



Rupert Bates

As we celebrate the 2018 WhatHouse? Awards – the biggest accolades in UK housebuilding – it is tempting to present a PR booby prize for the year and that goes, by a margin bigger than Usain Bolt taking me on over 100 metres, to Persimmon Homes.

Of course you can't fault – or the senior management and shareholders certainly can't fault – the financial performance on the field by one of Britain's largest housebuilders, but off it, oh dear. Last month we witnessed the #PRFail of all hashtag PR fails.

Personal abuse – so vitriolic with the rise of social media – is unacceptable at any level and with the video I'm about to refer to attracting well over a million views, it whistles under the bridge to the worst of trolls, drowning out the more measured critics.

But Persimmon quite rightly came in for corporate criticism for the handling of their big cheeses' huge bonuses, headed by chief executive Jeff Fairburn.

Did seriously nobody in his PR team or inner circle suggest that there was a strong possibility that the press, with the opportunity of sticking a microphone in front of the Persimmon boss might just, mischievously or not, raise an important and highly relevant issue?

Everybody likes to kick a fat cat, but it has been the subsequent handling of the controversy that has been so spectacularly bad, culminating in the most excruciating television clip of Fairburn refusing to answer the question of his bonus in front of a BBC camera last month and walking away, with advice not to respond clearly coming from an aide out of shot.

Now there are plenty of people, no matter the weight of their position or indeed bonus, who are naturally uncomfortable in the media glare no matter the nature of the interview or question, and Fairburn gave the impression he'd rather eat the 80 million bricks a year he thought he was going to be discussing coming out of Persimmon's new brick factory than talk to a journalist.

Fairburn needs to spend a slice of his wealth on media training. Did seriously nobody in his PR team or inner circle suggest that there was a strong possibility that the press, with the opportunity of sticking a microphone in front of the Persimmon boss, might just, mischievously or not, raise an important and highly relevant issue that gets aired by every housebuilder I meet?

As mentioned in previous columns I never meet Persimmon. They don't talk to me either; it's not just BBC Look North and full marks to Spencer Stokes for trying.

In fact, I've never been invited to the brick factory, but, hey, when you're only building 16,000 new homes a year, why touch base with a leading housebuilding trade magazine?

Yes I would have asked Fairburn about his £75m bonus. But I would have also asked him to tell me what I would hope would be an inspiring tale about how a teenage apprentice stayed with his first company and rose to the very top and is now showcasing his very own brick factory – a career path from building site to boardroom. That's a bloody good, positive, uplifting industry story.

At the very least, Persimmon should have had a bland statement to hand about the bonuses being the result of a highly successful company delivering on a long-term incentive plan.

The most telling tale of all since the eye-popping numbers were announced nearly a year ago is what Persimmon's peers think about the company. Not necessarily the money – and they are not the only industry bosses to have done very well thank you very much in recent years – but the business itself.

The privacy of a restaurant table or a quiet coffee house prevents me from going into detail of conversations with housebuilders, large and small, I've had in the last few months. But if the industry ran the equivalent of football's Players' Player of the Year award, Persimmon would be unlikely to garner a single vote. My goodness, ears in York must have been burning.

This is not envy – okay maybe a little bit – but a disappointment that Persimmon is not perceived as a team player; getting on with making money and building houses, but not getting on with making a difference.

I asked nearly a year ago for an interview with Fairburn, or indeed any of the top brass at Persimmon, and predictably have heard nothing. I posed the question in this very column in January: "How much do you care?"

So I am asking again 10 months on: "How much do you care?" [sh](#)

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