

Communicating Sustainability Using Social Media

HOW TO USE IT TO COMMUNICATE YOUR VALUES EFFECTIVELY



COMPANIES ARE SPENDING a tremendous effort on sustainability initiatives these days and even more effort on reporting about them (CorporateRegister.com, for example, lists over 24,000 reports across 5,900 companies), but how many of us know about these initiatives?

Research shows that an eye-popping 85 percent of consumers have no idea that companies such as HP, Intel, Cisco, and Unilever—who are among the leaders in sustainability—were participating in any sustainability practices. This is especially disconcerting given that one of the main tenets of good CSR practice is stakeholder engagement. When was the last time you or someone close to you was asked your opinion about a company and its products or services?

A recent survey by SDialogue and Changents.com asked questions regard-

ing CSR perceptions. The answers were illuminating. Try it for yourself and see if you can correctly match the company to the CSR statement (the answers are at the end of the article):

The companies:

FedEx, IBM, Intel, P&G, Nike Statements:

1. In 2008, we became the largest purchaser of green power in the U.S., according to the EPA.

2. We are making solid progress toward our goal of preventing 80 million days of disease and saving 10,000 lives by

delivering 2 billion liters of clean drinking water.

3. Corporate responsibility at our company has grown beyond its role as a tool to define, discover, and address compliance issues, or to manage risk and reputation. Today, corporate responsibility no longer exists on the periphery as a check on our business, but is assuming its rightful role as a source of innovation within our business. Corporate responsibility is no longer a staff function within our organization. It's a design function, a sourcing function, a consumer experience function, part of how we operate.

4. Working together with leading disaster-relief agencies, we have made a difference in communities and regions in moments of dire need—from delivering

medical supplies to earthquake victims in China to providing humanitarian aid after floods in Mexico. Our skill in responding quickly, efficiently, and on a global scale makes disaster relief the cornerstone of our philanthropic efforts.

5. We are championing a food-traceability initiative designed to lift the veil off the entire food chain. The lingo is "farm to fork," but the effort actually extends further in both directions. Researchers and consultants are on one end sequencing the food genome to learn how to increase yields, and on the other end coming up with ways to monitor the waste stream to see how our diets are affecting the planet.

Did you guess right? Or were you as surprised by the answers as we were? Well, this small test reveals that the corporate CSR messages are not getting out there in an effective way. As a result, we believe social media is a catalyst for enabling meaningful conversations as more companies try to figure out how to engage with stakeholders in a market that demands transparency and crowd sourcing to solve our most intractable problems.

The first steps include identifying all of a company or organization's stakeholders and engaging them in a systemic way. Sustainability is such an important topic that the stories about corporate efforts need to be fully integrated into a company's overall communications. And these conversations should engage stakeholders in a variety of social media channels such

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as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Wikipedia, message boards on Google and Yahoo!, YouTube, and Flickr, among others.

Timberland Co., for example, engages its stakeholders on several fronts. The company's Facebook page has nearly 77,000 fans who celebrate themselves, tout the company's products, and even criticize the shoe and outdoor products maker. Just recently, Timberland posted a Q&A with Jeffrey Swartz, president and CEO of the company. Fans were also reminded to follow Swartz on Twitter. But the engagement doesn't stop there. During the Copenhagen Climate Conference, Timberland's Earthkeepers blog offered dispatches from the event. The content was compelling, and included discussions with U.N. officials and reports on youth activism in Denmark.

It's important that we get more people talking. The conversation needs to move mainstream and directly engage with more people instead of trying to drive them to specific CSR communications or reports. Let's face it, very few people read CSR reports, much less specific CSR communications. They need to be a part of regular corporate communications and not a separate stream if we are going to truly embed this in mainstream culture, engage more people in the discussion,

and inspire the change we want to see in the world.

Another good exercise for any-size company to go through is to think about several key CSR-related questions such as how your organization communicates with its stakeholders. And specifically, how does your firm communicate about sustainability? Also, how do you listen? And how do you solicit feedback?

In the long term, the results of a fully integrated and systemic sustainability strategy will show that your consumers or clients are more loyal. You'll find that your brand has firming footing in the market, and that the overall morale of your firm will be improved—all of which translates into improved profits as well as a better world to live and work in. **LJ**



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