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Exploring the issues in sustainable development journal reporting

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Exploring the Issues in Sustainable Development Journal Reporting

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Abstract

There is concern about the environmental claims organisations make in corporate social reports and advertising. Similar concerns may also occur with reporting of environmental initiatives in journals. This paper explores what information is being conveyed in academic and industry journals. In particular, we examine the types of projects that are discussed and the level of detail provided in the reporting of sustainable development initiatives to identify what is being communicated and whether there is substance to the reporting. The results show that there are issues with the lack of detail reported and its anecdotal nature.

Keywords: social communications, advertising, ethics, public sector marketing

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Introduction

Organisations have been quick to follow the 'green' trend to gain competitive advantage at least in marketing terms if not full in practice (Connolly et al 2007). More than half of the organisations in the Global Fortune 250 companies now provide some form of annual social report as an indication of good corporate governance (Kaptein 2007). Many corporations practice some form of marketing that demonstrates how they reduce the negative environmental impact of their products or production systems (Peattie 2001).

However, there are criticisms with social reporting as containing few hard facts and often anecdotal (van Tulder and van der Zwart 2006). Hooghiemstra (2000) describes the reports as being mainly self-laudatory. There are also an increasing number of organisations making environmental marketing claims in their advertising that could be misleading to consumers (Polonsky et al. 1998). In addition, organisations are discussing or announcing their sustainable development initiatives within journals, particularly when facing negative media attention (Hoogheimstra 2000).

Polonsky et al. (1998) stated that it is "*important to evaluate all firm based sources of environmental information, not simply advertising activities*" (p282). Could the criticisms of environmental corporate social reporting, advertising and marketing also be applied to the many academic and industry journal articles reporting on sustainable development implementations? Is it possible that organisations are using academic or industry journals as another form of non-regulated promotion? There is some evidence that these criticisms are valid in the call for environmental journals to introduce conflict-of-interest disclosure statements for articles where the writer/researcher has received industry funding (Thacker 2006). Disclosure statements are standard in medical journals but are not common outside medical research with a study in 2001 indicating that only 16% of the science and biomedical journals requiring them (Thacker 2006).

This paper is an exploratory pilot study on reporting of sustainable development projects within organisations, and addresses the issue of what information and level of detail is reported about sustainable development projects in academic and industry journals. The main research objective is to 1) critically examine the articles for the level of detail on how the projects are implemented and 2) determine whether the criticisms of corporate social reporting and green advertising could be applied to journal articles. The paper adds to the literature on marketing practices, ethical marketing and social reporting by examining the communications in a different field from those of corporate annual reports or advertising and marketing.

Sustainable Development and the Issues with Reporting

There are an increasing number of methods for organisations to promote their social responsibility aside from traditional marketing strategies. Organisations can promote their social and environmental image through corporate social reports, advertising and marketing within industry journals and news reports. These methods have been integrated into organisational marketing strategy in response to studies showing that consumers are more

likely to choose a more environmentally friendly brand over another (Carlson, Grove and Kangun 1993). However, there have been many problems associated with environmental promotion of organisations, as outlined below.

Social Reporting

Social reporting is one of the three main areas that organisations produce annual reports on for stakeholders and the public. Over time, the concept of the social report has changed to include a combination of environmental issues, health issues, sustainability matters or socio-ethical statements, with most reports attempting to provide some elements of the triple bottom line (van Tulder and van der Zwart 2006). However, the lack of regulation in the production of social reports has meant that for many organisations the perception of the report is to improve the corporate image rather than any motivation for social accountability (Baker and Sinkula 2005; Belal and Owen 2007). As corporate social reports are available to shareholders and the general public on request, they can be used as a method for promoting the organisations 'environmental information' to consumers. This has lead to the criticism that social reporting is often anecdotal in nature, containing few verifiable facts, that they are self-laudatory, lack legitimacy and have poor quality (Hooghiemstra 2000; Kaptein 2007; van Tulder and van der Zwart 2006).

Green Advertising

Organisations have also increased their level of social advertising (Polonsky et al. 1998). On the one hand, organisations are developing more environmentally friendly alternatives to regular products for consumers to make a choice (Peattie 2001). Social advertising can also include attempts to improve the social perception such as changing production to have a lower environmental impact through, for example, recyclable packaging or dolphin-free fishing (Connolly et al. 2007).On the other hand, there is increasing awareness of misleading environmental statements that can be made through advertising of products and labelling in packaging (Polonsky et al. 1998). Regulators in some countries have developed guidelines that define what can be claimed in environmental marketing (Carrigan and Attalla 2001).

Implications in Journal Reporting

The criticisms of social reporting and the concerns of environmental marketing may also be applicable to the reporting found in industry and academic journals on sustainable development issues. This is of particular concern when an article is written by someone within the organisation. Such conflict-of-interest is discussed by Thacker (2006). There is also the issue of lack of disclosure in environmental journals (Thacker 2006). This lack of disclosure and support of findings means that some articles could merely be another form of inadequate promotion similar to that found in corporate social reports.

Research Design

We conducted an exploratory pilot study to examine the types of information and the level of detail provided in journal articles reporting on sustainable development projects implemented at an organisational level. The study involved preliminary testing of whether dimensions, such as the type of sustainable development project, level of detail provided in the journal article and whether the project was completed or not, The dimensions were tested as part of

examining the feasibility of a greater study into the ethics of sustainable development reporting.

Content analysis was used to examine a sample of journal articles published between 2000 and 2009 that report on sustainable development projects in organisations. Content analysis has been used in similar studies by Carlson, Grove and Kangun (1993) to examine environmental claims in print advertising and by Polonsky et al. (1998) to examine environmental claims on packaging.

As this was a pilot study, the set of articles was limited and selected from a keyword search in a set of specified databases. 'Sustainable development' was used as a subject term in combination with the key words of 'organisation' and 'project' in the search of databases such as Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, and MasterFILE. These databases were selected as they provide a range of articles from periodicals focused on organisational aspects and include both academic and business sources. Our aim was to achieve approximately 100 projects for examination as this would provide clarity and reliability of the dimensions and a reasonable understanding of the nature of the information provided in the journal articles. We carried out the search until enough projects were collected from articles to form the pilot study sample.

Selected journal articles were initially coded based on the type of journal. Determination of whether an article was coded as academic or industry depended on the level of peer review carried out in the journal. Articles that provided peer-review processes were allocated a coding of academic. Articles that provided no peer review and indicated that they were oriented to a particular industry were coded as industry.

Content analysis approach was then applied to examine the sustainable development projects discussed in the journal articles for phrases or terminology that were part of a set of defined concepts. Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as "*a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communications*". We used content analysis as we were interested in the *content* and the level of *detail* of what is communicated in the article (Weber 1990). The use of phrases or terminology related to the goal of the sustainable project implemented, the level of description provided in the article such as how much the project cost to implement and the benefits that were achieved whether intentional or unintentional were examined for an understanding of motivation (Payne and Payne 2004) We have developed three dimensions for coding that are discussed below.

When examining the coding of the project for the goals discussed, each specific project often covered more than one sustainable development project goal. We looked for phrases or terminology that indicated such goals as raw material reduction, energy, water or fuel reduction, process efficiency, waste management, recycling, substitution of materials used for greener options, pollution control or social improvements.

To determine whether the purpose of the article was marketing of the organisation through its sustainable development projects, we needed to identify the amount of detail available. The level of detail needs to be sufficient to allow consumers to understand the nature of the project. We coded for the level of detail provided in the description of the sustainable development project, how it was carried out, the resulting benefits (both intentional and unintentional) and cost of implementation. The phrases that applied to these concepts were rated with a scale of 1-5 with one representing little or no explanation of the concept in the

article and five representing very good detail in the article that would allow a potential consumer to understand how the project was promoting environmental policies.

The discussions of the projects were also reviewed for any phrases or terms that indicated whether the project was a proposal, in the early stages, completed or ongoing. By understanding the status of the project we can see whether there is prevalence for reporting on projects that have been implemented for some time or are only in the early stages. Projects that are implemented and ongoing could provide confidence in the continuation of the organisations environmental policies. Where a project is only in the proposed stage, the relevance of the reporting may be more anecdotal than based on the organisations policies.

Results of Study

Our restrictive keyword search of selected databases resulted in a sample of 129 sustainable development projects (from 35 articles). There were 29 projects (from nine articles) discussed in academic journals and 100 projects (from 26 articles) discussed in industry based journals.

When examining the coding of the content for the goals of the projects discussed, each specific project often covered more than one sustainable development goal. Of the 129 projects examined, we found 239 different sustainable development goals. Overall there was generally more emphasis on projects that dealt with energy, water and fuel conservation, waste management, recycling and pollution control (Table 1). Very few projects were concerned with either the reduction of raw materials used or developing a more efficient process within the organisation. In the case of the few social project goals discussed, these initiatives were only social projects and had no additional environmental goals. It is possible that the low number of social project goals could be because these projects are often not labelled with the term 'sustainable development'. This leads to questions as to why those issues are not as popular in either journal type. Further research is needed to understand why some environmental goals are not discussed as frequently. Is it possible that organisations are only reporting on projects that are more popular in the media and have greater consumer awareness?

Table 1 Results of coding the sustainable project goal (percentage within journal type)

	Raw Material	Energy, Water, Fuel	Process Efficiency	Waste Mgmnt	Re-cycling	Material Substitu'n	Pollution Control	Social	Total
Academic	6(8%)	13(17%)	5(6%)	12(16%)	10(13%)	12(16%)	18(24%)	0(0%)	76(100%)
Industry	9(6%)	48(30%)	12(7%)	25(15%)	28(17%)	11(7%)	25(15%)	5(3%)	163(100%)
Total	15	61	17	37	38	23	43	5	239

In the projects reviewed, we found that generally academic journals tended to provide much more detail on what the project was, how it was implemented and the benefits than was found in industry journals (Table 2).With little insight into the project, the articles become merely anecdotal reporting. They do not provide sufficient detail of the project to develop an informed choice. The lack of detail could mislead consumers as to how the project has helped the environment. This lack of detail and anecdotal quality parallels the criticisms found in corporate social reports. When it came to discussion on how much a particular project cost to implement, the academic journals provided very little detail as did the industry journals (Table 2). This could mean that despite the possibly economical failure of the project, organisations are still reporting it to promote and advertise their environmental persona.

Further research into the costs of projects implemented and reported needs to be done to resolve these questions.

Table 2 Level of detailed provided for each sustainable development goal (percentage within journal type)

	What was Done		How it was Achieved		Project Benefits		Implementation Cost	
Level of Detail	Little	Detailed	Little	Detailed	Little	Detailed	Little	Detailed
Academic	12(41%)	17(59%)	11(38%)	18(62%)	10(34%)	19(66%)	23(79%)	6(21%)
Industry	67(67%)	33(33%)	65(65%)	35(35%)	71(71%)	29(29%)	95(95%)	5(5%)

In academic journals there was a marked preference for completed (28%) or ongoing projects (28%) as shown in Table 3. In industry journals we found that there was predominant reporting of ongoing initiatives (68%) and to a lesser extent on projects that were only at the proposal stage (14%). This reinforces the concept that the journal articles are only being used as another method to advertise the organisations 'green' initiatives. Research into whether these proposed projects were ever initiated and what was reported about them is needed to see whether they were used merely as a promotional report.

Table 3 Status of the projects reviewed (percentage within journal type)

	Proposed	Early Stage	Completed	Ongoing	No Mention	Total
Academic	0(0%)	1(3%)	8(28%)	8(28%)	12(41%)	29(100%)
Industry	14(14%)	4(4%)	2(2%)	68(68%)	12(12%)	100(100%)

Conclusion

This research aim was to perform a preliminary exploration of whether there were any concerns with what is actually reported on sustainable development projects in journal articles. We were looking to see whether there were any patterns in the data that indicated that journal reporting of sustainable development initiatives might parallel the concerns found in corporate social reporting and green advertising. In the small sample of data we collected for this exploration we have found some patterns already standing out that require further examination.

In summary, there is much more emphasis on reporting sustainable development projects that fit with public awareness than those that are not as well known. The reports provide little detail as to how the initiative was carried out, thus being more anecdotal in nature than informative. There is little discussion on the costs of implementing the initiative leading to questions about the economical viability and success of the initiative. Organisations provide more reporting on proposed initiatives than ones that have been implemented reinforcing the concept that the reports are simply another form of promoting and advertising their 'green' qualities rather than reporting what has been achieved. However, all findings could be an artefact of the limited search being used in this pilot study.

This research has provided evidence that journals that include articles on sustainable development may have reason to be concerned about the claims made. There are parallels between the reporting in journals and those made in corporate social reporting, advertising and marketing in terms of the anecdotal nature, lack of detail and possible misleading claims to allow consumers to make an informed choice. However, as indicated, there is a need for further research to determine whether the patterns emerging are cause for concern.

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