public support to begin a long-term shift to clean energy sources. But will the emerging cleantech industry thrive or merely survive? This depends on the ability of cleantech business leaders - from start-ups to global corporations - to deliver the burden of proof and tell a compelling, visionary story. We need a narrative with solid examples of success today, as well as data-backed evidence of future promise. We also need an effective communications framework to engage diverse stakeholders like government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business leaders and consumers.

While they could not agree on an international climate treaty, the delegates in Copenhagen displayed a common purpose motivated by economic, national security and environmental concerns. Both developed and developing countries are pouring billions of dollars of direct public investment into cleantech. According to the [Breakthrough Institute](#), China, South Korea and Japan will invest a total of \$509 billion in cleantech over the next five years. In a Dec. 8 speech reported in TIME, President Obama said, "We know the nation that leads in clean energy will be the nation that leads the world."

From a venture funding standpoint, cleantech is the number one choice for new investments in 2010, according to a December 2009 [survey by the National Venture Capital Association](#). But as the Wall Street Journal reports, the absence of an international agreement means that cleantech companies must continue to navigate a patchwork of national, regional and even local energy policies. To take advantage of the momentum provided by public and private investment, cleantech leaders must fine-tune their communications strategies to reach stakeholders on the national, regional and local levels.

Too often, cleantech leaders get mired in the details of their technology versus the competition and miss the opportunity to tell the bigger story of an entirely new energy economy, worth trillions of dollars and opening the door to millions of new jobs. We need a cleantech narrative to explain these technologies holistically, with the right context and through the right channels to public officials, NGOs, investors, academics, corporations and everyday people. The media landscape, though fragmented, can help us reach these audiences through targeted channels - from wire services and national business outlets to daily newspapers, neighborhood news feeds, industry-specific social networks and Twitter accounts.

To position ourselves for long-term growth, we must avoid overhyping where we are with today's clean technologies. According to Lightspeed Venture Partners, 2010 will be about scalability with some shakeout for companies that cannot keep their commitments. We need to

prove ourselves using plain English rather than technical jargon, but we must also be tempered and accurate with timelines for wide-spread deployment. Spokespeople need to carefully manage expectations around scalability and related success factors. If we are to show global government bodies how to report, scale and prove their carbon reductions, we must be equally responsible in communicating our own milestones such as pilot results.

This cleantech narrative must be compelling and understandable for each audience for future UN negotiations to succeed, not to mention U.S. climate legislation and continued private funding. For example, according to [New Energy Finance](#), the Copenhagen Accord's recognition of the 2°C temperature threshold will be hard to enforce without carbon reduction goals. We, the cleantech storytellers, can show nations how and when they can reach the goals that will support this threshold. No one is better suited than the cleantech industry to demonstrate "measurable progress," a critical piece of the climate change puzzle according to the [Breakthrough Institute](#).

Finally, cleantech leaders must communicate how we fit into a larger global ecosystem, including other types of renewable and traditional energy. [Seeking Alpha](#) expects to see growth in IPOs from emerging leaders, consolidation and joint ventures as larger companies tap startup innovation, and new financing models as startups seek to scale up in a more capital-efficient fashion. In this environment, cleantech companies would benefit from sharing information and joining forces to increase influence and competitiveness on a global scale.

Like all forms of communications in 2010, the cleantech narrative cannot be didactic, one-way or elitist. We will shine a brighter light on industry events through engagement and consumer participation. We will draw utilities, consumers and cleantech vendors into online conversations using tools like Twitter, and offline in the journals and events they follow. We will bridge the gap of understanding between corporate and public policy interests in cleantech, a communications challenge previously identified by Edelman's "[Cleantech 101](#)" research. If we do this successfully, the global ascendance of the cleantech industry will help pave the way to a true climate accord.