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How to shout about sustainability effectively

Posted by Toby Webb ^[1] on Feb 6, 2013

While there are lots of ways to communicate badly, what are the good things companies can do to stand out? Toby Webb has some suggestions

There are a number of communications techniques that corporate leaders in sustainability and corporate responsibility communication use, to various degrees. Here are 15.

- 1. They have clear websites navigating readers to clear targets.* Websites change and, if not planned, can sprawl needlessly. Many companies neglect old pages, which continue to turn up on Google years later. These can offer a very misleading impression of where the company is headed, and how seriously it takes stakeholder communications. In the world of Twitter and Facebook, everything can unfortunately mean something.
- 2. They demonstrate both an understanding of the global challenges, and their role in the world.* Getting this right does not simply involve quoting WWF on the number of planets we will soon need. Showing understanding is about demonstrating much deeper knowledge and acknowledging the “megaforces” driving sustainability concerns, and showing how the company is starting to try to tackle them, and contribute to wider solutions.
- 3. They use their reporting as the basis for communications campaigns, not as the campaign itself.* Short, targeted messaging to key, focused stakeholder groups, on top of a main website and regular reporting. This point is relatively self-explanatory. The report is just a library. Authentic stories from the report are what will improve your reputation with employees, customers and wider stakeholders.
- 4. They are not afraid of honest debate about challenges,* progress, missed targets, problems and solutions, online and face-to-face. They value being challenged and seek to use the opportunity to innovate and improve, rather than becoming defensive.

5. *They use social media to communicate on sustainability*, either via a corporate account or by specific accounts. Many companies are nervous about doing this. Social media is risky. But if you have something authentic to say, you should say it. That doesn't mean you have to issue a press release and crow about running your business well. Tone is everything, as is personality. Look at Sainsbury's corporate social media account for a good example.

6. *They publish regular performance data and updates*. Publishing annual data seems quite behind the times now. What's wrong with quarterly?

7. *They offer news feeds on progress*. This is a very simple thing to do, but many companies don't do it. It's simple to drip-feed progress reports via short news items on your site. It looks good to stakeholders.

8. *They showcase critical stakeholder voices and suggestions for improvement*. This is vitally important, yet few companies do it this well. Patagonia is the best-known example. Wal-Mart tries too. Perhaps Waitrose would have spotted the looming disaster of its Shell retail partnership if it had taken this idea on board via the web.

9. *They partner with credible academic institutions and NGOs*. Science matters. Whether it's technical research to improve performance, lower impact and drive efficiency, environmental data, or social science research, outside parties with good reputations can really help with both strategy and a reputation for authentic communications. Take a look at how DuPont and Dow Chemical work with NGOs and academics.

10. *They talk about how sustainability fits with business strategy* – and how that will improve. This is hard to get right. What is strategy anyway? Most companies seem to confuse it with tactics. Put simply, strategy is the destination; tactics is how you get there.

11. *They don't forget to link sustainability with both social issues and governance*, global and local. For many companies in the US, sustainability is all about green. Tell that to a Canadian mining company or European retailer. Social issues, and how you engage with them, are the number one issue in the rest of the world, so no credible company can pretend they don't exist. Yet, for some reason, many continue to.

12. *They host public debates which are streamed online* and do not always have themselves at the centre. There are not many examples of companies doing this well. Unilever is probably the best known.

13. *They seek crowd-sourced solutions and encourage and fund innovation*. Marks & Spencer is a good example of how to do this, as is Coca-Cola Enterprises and PepsiCo. But B2B companies can do this too. Interface and Desso are well-known examples but there are others, such as Skanska, pursuing this idea on a large scale.

14. *They are clear about sustainability as a business opportunity*. They recognise that stakeholder engagement is about listening and encouraging intra-preneurs, as much as it is about responding to external trends and pressures.

15. *They are clear about their corporate power and influence* and have a public debate about how that power and influence are used, and report on progress, positive and negative.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.ethicalcorp.com/users/toby-webb>

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