

CSR sings a new tune

CSR is nothing new but social media channels are giving it a fresh – not to mention lucrative – lease of life.
Lucy Fisher reports

The term corporate social responsibility – or CSR for short – can provoke a stifling of yawns both within the boardroom and beyond. But CSR has a new face and this is being communicated across social channels, with the term sustainability being used almost interchangeably with the terms corporate social responsibility or corporate responsibility (CR).

Some organisations even use their own terminology. For instance, at IBM (see case study on page 32) employees refer to ‘corporate citizenship’, while at Veolia Environmental Services the strapline ‘go further together’ encompasses its CSR strategy.

Whatever you call it, it seems that over the years, CSR has become less of a bolt-on activity and more integral to operations. “Traditionally, CSR was about philanthropy, charitable giving and activities in the community that generally were of little relevance for the core business,” says Vicky Gashe, head of media at Business in the Community (BITC), a charity focused on promoting responsible business practice. “Now, corporate responsibility is aligned with corporate ambition, integrated into strategy and decision-making.”

Taking CSR social

More recently some B2B organisations are trying to take advantage of communications platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, to show off their credentials in the CSR space and give themselves a competitive edge over rivals. The reason for this focus is social channels can reach wide audiences in a very short space of time, and can involve little cost in terms of the marketing budget, compared with other channels.

Of course brands need to have grappled the basics of marketing via these channels before they can hope to devise truly strategic CSR campaigns. So it may come as no surprise to hear that few are leveraging social channels to

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Taking CSR social

The dos and don'ts of communicating CSR via social channels

- **Do** identify where your stakeholders are and listen to what interests them.
- **Do** update your chosen platforms on a regular basis with new – and compelling – content.
- **Do** enable marketing and CSR teams to work together.
- **Do** think of clever or creative angles for news and stories that promote human interaction.
- **Do** encourage interactivity on corporate blogs wherever possible.
- **Don't** be afraid of showing a human face.
- **Don't** leave all your sustainability communication via social to one person.
- **Don't** rush in before you're sure of your overall business strategy and how social platforms can help you communicate it.

communicate sustainability initiatives in any truly strategic sense.

In order to do so effectively, organisations need to have a story to tell, says Matthew Yeomans, social media sustainability consultant and author of *#FAIL: The 50 Greatest Social Media Screw-Ups*. “IBM and GE are putting a great deal of money and effort into a business offering that looks at sustainability and social. They've put a lot of thinking into what kind of company they want to be and how they want to do business,” he says. “But I'd say there are only a handful of companies who've really got it.”

As with any marketing activity, it's necessary to identify where your audience is on social channels and listen to what they are interested in before you bombard them with your take on things or post photos of your latest corporate fundraising initiative. Social media is about a philosophy. It's about listening and learning, and taking part in conversations as opposed to push messaging. Social channels provide an ideal opportunity for businesses to improve their CSR strategies as a result of improved dialogue with stakeholders.

So how can CSR best be delivered? Given that its often bound up in scientific or technical language, it's a good idea to get the sustainability and marketing

teams working together in order to communicate in a compelling and trustworthy manner. Philippa Stone, head of sustainability at ISG, says the two departments have become very closely linked at the construction services firm. "These days, I'm spending half of my day with the marketing team," she says. "They ask us whether we have anything tweet-worthy all the time."

ISG's digital marketing manager Francis Madeira adds that about one in three of the firm's tweets is about sustainability. "In terms of retweets, comments or favourites, it's our tweets about sustainability that tend to be the popular ones," he says.

Setting the tone

Of course, claims around sustainability on social media platforms can lead to a very public backlash if they are found to be false or misleading. It's important, warns Kevin Curry, social media manager, corporate social responsibility at Dell, to bear in mind that certain topics are trigger topics. "It can be risky and it can be explosive, and what you say can be taken the wrong way. You have got to ensure what you say is accurate," he says. "There are passionate people out there."

That doesn't mean to say, however, that CSR communications need to be overtly corporate or polished.

Aida Pérez Cadenas, who works in sustainability communications at Spanish bank BBVA, suggests the decision to communicate the bank's CSR activities via social channels in a direct, personal and transparent manner has been beneficial for its reputation. "Our corporate blog is not as slick as other corporate blogs. It's very simple," she says. "But what's important is to be active and to update regularly."

However she admits to being surprised at the lack of interactivity in terms of reader comments – especially given the complicated financial situation in Spain. "We're working with our social media team to try to promote the conversation a bit more," Cadenas adds.

Veolia's marketing and communications director Kevin Hurst agrees it is beneficial for a brand to portray itself as approachable and human via social channels. "Some of the videos we post on YouTube are quite raw," he admits.

Veolia's primary channels for sustainability communications via social are Twitter and YouTube. Twitter has proven the most popular channel among stakeholders, reveals Hurst, and is being used in a creative way. For instance, topics for tweets include gardening tips, recipes for food waste and ideas for uses for old fabrics. "It's not seen

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as an initiative to drive revenue, rather as something to give a more personable character to our company," he says.

About eight people now tweet on behalf of Veolia. "It's good to have more than one voice as communications sound less tired that way," adds Hurst. "And it's important business owners buy into communication via social media and give authority to others to communicate."

Share of voice

One of the beauties of CSR communication across social media is that whole communities can be galvanised in real-time. Natalie Black, public relations manager for sustainability at UPS, believes it's important for businesses, which are serious about social sustainability communication, to get everyone involved internally. Guidelines can be useful to manage risk, and it is of course crucial to think strategically about how channels will be most useful both internally and externally before rushing in. She says, "You can't be on every channel, every day, and monitoring it all too. Some things are just not a fit for you. When you become comfortable with that truth, then things become a lot easier."

Measurement of marketing effectiveness in the social and sustainability space is also a challenge. At the moment investing in these channels is still something of a leap of faith.

"It's possible to measure in quite a one-dimensional way in terms of retweets, numbers of shares, page impressions and so on, but this doesn't tell the full story," says Black. "I think over the next two or three years we'll see an industry standard emerging."

With the use of smartphones and tablets increasing all the time, and the

Case study: IBM

The computer giant encourages a company-wide approach to CSR activity

IBM's business strategy has been termed 'Smarter planet' since November 2008 and this encompasses the company's CSR and sustainability initiatives.

"Having a clear business strategy is a fantastic basis for a long-term communications strategy," says Caroline Taylor, VP for marketing and communications in the UK. "It constantly feeds new, fresh content and in the world of social media there's a hunger for content."

While the technology giant's 'Smarter planet' blog is the editorial hub, multiple corporate Twitter IDs and a 'People for a smarter planet' Facebook group are also used to communicate CSR initiatives. There are many thousands of IBM employees who tweet and are on Facebook. "The amplification effect comes from employees adding their own perspective," says Taylor, who suggests IBM is better able to manage the risk of communicating widely via social media as it has in place both business conduct and social media guidelines.

Taylor believes that sentiment analysis is of real value in the sustainability space given the delicate nature of certain topics and the fact that no business wants to be suspected of 'greenwashing'. "It means, in real-time, you can tune your messaging and vary it according to response. It's a bit like looking at body language while you're speaking at an event," she says.

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imminent move to 4G across many mobile networks, there's no doubt that rapid, social communication will continue to rise on an exponential level.

Increased sophistication in terms of the tools marketers can use to identify and map trends in social engagement will open the door for those companies who have embraced CSR to take centre stage and showcase their efforts.