



BUSINESS RESOURCE STRATEGY TALK

Social media and corporate responsibility: a new horizon?

Social media can be an effective tool for sharing information on social and environmental issues, yet many companies remain reluctant to use this new channel of communication, writes CR specialist Melissa Davis.

A growing awareness of global issues like climate change and its associated social impacts, are increasingly forcing companies to demonstrate their environmental and social credentials. At the same time, these issues are being discussed online through social media networks where online communities share ideas and information, raise awareness of poor corporate behaviour, or simply bring issues and ideas to the attention of a wider audience.



GE ecomagination

Timberland's environmental labels

"Consumers are becoming more empowered through social media - they are putting companies under pressure and requesting **more transparency from companies,**" says Birgit Heinold, European head of corporate responsibility at public relations agency, Text 100.

Although brands are rightly cautious about how their activities could be perceived online, **social media represents an opportunity rather than a threat.** An effectively executed social media campaign can engage people around a campaign or brand. Executed through tools such as Twittering updates, a CEO blog or discussion groups or through co-created campaigns around products and services, social media offers a unique platform for raising awareness of corporate responsibility (CR) activities.

"CR is part of a societal shift. A shift that is often not driven by the corporations but rather predicated in the minds of the masses - essentially their customers - who too often find that their voices and views are not being heard," says Carlos de Spinola, a freelance strategy consultant and social media specialist.

"There is an opportunity for brands to tap into the **collective wisdom** of their customers to encourage them to participate in bringing about change," he adds. "If executed correctly, it can build brand equity as well as efficiencies. Businesses can use online crowd sourcing properties such as www.kluster.com to help find ways to streamline their supply chain or to create greener technologies."

Social media and CR

Despite its brand building advantages, many companies are yet to use social media to raise awareness about their position and actions around sustainability or corporate responsibility. For many CR managers, highlighting CR issues and enabling debate may seem like attracting

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unwanted attention. Yet **online environments offers companies a broader space in which to connect with customers**, NGOs and peers around sustainability issues.

Business Fights Poverty, for example, is a community of 5,000 members that bring business, policy makers and the public together to discuss poverty reduction strategies and practices. Such complex issues need collective wisdom if solutions are going to be reached.

As consumers increasingly call for more transparency and action from companies around social and environmental issues, **companies need to review how they communicate their sustainability beyond traditional CR audiences**. Online innovation may be a goal but, initially, the CR team can simply "listen in" to the online banter to identify issues and recognise trends. Encouraging participation and using social media for innovative communications will follow.

"Social media can be used to connect with specific audiences and join in the debate on that space - so it can create a positive dialogue," says Penny Baxter, co-founder of Salter Baxter, a creative consultancy.

"It may start with a sensible online presence that is engaging and interesting or it may start with a CR report," she adds. **"It is an emerging agenda so there is no right or wrong**. But it has to be harnessed with the overall brand approach and activity."

Where to start

For organisations that are seeking new ways to communicate CR, but are unsure where to start, there can be tactical ways to try out social media without attracting high exposure that could damage the brand:

- **Let go of the brand:** Accepting that a brand belongs to customers, employees and other stakeholders, as well as an organisation, can help companies take the leap into social media. A presence on social media sites and forums means that a company may have less control of its brand but with potentially greater rewards. New CR-related online ideas can be tested on employees first to gather feedback and input before going live.
- **Listen to the banter:** Use social media as a risk management tool, to gauge and mitigate issues, so that action can be taken before an issue becomes newsworthy. This could include looking for issues that affect the business and sector, such as supply chains, social issues and environmental degradation.
- **Plan your foray:** Have a purpose for engagement that encourages people to come to you. Figure out who you want to connect with; listen to their views and opinions online, and then use social media to keep them informed and invite contribution to the debate.
- **Work across teams:** CR teams need to work with other areas of marketing, such as brand and digital, if the sustainability message is to reach broader audiences. Innovation can happen through this type of collaboration. It will also help to embed responsible practices within an organisation.
- **Converse online:** Social media aims to encourage conversation and remove divisions between company and customer, or employee and management. It enables conversations with audiences that may be harder to reach offline - but any engagement must be authentic and genuine. Figure out how best to start a conversation. For example, through blogging or through separately branded websites that encourage debate and discussion.

An easy first step into CR participation online is to use the CR report to encourage comment and input. Mobile phone company O2, for example, asked its audience to vote on CR issues within its 2006 report. Direct engagement from interested stakeholders can also be encouraged on CR community sites and networks like www.justmeans.com. Clothing company, Timberland, posts [its CR report](#) on the site to promote transparency and encourage comments.

It is also possible to develop existing CR communications - such as a

corporate website - to become something more community based and participative. Sustainability leader, GE, relaunched its ecomagination site - the "green" product and development area of GE - to encourage discussion.

Future innovation

If sustainability is to become core to business operations and communication, then **more widespread participation from stakeholders is critical.**

Social media offers an ideal platform for ongoing dialogue, participation and joint action among stakeholders - these are also all fundamental principles that underlie the CR discipline. It can also potentially **reduce the cost of more traditional means of stakeholder dialogue.**

At a broader level, global issues around sustainability, such as climate change and poverty reduction, need shared-thinking and collaboration among businesses, organisations, civil society and government to create new solutions. Social media can **break down the traditional boundaries** between these bodies by encouraging innovation and participation from all.

Consumers are also willing to engage and try out new ideas and solutions to address the big issues. Currently, **any innovation that links CR issues with social media will inevitably stand out** and build on an organisation's reputation - simply because there is not much being done:

"Companies are not yet exploiting social media for CR," says Heinold. "Contact tends to be one-way. This has to change as audiences are requesting transparency. Companies need to open up the dialogue on CR and this is a challenge."

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