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7 Social Media as a CSR Communication Channel The Current State of Practice

Kati Tusinski Berg and Kim Bartel Sheehan

INTRODUCTION

According to a 2010 study on Social Media Influence by Custom Communications, firms rarely use social media to inform the public about their brands' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. At the same time, these same firms use social media (such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs) for other branded promotions. Social media is popular; since the Social Media Influence study was published, consumer use of social media has increased to the point that a quarter of time spent online is spent on social media. Social media is powerful; it helps individuals find others who share their interests and convictions, as well as its power to strengthen community ties. This study investigates whether brands' usage of social media reflects the increase in consumer use, specifically regarding brands' use (or avoid using) social media to communicate CSR activities. In addition, we examine whether consumers respond to CSR messages at the same rates as other types of branded messages.

This research adds to the small body of literature on CSR channels, identifying the types of CSR messages delivered in social media channels and understanding decision-making processes and motivations for placing these messages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CSR is defined as a company, firm, or brand's "commitment to improve societal well- being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources" (Kotler and Lee, 2005). As such, CSR encompasses the "economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (Carroll, 1979). Whereas many firms have always participated in CSR activities, the use of CSR as a marketing tool has increased over the past several decades (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006). Perhaps as a result of the increased use of CSR, today's consumers and other firm stakeholders expect businesses to

act responsibly. Globally, we are seeing the emergence of a global business ethic; specifically, a growing sense among society that the responsibility for righting social wrongs belongs to all organizations. At the same time, there is a growing business need for increased attention to business ethics in order to reduce operating uncertainties and to be able to manage their reputations in both calm and stormy seas.

Firms participating in CSR activities can reap several benefits. First, CSR activities can enhance a brand's corporate reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Menon & Kahn, 2003) and consumers often see these brands as caring about society (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Boston College's Reputation Institute assessed consumer perceptions regarding CSR activities of firms and found that companies like Johnson & Johnson, Walt Disney Company and Kraft Foods have a high level of CSR activities that correlate with their positive reputations. Companies with poor perceptions among consumers tended to be in industries with major reputation challenges such as automotive and financial services (Boston College Reputation Institute, 2010). These findings support other research that shows that stakeholders such as consumers, employees, and investors take actions to reward good corporate citizens, and to punish bad ones (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007).

Companies with strong CSR reputations also benefit because consumers often chose to buy products from companies with strong CSR reputations, employees want to work for those companies, and investors chose to invest in those companies. As a result, brands with strong CSR reputations have an opportunity to turn these different stakeholders into brand ambassadors, stimulating positive word of mouth (Du et al, 2007).

CSR Communication

A small but growing body of literature has investigated strategic and tactical approaches to CSR communication. Building on the idea of legitimacy strategy, researchers have identified two types of strategic approaches to CSR communication: reactive and proactive (Wagner, Lutz & Weitz, 2009).

With a reactive strategy, the firm communicates CSR information in reaction to some event or crisis facing the industry and/or the firm (van Staden and Hooks, 2007), increasing legitimacy through the quality of the response. With a proactive strategy, a company's CSR communication is designed to prevent any legitimacy concerns that may arise. Interestingly, though, regardless of which type of strategy a brand or firm chooses, overall awareness of the firms' CSR activities is generally low among both internal stakeholders (employees) and external stakeholders (consumers) (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Communications strategies then often may not resonate well with some stakeholders. Perhaps the positive ratings seen by companies such as Johnson & Johnson are less the result of a strong CSR campaign but instead are based on an individual's past involvement with the firm and its brands or with the individual's own information search.

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For some brands, consumers are aware of CSR messages yet are skeptical of such messages (Bronn & Vrioni, 2001). Consumer skepticism increases as messages become more aggressive (Pirsch, Gupta, & Grau, 2007). Consumers seem to want to determine whether a firm's CSR activities are extrinsically or intrinsically motivated: that is, whether a company uses such messages merely to increase profits (an extrinsic motivation) or if the company seems to want to truly do something positive for society (an intrinsic benefit) (Schiefelbein, 2012). One key challenge for CSR messaging, then, is to minimize stakeholder skepticism and convey intrinsic motives for CSR activities. In fact, stakeholders are tolerant of extrinsic motives as long as CSR initiatives are attributed to intrinsic motives as well (Sen, Bhattacharya & Korschun, 2006).

Of particular interest to this study is CSR media channel selection, as limited research in this area exists. Media selection can affect a consumer's perceptions on a firm's motivations. For example, Philip Morris's CSR television campaign promoted its Kraft brand's food donations to refugees in Kosovo. The actual donation though, was much less than the millions of dollars spent on the TV campaign, and consumers responded negatively (Sheehan, 2004). Promoting this message through a less-expensive channel might have made all the difference in consumers' perceptions of the firm. More recently, BP's television and print campaigns airing after the Gulf oil spill received similar criticisms.

When selecting media channels, one important factor is the degree of control the channel allows. Some channels have a high level of control, giving the firm complete or near complete control of the message. Such channels include official CSR reports and press releases, brand-based websites, television commercials, and product packaging. Other channels offer less control as consumers and other communicators interact with, adapt, or respond to the message. Such channels include word of mouth, consumer forums and rating sites, and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs.

Whereas many firms prefer a high degree of control, reduced control has benefits. Messages delivered from low control channels tend to be more credible than messages from high control channels, as individuals are more likely to trust these messages (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). Given this focus on community engagement, it would seem CSR messages would be a clear fit with social brands. Where such messages might reside and have a high degree of impact is not clear, since social media offers a variety of "outposts" where CSR messages would live, (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, branded communities, and geo-location platforms). Brands use these different outposts for different reasons, and discovering which outpost, (or channel), is most utilized helps to learn how CSR messages might evolve for social brands.

Social media sites such as Facebook offer a moderate level of control as brands can post messages, videos, images, and the like at a social network site and allow consumers and other stakeholders to participate in a

dialogue with the brand. Stakeholders become a key element in the firm's external environment that can affect the organization (Murray & Vogel, 1997). Social media makes CSR information accessible to more people more of the time. Additionally, social media can encourage "citizen philan-thropy," a movement where consumers connect with all types of organizations through meaningful social networking. One successful example is Lance Armstrong's Livestrong initiative, which raised awareness and funds for cancer research through a variety of community-building activities.

Given the power of social media, it is surprising that Custom Communications reports only 22.5% of 287 companies have social media communications dedicated to CSR issues such as sustainability. In an April 2011 white paper, Greenstein and Watson suggested that companies were avoiding using social media for CSR until there was greater adoption by consumers. Given the huge growth in social media usage since Greenstein and Watson's white paper, we propose that current usage of social media for CSR should be investigated with the following research questions:

- *RQ1:* Do brands use social media for CSR activities?
- RQ2: What types of CSR activities do companies discuss via social media?
- *RQ3:* Do consumers respond to CSR messages in social media as they respond to other types of messages?

RESEARCH PLANS

To answer these questions, we conducted two studies. First, a study of the types of messages on popular Facebook sites identified CSR activity and consumer responses to the different types of messages posted at such sites to see the level of frequency and engagement. Next, a content analysis of top brand social networking sites was conducted to confirm the findings from the SMI study and to identify the types of CSR activities being discussed on such sites. The content analysis also determined the level of consumer interaction on the site via a social media audit.

Together, these studies will map the landscape of CSR communication channels and will provide guidance for a range of firms to better create and target CSR messages.

Study 1: CSR at Popular Facebook Sites

The top ten most popular branded Facebook sites were identified, and eight of these sites were examined during the month of August 2011. Facebook was selected to be examined because it is the most popular social outpost with more than 500 million users worldwide. At the end of 2011, Facebook was used by one in every 13 people on earth, with over 250 million people (over 50%) logging in every day (Digital Buzz, 2011). The eight

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sites selected had the highest number of people who "liked" the page, and included Coke (33.4 million fans), Converse (20 million fans), Disney (28 million fans), MTV (27 million fans), Oreo Cookies (23 million fans), Redbull (22.1 million fans), Skittles (19.2 million fans), and Starbucks (24.6 million fans). These eight brands all have CSR activity: Coke promotes energy and resource conservation, Converse is affiliated with project Red, Disney is involved with sustainability and children's causes, MTV campaigns against cyber bullying, Oreo is part of Kraft Food's CSR promotions to support sustainability and family causes, RedBull supports volunteering, Skittles is part of Wrigley's CSR promotions to support environmental issues, and Starbucks promotes several causes, including Fair Trade issues. Two other branded pages rounded out the top ten, but were both focused on Facebook itself and thus were not included.

A total of 274 posts were made by brands on these eight sites during the month of August. Of these 274 posts, only one was a CSR message: Disney posted about donations made to children's hospitals, a proactive post. Therefore, it is clear that the most popular brands rarely use CSR messages on their social brand Facebook pages.

These brands' posts all generated significant commentary from fans. Commentary, such as "liking" a post or adding a comment to a post, is a good measurement of engagement among the community (Smith, 2011). The mean number of "likes" to the average comment made during the time period examined was 8,334 (.035% response); Disney's CSR post generated 27,738 "likes" (.099% response). The mean number of comments made by fans to the average comment during the time period examined was 901 (.006% response); Disney's CSR post generated 870 (.003% response). Disney's CSR post generated a higher percent of "likes" among the site's fans than the average post on a top-eight site, although the CSR post generated fewer comments than a top-eight site.

Study 2: CSR at the World's Most Sustainable Companies

A content analysis of top brand social networking sites was conducted to confirm the findings from the SMI Social Media Sustainability Index study and to identify the types of CSR activities being discussed on such sites. The content analysis also determined the level of consumer interaction on the site via a social media audit.

The SMI report lists 15 companies that are using social media for smart sustainability communications. Because the report specifically highlighted these companies, they were used as the sample for the content analysis. The following companies were analyzed: AMD (Advanced Micro Devices, Inc.), Allianz, Dell, Microsoft, PG&E, Fed Ex, Ford, General Electric, Intel, IBM, PepsiCo, Starbucks, BBVA, Philips and Nokia. Only Starbucks appears on both the top-eight and the SMI lists.

Data was collected during September 2011 and includes all Facebook activities, (wall posts, note posts, event posts, photos, video posts, and

linked documents), from official company accounts. All the materials were collected in a week, (during the first week of October 2011), and saved as Word documents for the next stage of content analysis.

Data was then coded for types of CSR activities being discussed and level of consumer interaction on the site. The SMI report describes the wide definition of sustainability as communicating about environmental issues, climate and clean energy issues, social and community causes, charitable giving, and employee well-being and development. These apriori categories were then used for the content analysis of CSR messages to determine topic area and message valence in order to detect patterns of activities and whether they vary by channel.

These 15 companies made a total of 477 posts during the month of September 2011. Of these 477 posts, 15.7% (75 posts) were CSR messages. Although these companies made significantly more CSR-related posts than the top branded sites evaluated in our first study, it is not a primary focus of corporate branding on social media.

The majority of CSR messages (37.3% or 28 posts) were about social and community causes. For example, Dell posted the following message on its Facebook page: "Happy Social Good Day from our friends at (RED)! Dell is a proud partner and we want to know who's meeting up to discuss how social media can be used for social good?" Another example for this type of message came from FedEx: "FedEx Cares Week: Nearly 4000 FedEx volunteers worldwide will donate a combined 20,000 service hrs to local orgs." About 27% of CSR messages (20 posts) were about environmental issues, like this post from Dell: "Hey corporate citizens! Learn how Dell makes being 'green' easier for our customers and provides underserved youth access to technology, education and training. Dell releases its FY'11 Corporate Responsibility Report. Tell us what you think in the comments below." Climate and clean energy issues made up 17.3% (13 posts) of the CSR posts. For example, Allianz posted the following message on its Facebook page: "Looking to invest in greenhouse gas cuts? Small scale projects like energy-saving light bulbs for Asia or solar cooking stoves in Africa offer new carbon credit opportunities, says Martin Ewald, Investment Manager at Allianz Climate Solutions." Only 12% (nine posts) of CSR messages focused on employee well-being and development. AMD made the following wall post on its Facebook page to reach out to its employees: "Serious wildfires continue in central Texas including the Greater Austin metropolitan area near Bastrop, Pflugerville and the Steiner Ranch neighborhoods forcing many, including a number of AMD employees and their families, to be evacuated from their homes. If you are in central Texas please stay informed and take great care." Lastly, 6.6% (five posts) were about charitable giving, like this post from Dell about its military charities: "Dell is donating \$100,000 to military related charities and giving away 250 PCs to soldiers. Nominate a soldier

Company	Average Likes Per Post	Average Likes Per CSR Post
Allianz	13.4	13
AMD	145	127
BBVA	57.3	72
Dell	177.6	276
FedEx	115.9	194
Ford	158.4	38
GE	85.9	95
IBM*	N/A	N/A
Intel	3,953	5,892
Microsoft	1,952	0
Nokia	1,121.5	1,013
PepsiCo	739.5	747
PG&E	46.6	58
Philips	78	78
Starbucks	15,774.8	47,090

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Table 7.1 Average Likes per Facebook Post and Average Likes per CSR Post

*IBM did not have an official company Facebook page at the time of data collection.

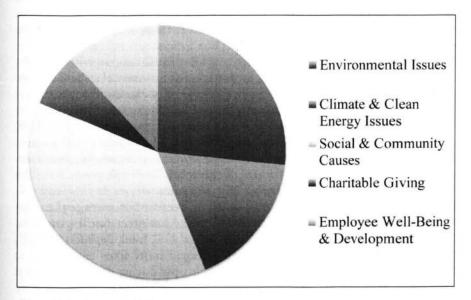


Figure 7.1 Types of CSR messages.

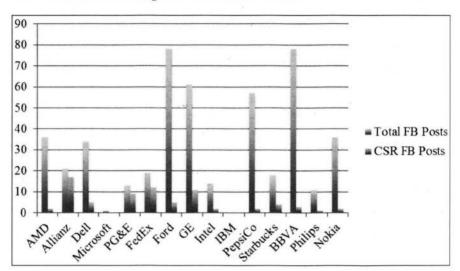


Figure 7.2 Total Facebook posts and total CRS posts.

today: http://del.ly/6039Rprf." Figure 7.1 provides a visual representation of the types of CSR messages.

Ford and BBVA had the highest number of Facebook posts with 78 each but less than 10% of those posts (6.4% for Ford and 3.8% for BBVA) were related to CSR. PepsiCo was also fairly active on Facebook during the month with 57 posts but only 2 of those posts or 3.5% were related to CSR. Likewise, GE had a total of 61 Facebook posts but only 11 were related to CSR.

Allianz had the highest percentage of CSR-related content with 17 of its 21 Facebook posts (80.9%) being focused on environmental issues, climate and clean energy issues, and social and community causes. Sixty-nine percent of PG&E's Facebook posts were related to CSR issues. FedEx had the third highest percentage with 63% of its Facebook posts focusing on CSR issues; however it should be noted that FedEx was celebrating FedEx Cares during the time of data collection so more posts were about this program. Figure 7.2 illustrates a comparison of the total Facebook posts with the number of CSR-related posts for all 15 companies.

More than half of the companies analyzed received on average the same amount or more likes per post for CSR-related content (see Figure 7.3). These companies included BBVA, Dell, FedEx, GE, Intel, PepsiCo, PG&E, and Starbucks. Only Ford and Nokia averaged more likes on its generic content. Microsoft only made one Facebook post during the month and it was not related to CSR, and at the time of data collection IBM did not have an official Facebook page. Thus, CSR-related content on average generates at least the same or often more interaction from consumers than other types of branded content.

DISCUSSION

These studies indicate that firms still do not regularly use social media to share CSR activities with external publics. Unlike previous studies, however, this study examines the types of messages that brands do post at their social outposts, which adds a new level of information to understanding the reluctance of brands to capitalize on this new medium. As this study examined activities at sites with millions of fans, the excuse that firms are waiting for people to adopt the medium falls short. We suggest several reasons why brands aren't using social media for CSR.

First, for many of these brands, a CSR message doesn't fit the "voice" of the brand at a social outpost. Social brands are creating voices that mirror the voices of the others in the community, which for many of the brands we examined is a youthful, fun, and casual voice. Shifting gears to a more serious CSR message may be at cross-purposes to the feeling of the community that the brands are trying to achieve.

Second, messages as social outposts are more "in the moment" rather than focused on long-term branding. Posts on social media often refer to something happening that very day in the world—an event that the brand is involved in, a comment on the weather that translates into a connection with the brand, a special promotion available only that day for social media followers. Similar to the first concern regarding the brand voice, interrupting this type of flow with a CSR message may not serve to support the community.

Third, social media postings are not text bound: brands often use a simple visual, which do not translate well into a CSR message. Disney, for example, often posts images from their movies to instigate discussions on what the characters and the movie mean to customers. This can develop a strong bond among fans, but may not be an effective technique for CSR.

Finally, brands create unique sites on social outposts for their CSR messages. For example, PepsiCo created a special Facebook page for the Pepsi Refresh Project, which provided information about their \$20 million donations in lieu of Super Bowl ads. The public was encouraged to vote for their favorite projects. In a similar interactive community, JP Morgan used the Chase Community Giving Facebook page to allow the public to cast votes for charities to receive part of a \$5millin donation. Timberland set up a special page for its Earth Keeper's program, which allows fans of the page to donate funds to plant both virtual and real trees in Haiti and China (Pannesidi, 2010).

Ethical Implications for the Practice of Social Media

This research contributes to the study of social media, ethics and the profession of public relations in several ways. It adds to the small body of literature on CSR channels, identifying the types of CSR messages delivered

in social media channels. Because consumers often identify CSR dialogue as a key factor in increasing a company's image (Bruchell & Cook, 2006), it contributes to the practice of public relations by helping firms understand the importance of channel selection for CSR messages as well as the implications of channel selection for CSR messages. Public relations professionals strive to develop effective CSR strategies that engage with key stakeholders and are ethical in execution and communication so that the messages and the firm are authentic to a range of stakeholders. These studies beg the ethical question of separating branded messages with CSR messages, particularly at a time when consumers want to support companies whose values are consistent with their own values.

Limitations and Future Research

These studies investigated one social media outlet: Facebook. Future research should address if and how companies use other social media such as Twitter to disseminate both branded and CSR messages. A comparison of the two types of social networks could prove useful, particularly because the users of these types of social media might demand different messages. Another research strand could investigate how corporations brand themselves across multiple social media accounts. For example, Microsoft's official company Facebook page did not include any CSR messages during September 2011 but its Microsoft Green page, which is the official Facebook account for Microsoft's Environmental Sustainability team, made seven posts during that same time, all of which were related to CSR.

CONCLUSION

The social media space is still in an evolutionary state, with new outposts opening up regularly and with brands and consumers deciding how and why to use what mix of outposts for their own purposes. Whereas CSR messages seem to be a way that brands can connect with consumers and other stakeholders with positive results for all, the potential is clearly untapped. This study provides benchmarks that brands can use to evaluate their social media messages, including CSR messages, to help determine the optimal messaging strategy to engage stakeholders. As social media evolves, updating these benchmarks will support firms' efforts to build brands in the social media space.

Discussion Questions

1. In your opinion, is it in the best of interest of firms to separate branded messages from CSR-related messages? Why or why not? How can the firm develop a consistent brand image with these different message strategies?

- 2. We suggest one of the reasons that firms do not disseminate CSR messages via branded social media sites is because the CSR messages do not fit with the voice of the brand. From an ethical perspective, shouldn't the voice of the brand be consistent across platforms? If so, is it possible to have a consistent voice with multiple communication channels?
- 3. If you were on the account team for a firm, what tactics would you use to disseminate CSR messages?

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