

Engaging stakeholders around the topic of sustainability

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When it comes to sustainability, Communications and Marketing Professionals play an important role in informing and engaging stakeholders around the initiatives. How should they do it, and which companies are leading the way?

By Veronica Scheubel

Over the past ten to fifteen years, the topic of sustainability has grown increasingly important to companies. Stakeholder expectations keep growing, and their view of corporate performance is not that favorable.

The ongoing financial crisis and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico are just two examples contributing to a sceptical view of corporate performance.

This perception creates a gap that companies attempt to close, so as to not put their own reputation and brand image at risk.

In many sectors, such as food retail in the UK and Germany, sustainability has also grown to become an issue of competition – nowadays named '**responsible competitiveness**'.

With the issues threatening people around the world and their environment – the financial crisis, climate change, water scarcity, overfishing, unemployment (especially for young people), poverty, health issues, crime – companies are increasingly called on to engage across sectors and contribute to co-creating sustainable solutions.

One company that has heeded that call convincingly is IBM with its 'Smarter Planet' initiative. Employees from research and technology, consulting and IT are involved in raising the standards of performance in education, contributing to economic development, addressing humanitarian needs, energy efficiency, secure water supplies, safe food and improved healthcare.

In our context today, the 'social contract' is no longer what it used to be. With more than 50% of the world's 100 biggest economies nowadays being companies, not nation states, stakeholders demand that companies show transparency and accountability about a sustainable performance, and they want to be heard and consulted with.

What sustainability is all about

Sustainability, formerly called Corporate Responsibility, Corporate Social Responsibility, or Corporate Citizenship, is no longer a nice-to-have, no longer an isolated add-on taken care of by two or three marginalized people behind closed doors at the end of the corridor.

As demonstrated by companies like Nike, sustainability nowadays is about leadership, and it is about change:

- How do leaders run their whole organization and business sustainably?
- How do they engage in stakeholder exchange to create sustainable relationships, both internally and externally?
- How can sustainability be looked at as a long-term change initiative for the whole organization, with every function operating sustainably?
- How can in-house innovation potential be sourced for finding sustainable solutions?

Communicators and Marketing Professionals need to engage in stakeholder relationships

All of the above are questions that closely involve Communications and Marketing professionals. They can no longer rely on a mere information 'push' – in our world today, influenced especially through the Internet and the rise of social media, stakeholders want dialogue, and even more – they want a relationship. Communications and Marketing Professionals are the ones who first and foremost need to engage in such a relational approach. How do they engage both employees internally and stakeholders externally?

Practical first step: The importance of being informed

Trainings for Communications and Marketing Professionals offer modules on stakeholder engagement, issues management and crisis communications. Very often the stakeholder engagement is around sustainability, the issues and the crises are around sustainability.

In terms of sustainable performance and corporate reputation risk, the first risk for a Communications or Marketing Professional is about not understanding sustainability well enough - so it is helpful for them to have had at least some basic training on the topic itself.

When it comes to issues management, Communications professionals need to be in touch with the heads of different functions across the company to find out and know about their issue areas – and be prepared for whatever crisis might arise in those areas.

Having that base of information, there is now an increasing amount of opportunities for Communications and Marketing Professionals to work directly in the field of sustainability. More and more positions for 'Director Stakeholder Engagement' are advertised each day.

Where does the company end?

Outdated views construct the company as separate from society. Taking an open systems view, a company is part of society, with permeable boundaries, influencing and having an impact, and being influenced and impacted. Accordingly, employees making up the company are also in a constant interdependent exchange with surrounding society.

Professor Gilbert Lenssen, President of The Academy of Business in Society (www.eabis.org), has famously said:

"The stakeholders *are* the company. They are the *meaning-making* about the company."

Informed stakeholders want to see companies demonstrating that they have understood those permeable boundaries, and that they are willing to engage in dialogue, exchange, relationships. This concerns customers as well as suppliers, investors as well as regulators, communities as well as universities.

Companies like Germany-based Henkel or France-based Lafarge have understood how to engage stakeholders. For years, they have had external stakeholder panels consulting with the company. The panels' advice is taken inside the company and acted upon. Every six months the companies report back to those panels on how change has been implemented.

Going further, there is additional opportunity for engagement: More and more companies, such as Nokia starting ten years ago, recognize the value of open source innovation, allowing innovative ideas to come from anywhere outside the R&D department. Open source innovation starts with extending an invitation to think about innovation to all employees, also around the topic of sustainability – and it continues with extending that invitation to external stakeholders. Communications and Marketing professionals are needed to facilitate these engagement processes through creating and facilitating spaces for exchange – be it through focus groups and cross-functional workshops, or through virtual spaces like Achordus (www.achordus.com).

Stakeholder engagement and social media

The use of social media in the context of sustainability can have three useful functions for Communications and Marketing Professionals:

- **Social media can be a great source of information** – searching for the hashtags #CSR or #Sustainability, there is a wealth of information replacing a research department. Using this, a Communications or Marketing Professional can be fully up to date on the very latest thinking around the topic, and can be in the loop on everything the competition or industry peers are undertaking in the field.
- **Feeding relevant information into social media networks oneself**, a Communications or Marketing Professional easily becomes known in the respective virtual 'community', creating a reputation for her-/himself and/or her/his organization and becoming part of a professional network.
- **Stakeholders appreciate presence, engagement and transparency in virtual spaces**, and over time, valuable connections with stakeholders are created, based on a mutual sense of credibility, reliability, closeness and trust.

In the past, Timberland was one company really engaging well through social media, with its CEO Jeff Swartz as @Timberland_Jeff personally tweeting on sustainability.

In conclusion, here are some top tips for Communications and Marketing Professionals to remember around the topics of sustainability and stakeholder engagement:

1. Communications and Marketing Professionals have a central role in embedding sustainability throughout the organization, as they can both inform and involve employees as internal stakeholders

2. Communications and Marketing Professionals have a central role in truly engaging external stakeholders - if well-informed about sustainability, they can even consider 'crossing over' into a position of facilitating stakeholder engagement

3. Social media offer Communications and Marketing Professionals great opportunities to gain access to professional knowledge; build a reputation for themselves and their companies; and build as well as nurture engaged stakeholder relationships



About Veronica Scheubel

Based in Germany and working internationally, Veronica Scheubel is a facilitator for change in organizations. She offers consulting and training on the complex field of CR and Sustainability, and more specifically, Community Involvement and Employee Involvement. She also offers coaching for individuals and supports team development.

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