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Ieva Severinaite

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GROWING SCEPTICISM

We are in an age where CSR is no longer a voluntary philanthropic endeavour to be engaged in on the side-lines but instead has become something expected in core business practice (Amin-Chaudry 2016). The public is no longer satisfied with corporate one-off donations to charities and wants to see sustainability throughout all areas of business and most of all, they expect transparency and accountability. Honest communications have become vital, especially in light of growing public scepticism towards corporate communications, at times leading to accusations of greenwashing. This is a time of challenge and opportunity for PR professionals who need to be aware of the changing landscape of CSR and engage in well thought-out strategic communications in order to build brand trust and public confidence in the sustainability promises of the companies they represent.

The threat of public scrutiny is especially evident when it comes to exaggerating a company's social behaviours (Holme and Watts 2000), or worse still, when their actions do not mirror their CSR commitments at all. We don't need to look far to appreciate the tremendous reputational consequences that can arise when companies fail to meet their publicly proclaimed commitments on sustainability. The recent emissions scandal of automotive giant Volkswagen shows the danger of not 'walking the talk'. In September 2015, when the Environmental Protection Agency found that VW had fitted 'defeat devices' into their US diesel engines to improve emissions results, the company suffered a heavy blow financially and reputationally. Not only did they report a loss of €2.5bn - their biggest loss in 15 years (BBC News 2015) - but they also saw negative impacts on

the reputation and trust of the brand, employee morale, customer satisfaction and investor loyalty (Du and Merrill-Sands 2016). The automaker's code of conduct proudly claims "We stand for responsible, honest actions" and "We therefore make ecologically efficient advanced technologies available throughout the world" (Volkswagen 2015), yet the company failed to live up to these promises. Moreover, the misalignment between VW's performance and communication created implications for public trust in CSR in a wider sense. As CSR researcher Dr. Du summarised, "deceptions such as those perpetrated by Volkswagen not only tarnish the reputation of other automakers and even corporations in unrelated industries, but they also undermine the public's trust in the business, and heighten consumers' cynicism about greenwashing" (Du and Merrill-Sands 2016). This undoubtedly creates challenges for CSR communicators.

Although companies are beginning to recognise the immense impact of CSR on their reputation, close to 40% of them assigned a mere 10% of their total communications budget to CSR communications in 2013, according to the Grayling's PULSE report (Idle 2013).

This figure may have changed slightly in the last three years but the issue still persists. Companies are not investing enough money, effort and strategic consideration into their CSR communications activities and as illustrated by the VW example, they often leave a gap between their communications and actions. Evidently, communicators play a vital role in ensuring transparency and truthfulness since a well-executed CSR communications programme could protect the business from public scrutiny in this age of hyper-transparent media and public scepticism (Valdivia 2012). I therefore highlight four key considerations that every PR practitioner entering the field of CSR communications (or for that matter even the experienced professionals) should remember in order to create strong, credible and effective communications campaigns that resonate with stakeholders and help avoid accusations of greenwashing.

EMPHASIS ON STRATEGIC INTEGRATION

First and foremost, the need to integrate and weave CSR efforts into all departments of the business horizontally and vertically and align them to the company's overall purpose and goal is a recognised foundation for success (Rangan et al. 2015). If CSR is seen as purely a PR problem or opportunity, companies run the risk of generating scepticism and negative perceptions among stakeholders (CSR Pulse 2015). In which case CSR communications may well be fruitless.

This leads to a debate on the role of PR in a company's corporate social responsibility activities. Some CSR managers argue that PR professionals should stay away from CSR initiatives altogether until tangible outcomes worthy of communicating have been achieved (Roche 2016). Others see PR practitioners as strategic partners in devising both CSR programmes and the communications campaigns to support them. As suggested by Heath (2000), PR professionals can offer much more to organisations than the simplistic snippets of text used for marketing and advertising. Indeed, using PR solely as a tool for broadcasting information about organisational CSR efforts and securing media coverage would be a waste of skills and knowledge (Frankental 2001). As trained professionals, PR practitioners have a unique strength in identifying and understanding

the needs, interests and expectations of various stakeholders as well as recognising the issues that are important to them. When making decisions on CSR implementation, this knowledge is an invaluable asset. It is clear that PR insights can provide useful inputs on devising CSR programmes that resonate with important stakeholders and as strategic communicators, we should strive to act as advisors to the teams creating CSR programmes and ensure each communications activity is aligned to the overall integrated CSR approach. Embracing the shifting role of PR practitioners not only as communicators but also as mediators and strategic consultants for CSR issues could help publicise the progress of companies in a credible manner (CSR Pulse 2015).

GET YOUR EMPLOYEES ON BOARD

When we speak about stakeholders in PR and CSR, we must not forget the internal audiences and recognise the power that lies within the workforce of the company we are representing in our communications. This public seems to be particularly important as external scepticism is no longer the only threat for successful CSR communications. Employees must be viewed as ambassadors, especially when we consider the findings of the Edelman Trust Barometer 2016.

The global survey results state that despite the employee voice being perceived as more credible than that of the CEO's when it comes to external stakeholders, the employees themselves are growing more sceptical of the companies they work for (Edelman 2016). This means a lot of work needs to be done in the internal communication and employee engagement departments, but importantly, CSR communications can also play a major role in getting employees on side to act as ambassadors and help carry forward CSR messages, contributing to a positive external reputation. This is noted by academics who have found that encouraging a greater belief in the brand's CSR promises and behaviours among employees translates into the staff voluntarily spreading their belief publicly, thus reinforcing the organisation's messages (Gill 2015). This is crucial to the overall reputation of an organisation and employee commitment and involvement is also seen as the foundation for trustworthy CSR communications (Morsing et al. 2008). Without employee backing, any CSR communication is likely to appear overly corporate, lacking credibility and trustworthiness. As Melanie Colburn, manager of internal communication and employee engagement on sustainability at Autodesk, put it, "if you're not communicating your corporate responsibility in an authentic and compelling fashion to your internal audience, you are overlooking your "greatest asset" (Triple Pundit 2012).

I have noticed the benefits of empowering and engaging employees in CSR activities first-hand while working in community engagement and internal communications at Airbus. Among the company's many initiatives to engage staff in CSR activities, the charitable giving programme allows employees to vote for a charity to be supported each year and also encourages them to run their own fundraising activities for a charity of their choice, with a 10% top-up donated by the company. The scheme has a great take up with an average of 15 top-up requests a month and the feedback has been hugely positive, boosting employee morale and confidence in the company's CSR values. Even judging by the amount of sponsorship requests received in the department on the basis of word-of-mouth through employees, it is evident that employees have the power to heighten (and

in a similar vein also lower) the reputation of the company they work for internally and externally when their values are aligned with the organisation's CSR values (Gill 2015). Clearly, starting from the inside out and investing in CSR buy-in internally is a crucial first step in achieving credibility and trust externally.

UNDERSTAND AND ENGAGE YOUR EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

The same rules of engagement also apply to external stakeholders and here is where the skill of understanding the organisation's various publics, mentioned earlier, is especially crucial. As Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggested over 30 years ago, the two-way communication model is very much still needed today, if not more so. Theoretically, Morsing and Schultz (2006) recommend moving towards a strategy of stakeholder involvement when communicating about CSR. This means inviting stakeholder to participate in an on-going dialogue and co-construct the CSR messages of the business. What does this mean practically? To create this dialogue, practitioners need to be effective communicators who understand what stakeholders are looking for in this changing CSR landscape (Valdivia 2012). Essentially, this requires attentiveness, listening and looking out for trends and dominating public opinions.

Experienced professionals in the field of CSR communications point out a number of growing public expectations to take into account. Anne Buchanan, president of Buchanan Public Relations, notes that in the last few years, CSR has shifted focus from activity to tangible outcomes (PR Week 2015). Consumers, as well as other stakeholders, are no longer satisfied by pompous statements of commitment to sustainability - they want to see the real impact that companies achieve in society and the environment. The public's attention is also moving towards a more holistic representation of business ethics, going beyond monetary donations or volunteering hours. "That kind of CSR activity is now a hygiene factor, people expect it. What they want to know is how a company operates beyond its CSR report. How do they treat their employees? How do they do business?", says Nick Howard, director of employee engagement at Edelman (PR Week 2012).

With the rise of social media, dialogue is more accessible than ever and Pedigree's 'Choose the Next Communities' project is a great example of engaging the public in dialogue and allowing personal involvement in the company's CSR activity. Pedigree in the US created a Facebook campaign encouraging dog lovers to nominate the cities and communities where animal shelters would benefit from the Pedigree Feeding Project (PR Daily 2016). The campaign donated more than 2.4 million pounds of dog food to participating shelters and encouraged close to 15,000 adoptions, winning the company PR Daily's 2013 Corporate Social Responsibility Award for Best Social Media Campaign (PR Daily 2016). Most importantly, the project empowered the public to contribute to the initiative and create impact where it was needed instead of imposing the company's own priorities. After all, stakeholders want to hear how your company's CSR activities impact *them* and the issues they deem important. If these activities and their consequent communications fail to be relevant, external publics are likely to be apathetic, or worse, openly critical.

BE A STORYTELLER

In order to help create relatable communications content, we as PR professionals must master the art of storytelling. When it comes to broadcasting CSR achievements, the most important task is to tell the story of the beneficiaries – the people involved and the impact your company's CSR initiatives have had on their lives in their own words. Too often we see press releases screaming the company's name in bold and proclaiming their nobleness. CSR communications will have much more success and impact when the recipients are allowed to tell their story (PR Week 2015).

For example, Coca-Cola take an effective storytelling approach on the sustainability page on their website, where they document the lives of local farmers, indigenous communities and other recipients directly affected by the company's CSR programmes. The stories offer a human touch and create a powerful impact that is meaningful and relatable, that feels more grassroots than top-down promises or faceless statistics. A first-person story about a restaurant owner in South Africa, inspired to start her own business through Coca-Cola's business skills workshop (Coca-Cola 2016), tells a much more compelling story that the readers can connect with. This is one way in which communicators can transform a corporate story into a meaningful narrative for its various audiences. By creating a narrative around an organisation's CSR activities and effectively explaining its links and benefits to publics, PR can help build a bridge to its stakeholders (Valdivia 2012).

AUTHENTICITY IS KEY

In the end, as CSR moves in a more integrated and principle-driven direction and corporate transparency is even more demanded (Visser 2012), communications on sustainability will need to continue to be truthful and honest. To regain the public's trust and confidence in corporate CSR claims, PR professionals will have to play an increasingly strategic role, but most importantly, authenticity will need to fuel all communications. Well-planned campaigns that portray a company's CSR commitment in an authentic manner and build strong relationships with stakeholders are needed (Harres 2015). Only through openness and transparency can communicators expect to enhance the company's CSR reputation and avoid accusations of greenwashing.

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