STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY IN CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this thesis is to develop a better understanding on how businesses should communicate their sustainability strategy to their stakeholders. Businesses are facing the challenge of designing sustainability communications strategies that appeal to stakeholders of various interest and knowledge on the topic, and stakeholders whose objectives might even be contradictory to that of the company. In order to facilitate the communications process to encourage a better uptake of sustainability initiatives by corporations and the public, it is essential to find solutions to these communications challenges.

Methodology: The study focuses on the food and drink value chain in Western Europe and is based on empirical evidence from a multiple case study methodology involving in-depth interviews with 25 senior managers and directors from food and drink manufacturing companies, retailers, and some of their stakeholders.

Findings: A framework for corporate sustainability communications is developed, depicting five communications strategies. The framework also offers an insight how stakeholders can be categorised into the most appropriate communications strategy through the application of certain segmentation attributes. It is further illustrated how the application of strategic ambiguity can add value to the communications process in order to stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation from stakeholders.

Theoretical and practical implications/originality:
Previous research on corporate communications strategies, has seen limited empirical validation, is primarily focussed on consumers, and more importantly is lacking in advice regarding how to craft communications that not only appeal to a multitude of stakeholders, but that also encourage collaboration. The findings therefore add confirmation and extension to the previous research and, importantly, it provides a link between theories of strategic ambiguity and the corporate communications literature. The framework also offers practical value as it provides managers with a clear guidance on how to design effective corporate sustainability communications, ensuring diverse appeal and/or engagement for collaboration. Thus it provides a tool that has the potential of facilitating holistic sustainability progress in a value chain.

TO EMMA AND CARL

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1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

"*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*"

These are the seminal words from the report 'Our Common Future' published in 1987 by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development, often referred to as the Brundtland definition of sustainable development. Following this call for businesses to take more responsibility for the environmental, social and economic impact in the context where they operate, many corporations publicise their sustainability agenda and make claims for their sustainable practices and brands. These declarations are subject to scrutiny by a range of stakeholders, who question the credibility and the motives behind such statements (Belz and Peattie 2012, Cowton 1992, Kangun et al. 1991, Davis 1994, Newell et al. 1998, Karna et al. 2001). Linked to this criticism is the notion that sustainability cannot be achieved by a business in isolation, but that a value chain approach is necessary to ensure that actions taken in one part of the chain will not have negative sustainability implications at an earlier or later stage of the chain. This value chain approach, which is often referred to as 'life cycle management', was initiated by UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme) urging businesses to take social and environmental responsibility for their products from "cradle to grave" (UNEP 2007), calling for collaboration between actors along the whole value chain (Vurro et al. 2009, Jiang 2009, Grayson 2011, Scandelius and Cohen 2011).

Despite corporations claiming that they take a life cycle approach and thus audit several tiers of the value chain, there is still evidence that this is not always the case, notable through the recent Bangladeshi catastrophe, where European fashion retailers are in the centre of a value chain that still employs significant unethical practices. It is therefore paramount for businesses aspiring to be perceived as sustainable, to find ways to engage with stakeholders along the whole value chain and make collaborative efforts to improve practices. In order to do so they will need to be able to identify and engage with these stakeholders in an effective manner (Polonsky 1995, Wheeler and Elkington 2001, Laszlo et al. 2005, Frow and Payne 2011). A challenge to this, however, is that the stakeholders can be quite heterogeneous and some might not have the interest, knowledge or resources

to collaborate, or some of these stakeholders might even have conflicting objectives or different views on the most optimal route towards more sustainable practices. The potential tension or scepticism stemming from these challenges could become dysfunctional, if not managed properly, which may delay actions towards more sustainable business practices. In addition, as all activities undertaken by a business can impact the brand relationship and trust (Duncan and Moriarty 1998) with stakeholders, these challenges could also harm business performance. It is therefore vital to find ways to harness possible tension between stakeholders to create interest and collaboration instead of conflict.

Strategic corporate communications have been suggested as a tool to manage stakeholders and encourage collaboration and co-creation (Grunig and Hunt 1984, Morsing and Schultz 2006, Gregory 2007), to ensure support for legitimacy to operate (Castello and Lozano 2011, Sridhar 2012, Johansen and Ellerup-Nielsen 2012), build trust (Morsing and Schultz 2006, Borgerson et al. 2009) and gain a positive corporate reputation to safeguard competitiveness in the marketplace (Dowling 2004, Polonsky and Jevons 2006, Lodhia 2006 and 2012, Sridhar 2012, Gurau 2013, Thiessen and Ingenhoff 2011). It is also stressed that it is not only important for a company to have a strategic approach to ethics and responsibilities but that in order to draw on the potential benefits, they also need to be able to effectively communicate their actions in this area (Basil and Erlandson 2008, Maignan and Ferrell 2004).

While there has been a significant increase in academic papers dealing with sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility communications in the last decade (Elving 2010), it is however, not clear what an effective communications strategy on sustainability entails, and further research has been called for (Morsing and Schultz 2006, Du et al. 2010, Scandelius and Cohen 2011, Blomback and Scandelius 2013, Podnar 2008).

"Since creating stakeholder awareness of and managing stakeholder attributions towards a company's CSR activities are key prerequisites for reaping CSR's strategic benefits, it is imperative for managers to have a deeper understanding of key issues related to CSR communication" (Du et al. 2010, p. 9)

Especially the notion of communicating the complex topic of sustainability to a very diverse stakeholder audience poses many challenges. An interesting strand within the

academic communications literature - strategic ambiguity - suggests the use of ambiguous communications as a particularly effective strategy when the stakeholder situation is diverse and the topic to communicate is complex (Eisenberg 1984, Eisenberg and Witten 1987, Leitch and Davenport 2002 and 2007, Davenport and Leitch 2005, Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010). Strategic ambiguity has been empirically tested in the context of organisational change, but how could it work to stimulate engagement around sustainability, and how can it be applied in corporate communications strategies?

The focal theory of this thesis is corporate communications, as defined by Balmer et al. (2011, p. 6):

"Corporate communications relates to the totality of controlled messages from the organisation that is directed towards customers, employees and stakeholders."

Cornelissen views corporate communications as being founded on communications theory, and management theory, and based on the strategic angle of management theory he suggests following definition (2005, p. 23):

"Corporate communications is a management function that offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communications with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent."

This research is, however, specifically exploring corporate communications on sustainability, where sustainability on a corporate level, corporate sustainability (CS) is defined by Steurer et al. (2005, p. 274) as:

"....CS is a corporate guiding model, addressing the short- and long-term economic, social and environmental performance of corporations."

Hopwood et al (2005) suggest these three building blocks (economic, environmental and social) are interconnected as for example a population's social equity is seen as a prerequisite for interest in also caring for the environment. At the same time the

preservation of natural resources are essential to ensure future economic growth, which subsequently has the potential to improve people's livelihood and health, and so forth. Therefore, CS can be seen as initiatives that contribute to either increased social welfare, and/or protection of the natural environment, having the potential to also improve societal and corporate economic prosperity. While corporate communications include the totality of controlled communications from an organisation with the ultimate aim of improving the organisation's financial success, CS communications can be seen as a subcategory primarily concerned with the social and environmental aspects, which may or may not also lead to a positive economic impact.

Taking the views of corporate communications as expressed by Cornelissen (2005) and Balmer et al. (2011), together with the above view of CS, following definition will be used for CS communications in this thesis:

CS communications are planned, formal communications, initiated by the firm, about its philosophy, initiatives, issues and performance with regards to its social and environmental responsibilities, targeted towards the firm's stakeholders, with the aim to seek those stakeholders' approval and support.

1.2   The research aim

Drawing on theories from the stakeholder and corporate communications literature, combined with the theories on strategic ambiguity, the overall aim of this thesis is to increase the knowledge on how to effectively build CS communications strategies to a diverse stakeholder audience.

In order to achieve this aim, some specific research questions will need to be addressed, which will now be discussed.

Sustainability is a multifaceted concept with many meanings and definitions (Van Marrewijk 2003). In addition, concepts like corporate social responsibility (CSR) and CS are interchangeably used by businesses, adding to the confusion (Moon 2007), and there is

limited consistency in how these concepts are applied in the academic literature, among business practitioners and in the media (Fassin et al. 2011). In order to conduct an effective literature review, and later on effective data collection, it is imperative to establish a clear understanding on what sustainability means and how it relates to the concept of CSR. The first research question is therefore:

RQ1: What is the definition of sustainability and how does it relate to CSR?

The public relations (PR) literature offers a communications framework (Grunig and Hunt 1984) to deal with various types of stakeholders surrounding a business, with four distinct communications strategies. The Grunig and Hunt (1984) framework has subsequently been further developed for example with the purpose of CSR communications (Morsing and Schultz 2006), suggesting three communications strategies, and in the context of brand co-creation suggesting four broad communications strategies (Gregory 2007). While the frameworks by Grunig/Hunt and Morsing/Schultz offer a useful overview of suitable communications strategies, they fail to link each communications strategy to the appropriate stakeholder group. For a business it is paramount not only to understand what types of communications strategies are available, and their pros and cons, but also to understand to which stakeholders each strategy would be most suitable. Gregory (2007) suggests two stakeholder classification attributes: power and interest, where a stakeholder group possessing both a high level of power and interest needs the highest level of interaction. The stakeholder theory literature however proposes broader selection criteria, where notably it is stressed that for ethical management, the 'legitimacy' of the stakeholder is a key criterion. Mitchell et al. (1997) suggest in their seminal conceptual paper that there are three attributes to consider: power, legitimacy and urgency of the stakeholder. They call for empirical verification of these suggestions, and subsequent research has offered further attributes and notions to their research (Winn and Keller 2001, Parent and Deephouse 2007, Myllykangas et al. 2010, Eesley and Lenox 2006, Aaltonen 2008, Harvey and Schaefer 2001)

A departure point for the exploration of CS communications strategies in this thesis is thus to address the following questions:

RQ2: What are the attributes that businesses use to categorise their stakeholders?

RQ3: What communications strategies are used for the different stakeholder categories, and what are the main objectives behind these?

The previous section also raised the issue of diverse stakeholders, possibly both within one stakeholder group and between stakeholder groups. A challenge is thus how to communicate on sustainability philosophy, initiatives, issues and performance in an effective manner, ensuring approval, and also in some instances active support, to implement sustainability initiatives, when the audience might be characterised by stakeholder groups or individuals with different (maybe even conflicting) objectives, or when the business is seeking to stimulate collaboration and co-creation? There have been some suggestions on the use of strategic ambiguity as a communications strategy when stakeholders are complex and might have conflicting objectives (Eisenberg 1984, Eisenberg and Witten 1987, Leitch and Davenport 2002 and 2007, Davenport and Leitch 2005, Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010). Based on the strategic ambiguity literature it would be interesting, in this sustainability context, to deepen the understanding under which circumstances ambiguous messages are used and whether there is a link between the use of ambiguous messaging and any or all of the four communications strategies. Leitch and Davenport have conducted a number of studies into internal communications and ambiguity (2002, 2005, 2007), and recently Dickinson-Delaporte et al. (2010) brought strategic ambiguity into the field of social enterprise marketing. There is however still very limited understanding of this concept and therefore the following research question is proposed:

RQ4: Is strategic ambiguity being practised in CS communications?

And if it is, considering research questions 2 and 3, with the notion of a differentiated approach to stakeholder communications based on stakeholder categorisation attributes (Gregory 2007), it would further be important to understand:

RQ5: What is the rationale and format of strategic ambiguity in CS communications for the different stakeholder categories?

Finally one might ask whether these factors are driven by company size, and by the position in the value chain. Therefore the last research question is:

RQ6: How are the attributes for stakeholder prioritisation and the subsequent CS communications strategies linked to: (1) the size of a company, and (2) a company's position in the value chain?

Answering these questions will assist in the development of a comprehensive framework on CS communications. It should be noted that this research is not looking into specific message content and channels to each stakeholder group, but aims at reviewing and comparing how corporations plan their CS communications to their multiple stakeholder groups. This means that the rationale behind the communications will differ for different stakeholder groups, with some stakeholders being communicated to, with the purpose of creating a positive image and to ensure support to operate, whereas for other stakeholders the communications rationale is to engage in collaboration. It should also be stressed that this thesis is primarily focussing on verbal communications initiated by a corporation, rather than communications in the form of actions, symbols and images. It is further the communications from the corporation that is being researched rather than the response communications from stakeholders. In terms of strategic ambiguity it should also be clarified that the focus is on the deliberate use of ambiguous words/phrases in order to create consensus and/or collaboration with diverse stakeholders. It should further be stressed that it is strategic ambiguity with ethical intent that is being researched.

1.3   Research rationale

CS communications are the focal point of this thesis, and while sustainability or CSR communications have been addressed in previous academic research from different angles, there is still limited understanding on what strategies are both available and recommended for various stakeholders. Morsing and Schultz (2006) propose a framework for CSR communications, based on the conceptual PR communications framework by Grunig and Hunt (1984), and while it suggests three CSR communications strategies for 'important stakeholders', firstly it fails to advise on what constitutes an important stakeholder, and

secondly it lacks robust empirical evidence and is thus limited to a description of these strategies. Another communications framework, albeit not specifically for sustainability or CSR communications, but for the purpose of developing corporate brands (see definition in appendix 13) is proposed by Gregory (2007). The framework depicts four communications strategies linked to two attributes for assessing the importance of stakeholders. Gregory's research paper offers very limited empirical evidence, and furthermore the proposed stakeholder categorisation attributes lack a clear link to stakeholder theory, and while briefly making a reference to the seminal article on stakeholder categorisation by Mitchell et al. (1997) it fails to explain why other and fewer categorisation attributes are chosen for the framework. Gregory (2007) acknowledges the limitations of the proposed framework and calls for further research to build a more comprehensive model. On that note, the existing corporate communications frameworks (Gregory 2007, Grunig and Hunt 1984, Morsing and Schultz 2006) are missing advice on how to seek endorsement or even collaboration on a complex topic like sustainability from diverse stakeholders. The academic literature on strategic ambiguity offers interesting guidance for such contexts but has so far primarily been focussing on organisational change and crisis communications. In addition, reviewing the stakeholder theory, and the stakeholder management literature, reveals that there seems to be disconnection between normative and instrumental stakeholder categorisation approach. Consequently there is limited understanding on how a business that wishes to be ethical can combine attributes that are relevant for ensuring continuous profit for the organisation with attributes considering the welfare of all stakeholders.

This thesis therefore addresses the above mentioned research gaps, with the potential to provide a comprehensive framework for CS communications, contributing to stakeholder theory, corporate communications and the strategic ambiguity literature.

1.4   The research method

An interpretive research philosophy forms the foundation to this research project, which takes a theory-first driven position (Miles and Huberman 1994), developing a conceptual framework based on existing literature, which is empirically tested through a qualitative approach, collecting data from interviewing a number of case companies. The data provided through these semi-structured interviews is subsequently used to evaluate, verify and further develop the conceptual framework. It should, however, be noted that while the

existing literature provides some frameworks, useful as a departing point, the contexts are different (Gregory 2007: brand co-creation) and it was felt that in order to avoid missing insights relevant to a sustainability context, or to lead the respondent into pre-set categories of answers, it was important to keep questions open-ended (Saunders et al. 2012).

1.5   The research context

At the outset of this study the context chosen was the packaging industry. The rationale was that packaging is, from a marketing perspective, an important and interesting aspect as a platform for communications and brand image (Underwood and Ozanne 1998); and, as packaging also plays a central role in sustainability from a life cycle perspective, the design of packaging will determine transportation efficiency and shelf life for the product it protects (Hopkins 2010). After pilot interviews with individuals in the packaging industry a number of points were noted:

(1) from a sustainability perspective, packaging should not be looked into in isolation, instead, a holistic perspective must be taken to decide how to best design packaging to minimise the overall waste of packaging and content. It is therefore the organisations that use the packaging (food/drink brand owners and retailers) that can take the best decisions for a more sustainable packaging–product balance.

(2) The packaging industry is fragmented and the balance of power is, according to the pilot interviews, in the favour of the food and drink manufacturers and retailers. Relevant decisions on sustainability initiatives are therefore taken with the brand owners and/or retailers.

(3) The pilot interviews suggest that there is a power balance conflict between brand owners and retailers, stemming from a very competitive retail climate, and that this potentially leads to suboptimal decisions and, further, is counterproductive in driving real positive change in the food and drink value chain.

For these reasons, it was decided that the focus of the study would be with the food and drink manufacturers and retailers, rather than with the packaging manufacturers. As there is an apparent conflict between these organisations, it provides an interesting context in

exploring communications strategies. For this reason it was seen as necessary to study both retailers and brand owners, to understand this dynamic and to see how communications take place, especially between these two key actors in the food and drink value chain. The context for the research is thus the Western European food and drink value chain, with a focus on food and drink manufacturers and retailers.

The food and drink sector is the largest manufacturing industry in the European Union, with an annual turnover of almost €1,000 billion, and employing over four million people. It is an industry under massive scrutiny from the public, governments, NGOs etc. as it has a significant impact on people's health through food safety and nutrition, on the ecological environment through emissions, food waste and impact on biodiversity, and on the European economy (www.fooddrinkeurope.eu).

The majority of food/drink brand owners and retailers publish sustainability agendas aimed at reducing the negative impact on the natural and social environment, and a range of issues from waste, energy and water consumption, impact on biodiversity, employee rights, consumer health etc. are highlighted. However, some of these commitments have been challenged by media, pressure groups and consumers as false (Duff 2007, Jones et al. 2013).

It is important for these corporations to resolve this scepticism and to build trust, and ideally to lead the way for more sustainable practices. On this note, the importance of retailers has been highlighted as they occupy an important point in potentially influencing consumer behaviour, and thus occupy a key position in driving a wider sustainability agenda (Lopez 2010). It is therefore vital for retailers to have a clear communications strategy to consumers, but also to external interest groups and other potential partners (Duff 2007). This observation is, however, not limited to retailers as research points out that collaboration between food and drink manufacturers and other value chain members, as well as research organisations, interest groups, and governments etc. is imperative in order to provide positive change towards a more responsible food and drink value chain (Sibbel 2012). The food and drink value chain thus offers an important and interesting context for research on strategic sustainability communications.

1.6 Thesis synopsis

Chapter 1 – Introduction: The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the challenges of CS communications. It presents the research aim and questions and highlights how the research will contribute to the academic literature.

Chapter 2 - The concept of sustainability: This chapter provides an introduction into the concept of sustainability and how it relates to other similar ideas like CSR, thereby postulating the departure point for the research project.

Chapter 3 - Stakeholder theory: Stakeholder theory is introduced with its underlying thoughts of the normative (moral) versus instrumental approach. The academic literature on stakeholder categorisation is thereafter reviewed and critiqued, notably discussing in depth the seminal 'saliency framework' for categorising stakeholders by Mitchell et al. (1997).

Chapter 4 - Stakeholder management through corporate communications: The chapter introduces stakeholder management approaches, subsequently reviewing and critiquing existing frameworks for corporate communications and introducing strategic ambiguity as a strategic tool in corporate communications.

Chapter 5 - Development of the conceptual framework: The discussion from the previous chapter continues, leading up to the presentation of a conceptual framework incorporating aspects from stakeholder categorisation, and the suggested corresponding communications strategies in respect of each of these categories, including the proposed rationales and formats of strategic ambiguity.

Chapter 6 - Research methodology: This chapter discusses the underlying methodological philosophy for this research project and outlines the choices taken along the entire research process. It further highlights issues related to the primary and secondary research process, suggesting solutions in order to prevent bias and to ensure the research findings are reliable and valid.

Chapter 7 – Evidence of stakeholder categorisation attributes and its links with CS communications strategies: This chapter provides an insight into the research findings, comparing and contrasting CS communications between the case companies with respect to their strategies for stakeholder categorisation and prioritisation, communications strategies to each stakeholder group, and their possible depletion of strategic ambiguity.

Chapter 8 - Evidence of strategic ambiguity in CS communications: This chapter continues to present research findings, but with a focus on strategic ambiguity. It provides evidence on the motives for employing strategic ambiguity and illustrates how it is applied for the different communications strategies.

Chapter 9 - The emerging framework for CS communications: This chapter builds on the findings in Chapters 7 and 8, connecting the observations and comparing those with the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 5. Finally an emerging framework for CS communications is depicted and discussed in detail.

Chapter 10 - Conclusions: This chapter provides a summary of the research aims and findings, outlining academic and practical implications and making recommendations for future research strands and for managerial practice.

2 THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

2.1 Introduction

In order to fulfil the research aim as set out in the previous chapter, a literature review was conducted to establish the existing knowledge in the field of corporate communications in a sustainability context, and to set the direction of this research project in order to extend the academic literature in this area. In the literature search, priority was given to articles from 3 or 4 star journals according to the ABS (Association of Business Schools) list. However, where these journals didn't provide sufficient evidence, also lower ranked journals were consulted to get as deep and varied view as possible. A number of theoretical constituents were consulted in order to answer the research questions, with: stakeholder theory as an important underpinning concept for sustainability thinking; stakeholder classification and management to find a structured method to deal with the variety of stakeholders of an organisation; corporate communications theories to get insights into suitable communications strategies to these various stakeholder groups; and finally the strategic ambiguity literature to seek advice for message formulation. However, before setting out on this journey it is imperative to make some clarifications to the complex concept of sustainability and assess how it compares with other popular concepts like CSR. This chapter will therefore review the literature on sustainability and CSR to set the scene for the subsequent literature review on stakeholder theory (Chapter 3) and stakeholder management through corporate communications, including the notion of strategic ambiguity (Chapter 4).

2.2 Confusion around the concepts of sustainability and CSR

Sustainability is an increasingly popular word, used widely by many businesses to portray a positive image, and is frequently debated in media and by NGOs. This is also highlighted in academic literature, where it is noted that there are "*...hundreds of concepts and definitions....*" (Van Marrewijk 2003, p. 95), stemming from a philosophy of "*... a more humane, more ethical and a more transparent way of doing business*" *(*Van Marrewijk 2003, p. 95). Other academics add to this opinion, raising the issue of the existence of much confusion and ambiguity around the concepts of CSR (Moon 2007), business ethics

and CS, and there is limited consistency as to how these concepts are applied in the academic literature, among business practitioners, and in the media (Fassin et al. 2011).

So what is 'sustainability' or 'CS' and how does it compare to CSR? The following section will review definitions of CSR and sustainability/CS, compare the concepts, and suggest the starting point for this research.

2.3 Definitions of CSR

The concept of CSR was first noted by Bowen in 1953, and while some suggest that there is no official definition for CSR (Runhaar and Lafferty 2009), there are plenty of widely quoted definitions available in the academic literature. CSR is suggested as a four-layered model addressing economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities (Carroll 1991), and Carroll, together with Buchholtz, later suggest following definition (Carroll and Buchholtz 2009, p. 44).

"Corporate social responsibility includes the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic expectations placed on organizations by society at a given point in time."

Other definitions of CSR exclude philanthropy (World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) 2000, Luetkenhorst 2004), and this was recently also empirically verified (Fassin et al. 2011). The definition by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development is:

"Corporate social responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large" (WBCSD 2000, p. 9).

This definition, as noted by Belz and Peattie (2012), is limited to social and economic responsibilities. The authors highlight however that the concept of CSR is a bit 'blurred' as it has evolved over the years and sometimes it will include also environmental

responsibilities. For example, the widely quoted definition of CSR by the Commission of the European Communities, includes the environmental dimension (2001, p. 6):

"....a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis."

The view of 'stakeholders' in this definition is important as stakeholder theory is frequently used as the underpinning of the CSR concept in the academic literature (Maignan and Ferrell 2004), which is further highlighted in the following definition:

"Subsequently, we suggest that CSR designates the duty (motivated by both instrumental and moral arguments) to meet or exceed stakeholder norms dictating desirable organizational behaviours" (Maignan and Ferrell 2004, p. 5).

The close link between stakeholder theory and CSR is however contradicted by Fassin et al. (2011) who empirically reveal that in the context of SMEs, the management of stakeholders is not seen as an integral part of CSR. Basil and Erlandson (2008) however conclude from their literature review on CSR that from an academic perspective stakeholders are a key component in CSR and CSR definitions:

"Definitions consistently include the notions that CSR involves (1) benefiting society in ways that may not directly benefit the company's financial position and (2) attending to the needs of a variety of organizational stakeholders" (Basil and Erlandson 2008, p. 126).

Some of the definitions discussed above mention 'ethics' as part of CSR, raising the question on how CSR and business ethics are related. Basil and Erlandson (2008) offer the following explanation of the difference between these two constructs:

*"CSR goes beyond ethics in that it also may seek to make a positive contribution to stakeholders, above what is morally right or expected. As such when ethics are discussed herein, they are viewed as a component of CSR, which has large but not perfect overlap. Similarly, philanthropy is treated as a component of CSR" (*Basil and Erlandson 2008, p. 126).

The notion of business ethics as being different from CSR is also supported by Fassin et al. (2011, p. 442), who found that there is a distinction between those concepts. In this context CSR is seen as *"…more theoretical, more opportunistic and more business-like than business ethics…"* (p. 442). CSR can therefore be seen as a management concept addressing social and environmental issues, whereas business ethics has more to do with a firm's behaviours and compliancy to legislation (Cacioppe et al. 2008). Fassin et al. (2011, p. 442) conclude:

"Therefore, contrary to the statements in a number of recent articles, business ethics and CSR should not be considered as interchangeable concepts."

The above discussion on CSR and its many definitions highlight the ambiguity around the concept (Sweeney and Coughlan 2008), and similarly it has also been criticised that the word 'social' in CSR is too vague and confusing (Van Marrewijk 2003), and in addition the concept is not static but keeps evolving, as noted by Carroll (1999, p. 268):

"CSR continues to serve as a core construct but yields to or is transformed into alternative thematic frameworks."

On top of the multitude of definitions around CSR, it has also been found that CSR definitions are not only context specific for various industry sectors, or geographical areas, but also specific to each business (Moon 2007), adding to the complexity. In addition, previous research offering definitions of CSR have often taken different perspectives (normative versus instrumental versus descriptive) and thus added to the confusion (Maignan and Ferrell 2004). The next section will discuss the concept of 'sustainability' and thereafter a comparison of the concepts of CSR and sustainability will be discussed, further highlighting the complexity surrounding these ideas.

2.4   Definitions of sustainability

Sustainability, like CSR, is a complex concept with a multitude of definitions and ambiguous meanings (Smith and Sharicz 2011, Steger et al. 2007, Hartman et al. 2007). One of the most quoted definitions of sustainability, is the one related to sustainable

development according to the so called Brundtland report (World Commission of Environment and Development WCED 1987), defining sustainable development as:

" ...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

The early years of the sustainability literature seem to primarily focus on the environmental aspect, however that has evolved, as noted by Crane and Matten (2010), who argue that sustainability now also includes economic and social concerns, as it often is unrealistic to make distinctions between social, economic and environmental considerations. Therefore sustainability fits within 'the triple bottom line' (TBL) philosophy as advocated by Elkington (1998), indicating that sustainability has three pillars, including not only environmental responsibilities but also considerations for social and economic aspects (see appendix 13).

Crane and Matten (2010) also refer to the Brundtland definition of sustainability, but argue that the definition is rather vague and their interpretation of the concept is that it is about maintenance or resources:

".....sustainability appears to be primarily about system maintenance, as in ensuring that our actions do not impact upon the system – for example, the Earth or the biosphere – in such a way that its long-term viability is threatened" (Crane and Matten 2010, p. 33).

They conclude by defining sustainability as:

"Sustainability refers to the long-term maintenance of systems according to environmental, economic and social considerations" (Crane and Matten 2010, p. 34).

Sustainability is also, as noted above, linked to the concept of the TBL and Smith and Sharicz (2011, p. 73–74) even combine the concepts and offer a definition:

"We define TBL sustainability as the result of the activities of an organization, voluntary or governed by law, that demonstrate the ability of the organization to maintain viable its

business operations (including financial viability as appropriate) whilst not negatively impacting any social or ecological systems."

Gao and Zhang (2006) bring the Brundtland view of sustainability into the corporate context and suggest that CS can be achieved when:

"...corporations should fully integrate the social and environmental objectives with their financial aims and account for their actions against the wellbeing of a wider range of stakeholders through the accountability and reporting mechanism" (Gao and Zhang 2006, p. 724).

A similar notion is offered by Steurer et al. (2005, p. 274), defining CS as:

"....CS is a corporate guiding model, addressing the short- and long-term economic, social and environmental performance of corporations."

With this definition, they argue, CS can be used interchangeably with sustainable development.

2.5   A relationship between CSR and sustainability

The two previous sections have defined CSR and CS, and while it is obvious there are several similarities between these concepts, there are likewise some differences. The aim of this section is to establish if CS and CSR are similar enough to make the assumption that these concepts can be used interchangeably.

Steurer et al. (2005) identifies three key differences between CSR and CS:
1. CSR is more specific and closer related to stakeholder demands, while CS takes a more general approach on the corporate direction.
2. CSR takes a short term business approach, whereas CS takes a long-term perspective.
3. Historically, the concepts are different, with CSR focussing on social aspects and CS on environmental aspects primarily.

Other scholars also make a distinction between CSR and CS (Wai 2011, Lo and Sheu 2007, Lopez et al. 2007), where for example it is suggested that the key differences are that in CSR the three pillars of social, economic and environmental responsibilities are seen as separate constructs with a focus on how they impact on the lives of humans, whereas in CS the constructs are interlinked and with a focus on the firm; in addition, CSR can be seen as a tool to reach CS (Wai 2011).

CSR as an antecedent to CS is also suggested by Van Marrewijk (2003), who argues that while CSR and CS are two different concepts, they are related by CSR being the structured business programme that leads to CS. The following definitions are proposed (Van Marrewijk 2003, p. 102):

"Associate CSR with the communion aspect of people and organisations and CS with the agency principle. Therefore CSR relates to the phenomena such as transparency, stakeholder dialogue and sustainability reporting, while CS focuses on value creation, environmental management, environmental friendly production systems, human capital management and so forth."

This view is also shared by Steurer et al. (2005) who make a distinction of CSR, CS and SD (sustainable development), where CSR is the management approach, CS the corporate approach, and that these approaches eventually lead to SD, by interconnecting the concepts through the application of SRM (stakeholder relationship management see Figure 2.1 below). CSR is thus seen as the vehicle for CS (Moon 2007).

In the context of SMEs the perceptions of CSR and sustainability are closely associated, with small differences such as sustainability being seen as more practical, taking a longer term perspective, being less voluntary, involving more stakeholders and being more operational (Fassin et al. 2011).

Figure 2.1: An overview of relationships between SD, CS, CSR and SRM. (Steurer et al. 2005, p. 275)
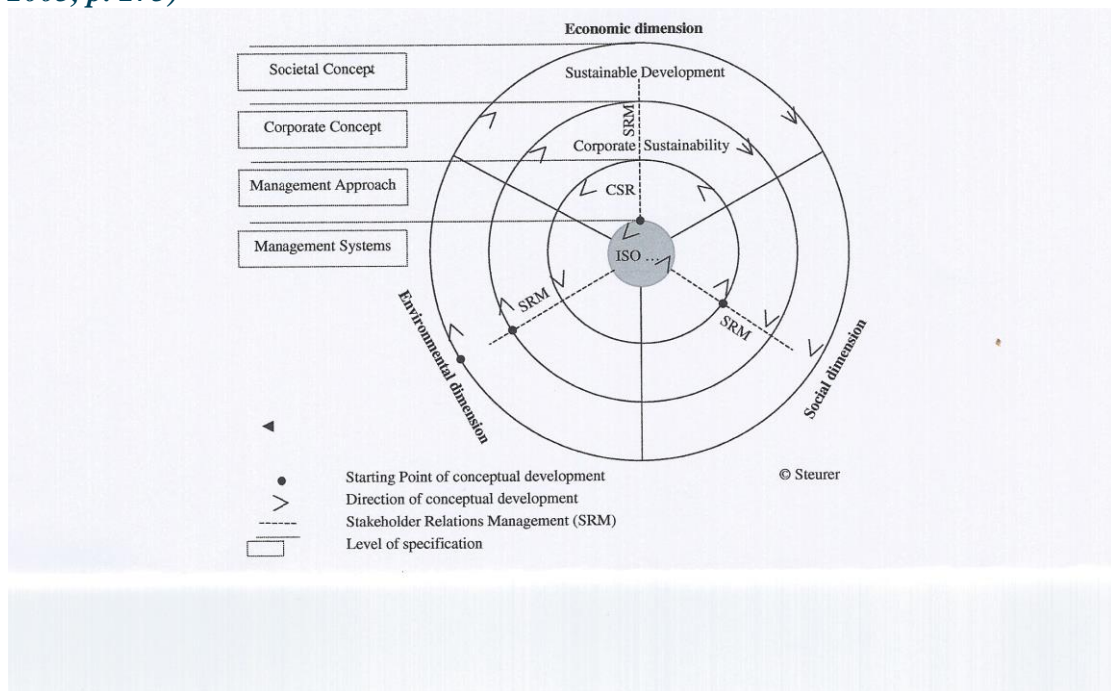
Belz and Peattie (2012) highlight the connection between CSR and sustainability marketing, where sustainability marketing is considered to primarily focus on the product level, but is linked to CSR that deals with the corporate level. They argue that in order for corporations to take consistent and effective sustainability actions, the concept of responsibility needs to be fully integrated in the business and form the basis for the corporate strategy, and CSR is the most common framework to allow this to take place.

It is noted that although these concepts historically were quite distinct in the way of CSR being primarily focussed on social aspects and sustainability more on environmental aspects (Van Marrewijk 2003; Steurer et al. 2005), they are nowadays commonly used as synonyms, and the notion of the TBL is used in both contexts (Van Marrewijk 2003). A combined definition for the two concepts is suggested as follows (Van Marrewijk 2003, p. 102):

"In general, corporate sustainability and, CSR refer to company activities – voluntary by definition – demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business

operations and in interactions with stakeholders. This is the broad – some would say 'vague' – definition of corporate sustainability and CSR."

Consequently, many scholars in the business and management discipline make the assumption that the concepts of CSR and CS, while not identical, can be used interchangeably (Lourenco et al. 2012; Perez-Batres et al. 2010; Porter and Kramer 2006; Jose and Lee 2007; Sotorrio et al. 2008; Moon 2007). Lourenco et al. (2012) for example construct their empirical work on CS performance on the assumption that CSR is substitutable with CS as (Lourenco et al. 2012 p. 417):

"....these concepts are considered to address the same basic issues, in the sense that they all are about companies' impacts on, relationships with, and responsibilities to, society".

The above discussion highlights that there is ample academic support for CSR and CS as being different constructs, where CSR is being seen as the antecedent to CS (Van Marrewijk 2003; Steurer et al. 2005). However, following the assumptions made in a range of prominent research papers (Lourenco et al. 2012; Perez-Batres et al. 2010; Porter and Kramer 2006; Jose and Lee 2007; Sotorrio et al. 2008; Moon 2007), treating CSR as a synonym to CS (Van Marrewijk 2003), this same assumption will be made for this research. Thus, the following literature review will take into consideration both academic papers on CSR as well as CS and sustainability.

2.6   Summary

This chapter has established current knowledge on the definitions of sustainability and highlighted its relationship with CSR. It is found that while sustainability and CSR are different constructs, a range of previous prominent studies make the assumption of treating CSR as a synonym to sustainability, a notion that will also be followed in this thesis. Having established the context of sustainability, the next chapter will review one of the key literature strands for this research, i.e. stakeholder theory, to facilitate understanding on how businesses identify and categorise their stakeholders.

3   STAKEHOLDER THEORY

3.1   Introduction

Stakeholder theory can be seen as the underpinning theory to CSR and sustainability management (Maignan and Ferrell 2004). It is suggested that businesses must not only consider owners and shareholders, but must also address a broad range of organisations and groups that have a stake in the corporation. Three categories of stakeholder theory are suggested (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Steurer et al. 2005):

1. Normative: how organisations should treat stakeholders from a moral perspective, not only key stakeholders but all stakeholders. Deals with questions on why and how a firm should deal with its stakeholders.

2. Instrumental: accepts a linkage between how stakeholders are treated/managed and their responses and vice versa, indicating that taking stakeholder views into consideration improves chances for the firm to perform well and reach its objectives.

3. Descriptive: actual treatment of stakeholders. Answers the question on how stakeholders are actually managed by businesses.

It has been argued that CSR and sustainability should take a normative approach (Donaldson and Preston 1995), however this broad definition of stakeholders is overwhelming for many business managers, commonly resulting in businesses choosing an instrumental approach (Mitchell et al. 1997).

This chapter will now continue with an overview of definitions of stakeholders, and highlight some of the key developments within stakeholder theory. It will further discuss, based on stakeholder theory and the related concept of stakeholder management, different classification methods of stakeholders, which will later form the foundation of the conceptual framework for this thesis. The chapter will further provide a review of stakeholder theory and management from a marketing lens.

3.2 Stakeholder definitions

Freeman (1984) is often seen as the pioneer in stakeholder theory in the business literature. In his seminal book on stakeholder management he defines the stakeholder as:

*".... any group or individual who can effect, or is affected by, the achievement of the organization's objectives" (*Freeman 1984, p. 25).

While the definition has been widely discussed and criticised in the academic literature over the years, many subsequent definitions are variations of the Freeman definition. Much of the debate has been whether the Freeman definition is too broad, as one could argue that the definition indicates that anyone could be a stakeholder.

Donaldson and Preston (1995) stress that the foundation of stakeholder theory is to consider all stakeholders' interests and to have mutual relationships with the focal organisation, and suggest a definition of stakeholders as:

"Stakeholders are identified through the actual or potential harms and benefits that they experience or anticipate experiencing as a result of the firm's actions or inactions" (Donaldson and Preston 1995, p. 85).

This definition focuses on the harm and benefits that the stakeholders can experience from the organisation, suggesting a one-way approach. There is no suggestion that actors whose actions or inactions could harm or benefit the organisation should be considered stakeholders. Donaldson and Preston (1995) address this by making a distinction between influencers and stakeholders, where they suggest that media and competitors have influence but no stakes. When competitors collaborate through trade associations however, they can be seen as a stakeholder for this non-competitive relationship.

A more recent and specific definition assumes that stakeholders differ from company to company and also with time: (Crane and Matten 2010, p. 62)

*"A stakeholder of a corporation is an individual or a group which either: is harmed by, or benefits from, the corporation; **or** whose rights can be violated, or have to be respected, by the corporation."*

As a contrast, some scholars offer definitions that are more focused on stakeholders holding an economic interest, i.e. taking an instrumental view to stakeholder theory. Resource dependency theory often underpins this approach, defining stakeholders as actors who can grant or withdraw important resources to the organisation, and who can exert influence on the organisation and thus become important stakeholders (Maignan and Ferrell 2004; Frooman 1999). This provides a more specific and narrow definition of stakeholders as compared to the definitions by Freeman (1984) and by Donaldson and Preston (1995).

Irrespective of which definition of stakeholders is being considered, businesses are surrounded by a multitude of stakeholders, posing a challenge for the business to effectively address this large and potentially diverse audience (Mitchell et al. 1997). Methods to classify and prioritise stakeholders can therefore offer great support to managers facing this dilemma, and this will further be discussed in the following section.

3.3 Stakeholder categorisation

Stakeholder theory, or specifically how to identify and prioritise critical stakeholders is essential for firms in order to optimise the use of internal resources (Grinstein and Goldman 2011), and to choose the most appropriate stakeholder management strategy (Harrison and St John 1996). Normative stakeholder theory suggests that all stakeholders must be considered (Donaldson and Preston 1995), and as society and businesses constantly evolve, the stakeholder dynamics are also likely to progress; therefore all stakeholders must be viewed as important, as a stakeholder group of less importance today may become a significant stakeholder in the future (Berman et al. 1999).

There are however examples of more focussed stakeholder perspectives, one example of which is to classify stakeholders into primary and secondary stakeholders. Primary stakeholders are defined as those that are required for the survival of the business through their provision of resources, whereas secondary stakeholders don't have this direct impact

on the firm but can still have influence, e.g. media and NGOs (Savage et al. 1991; Maignan et al. 2005; Waddock et al. 2002). In another study, Maignan and Ferrell (2004) suggest four main categories of stakeholders: organisational (which includes employees, suppliers, customers, investors etc.); community; regulatory bodies; and media stakeholders.

Frequently listed examples of stakeholders include: consumers, competition, legal bodies, employees, financial institutions, general public, government, interest groups, media, owners, scientific communities, suppliers etc. (Polonsky 1995). Some believe that the natural environment should be considered a distinct stakeholder (Buchholz 2004), whereas other scholars rather take the view that the ecological environment can't voice its own concerns and thus needs to be represented by what they call 'green stakeholders'. Fineman and Clarke (1996) for example name four broad categories of green stakeholders:

- National and local pressure groups whose objective is to be the voice of the ecological environment;
- Regulatory bodies;
- Stakeholders with indirect interest of a greener environment, e.g. shareholders, customers, media etc.;
- Internal stakeholders.

A more recent attempt to identify green stakeholders (Rivera-Camino 2007) suggests that there are four major green stakeholder groups: market (including customers, distributors and suppliers), social stakeholders (e.g. local communities), immediate providers (shareholders, labour unions etc.) and legal stakeholders.

Although this rather simplistic view of a focal organisation surrounded by its stakeholders is prominent in the stakeholder theory literature, there are critical voices suggesting that the real picture is more complex than this dyadic relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders. Rowley (1997) for example, highlights that businesses do not respond to individual stakeholders but to an interaction of stakeholders. Basing his arguments on social network analysis theories, he postulates that firms also need to consider other indirect stakeholders who might not have a direct influence on the focal firm but who have influence on the stakeholders of the focal firm.

3.4   Stakeholder categorisation in a marketing context

While stakeholder theory has been widely debated and researched in the management literature, the marketing discipline has been criticised for limiting stakeholder thinking to primarily customers and/or consumers (Greenley and Foxall 1998; Jackson 2001; Maignan et al. 2005; Greenley et al. 2005), which is evident in the definition of marketing by the Chartered Institute of Marketing (2013, www.cim.co.uk), where 'customers' are the only stakeholders mentioned:

"Marketing is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably."

This narrow perspective can lead to uncoordinated CSR activities (Maignan et al. 2005), which can even damage the competitive advantage of the firm (Jackson 2001). To investigate the relatively low interest in stakeholder theory in the marketing literature, a word search was conducted in some of the most prominent marketing journals, resulting in a very limited number of hits (as depicted in Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Literature search for stakeholder articles in marketing literature for the period of January 1989 – June 2013

	Number of articles found using the following keywords		
Journal	Stakeholder identification	Stakeholder saliency	Stakeholder prioritisation
European Journal of Marketing	20[*]	1	1
Journal of Marketing	0	0	0
Journal of Marketing Research	0	0	0
Journal of International Marketing	0	0	0
International Marketing Review	0	0	0
Journal of Marketing Management	0	0	0
International Journal of Research in Marketing	1	0	0
Journal of the academy of Marketing Science	3	0	0

Industrial Marketing Management Journal	4	0	0
Total number of articles	**28**	**1**	**1**

*Notably 11 of these were published in 2005–2006.

'Stakeholder identification' seems to be a more researched area in marketing compared to 'stakeholder saliency' and 'stakeholder prioritisation' (also searched for the American spelling 'prioritization'). As can be concluded from this search, stakeholder theory has yet to become established in marketing theory. This is also highlighted in a fairly recent paper in the *European Journal of Marketing*, where there is a call for papers combining stakeholder theory and marketing theory and to consider stakeholders beyond the customer (Grinstein and Goldman 2011). Ferrell et al. (2010) highlight that while a stakeholder orientation is becoming commonplace with most businesses, the marketing discipline still focusses primarily on customers and competitors as the primary stakeholders.

The corporate marketing literature, especially the strand dealing with corporate ethical identity, raises the responsibility of corporations to a wide range of stakeholders (Balmer and Greyser 2002; Balmer et al. 2011; Balmer et al. 2007; Fukukawa et al. 2007). Also the advent of green marketing and relationship marketing, pose a good starting point for possibly enlarging the classical stakeholder consideration from a marketing perspective, as these concepts both add new dimensions on corporate and marketing objectives, i.e. not only to meet needs of consumers (Polonsky 1995). Grinstein and Goldman (2011) also attempt to bring more stakeholder thinking into the marketing literature, and to look beyond the traditional customer focus for the marketing discipline. There is already evidence for a wider stakeholder picture, they debate, as in B2B (business to business) contexts, it is typically the retailer or distributor that is seen as having priority instead of the end consumer. They argue that it is the stakeholders that provide revenue and funding to an organisation that should get prioritisation. Their empirical test involving a quantitative study of 115 Israeli firms, found that firms with higher levels of resources typically also take a more generalist stakeholder view, as they have sufficient resources to deal with a larger number of stakeholders. The study is, however, limited to pre-set types of stakeholders (all revenue and funding providers) and fails to consider stakeholders beyond resource providers.

This notion of viewing other stakeholders beyond consumers as key, is also supported in a study into new development in a B2B context of four businesses in the service sector (Smith and Fischbacher 2005), where it is found that stakeholders with existing 'dependencies' with the firm and where the managers recognise the stakeholders' legitimate power, are more likely to enjoy higher prioritisation from managers. The study also shows that customers are not directly involved in the development process (apart from being 'represented' by the marketing function or other stakeholders), which highlights that in the new development context, the customer is not seen as a key stakeholder but as a 'dormant' stakeholder.

An empirical study from Spain (Rivera-Camino 2007) confirms that stakeholder identification is a dynamic process, evolving with time. Another interesting finding is that the size of the firm is relevant for stakeholder attention, as larger firms are more visible and might therefore be more prone to consider claims from stakeholders. Finally it is also suggested that the closer the firm is to the final customer in the value chain, the more responsive it is likely to be to its stakeholders. Also the geographical context is important with regards to identification and engagement with multiple stakeholders. Jurgens et al. (2010) compare in a conceptual paper how firms engage with stakeholders in the US as compared to Europe, and find that there are huge differences, which might also explain why some US businesses struggle when establishing businesses in Europe. The US stakeholder model is still very shareholder focused, whereas Europe takes more of a network perspective, considering a number of stakeholders as key, such as unions, financial institutions and governments, and to some extent certain interest groups. It is further stressed that engagement with stakeholders should be an on-going process and not just deployed when issues arise.

This chapter has so far discussed the definition and classification of stakeholders and the debate around a narrow versus broad stakeholder focus. In addition, the debate in the academic marketing literature has been summarised. The next section will address stakeholder categorisation strategies, as especially firms with a broad stakeholder view will know that the stakeholder situation can be rather complex and can involve stakeholders with conflicting objectives. It is therefore essential that firms have a clear strategy on how to deal with a multitude of stakeholders.

3.5   The stakeholder saliency framework

Mitchell et al. (1997) call for more research in how to identify and categorise stakeholders as they feel that the existing definitions of stakeholders are too broad and could in principal include anyone. While a broad definition is suggested in normative stakeholder theory, it makes it difficult for managers to effectively deal with stakeholders and their claims, especially as claims might even be contradictory. A narrow definition, on the other hand, can facilitate stakeholder management in terms of managers' time and firm resources. It carries the risk, however, of putting too much emphasis on investors and shareholders, and therefore takes too much of an instrumental view of stakeholders, ignoring or overseeing other legitimate stakeholders. The authors (Mitchell et al. 1997) therefore argue for a pragmatic narrower definition that is legitimacy-based (ranging from contractual to moral claims / interests / risks), and also accommodates for some stakeholders covered by the broad definitions, who might be able to exert a high level of power over the organisation. These two stances – broad and narrow - therefore need to be connected for effective stakeholder management, and the authors argue:

"*Power and legitimacy, then, are necessarily core attributes of a comprehensive stakeholder identification model. We argue that when these attributes are evaluated in light of the compelling demands of urgency, a systematic, comprehensible, and dynamic model is the result"* (Mitchell et al. 1997, p. 863).

It is thus proposed that stakeholder saliency, i.e. how managers prioritise competing stakeholder requests, is determined by the three attributes: power and/or legitimacy and/or urgency.

Power is here defined as:

"*Therefore, a party to a relationship has power, to the extent it has or can gain access to coercive, utilitarian, or normative means, to impose its will in the relationship"* (Mitchell et al. 1997, p. 865).

Coercive power refers to the use of force to gain power over the organisation, utilitarian power is linked to material resources controlled by the stakeholder, and finally normative power denotes symbols such as esteem, prestige and acceptance.

Legitimacy is defined by Mitchell et al using a definition by Suchman (1995, p. 574):

"... a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions."

Legitimacy can be divided into three categories: Cognitive (shareholder and market driven), pragmatic (lobbyism, strategic PR etc.) and moral (input-focussed, political and communicative), where the two former are increasingly criticised in society and moral legitimacy has become preferred in public opinion (Palazzo and Scherer 2006). On this note, Fineman and Clarke (1996) suggest that legitimacy is based on four principles: the language the stakeholder uses (where a situation when the language of the stakeholder resembles that of the focal organisation leads to higher level of acceptance by the focal organisation); an image that is not too radical; an interaction method that is not too confrontational; and finally the apparent competence of the stakeholder. A stakeholder who enjoys highly perceived legitimacy and a non-threatening approach to the industry is more likely to gain attention from the focal organisation. It is also suggested that the prioritisation of the stakeholder is sometimes linked to the historical relationship with that stakeholder (Fineman and Clarke 1996).

Finally urgency is defined as:

"We define urgency as the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention" (Mitchell et al. 1997, p. 867).

Although Mitchell et al. do not discuss in depth or underpin an argument for 'urgency', it is still proposed as a third factor for stakeholder saliency as it makes the model more dynamic.

Thus, based on these three attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency, managers can assess the saliency of stakeholders. Each stakeholder group may possess one, two, or all three of these attributes, and Mitchell et al. (1997) therefore propose:

"Stakeholder saliency will be positively related to the cumulative number of stakeholder attributes – power, legitimacy, and urgency – perceived by managers to be present" (Mitchell et al. 1997, p. 873).

The different combinations of the attributes are presented in a model (Figure 3.1)

Figure 3.1: The saliency framework (Mitchell et al. 1997, p. 874).
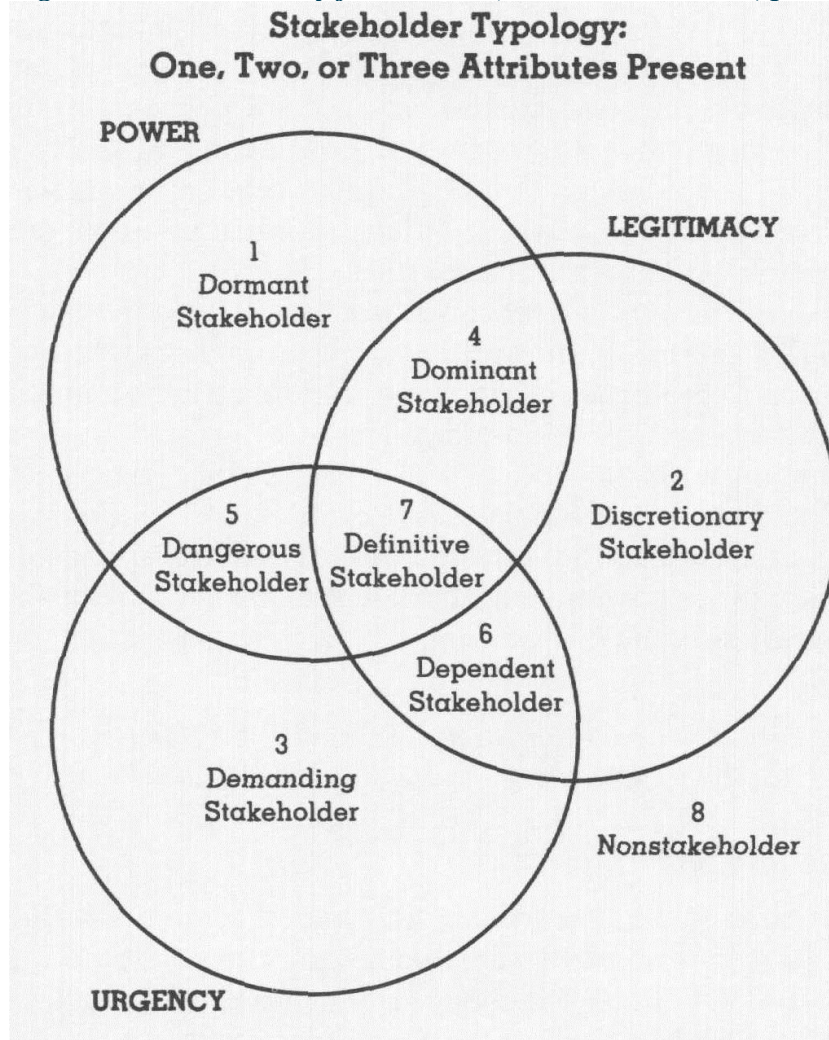
The authors go on to classify stakeholders into three broad categories: 'latent stakeholders' who possess only one of the attributes (those in areas 1,2 and 3 in figure 3.1) and therefore

have rather low saliency; 'expectant stakeholder' are those where two of the attributes are present (those in areas 4,5 and 6) and therefore they are seen as moderately salient stakeholders; and finally 'definitive stakeholders' where all three attributes are present (area 7) and therefore the most salient stakeholder group. In total (as depicted in Figure 3.1) there are thus seven possible stakeholder categories, as depicted in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Classification of the seven stakeholder types (based on the paper by Mitchell et al. 1997)

Stakeholder classification	Saliency attributes	Description
Latent stakeholders		
Dormant	Power	Powerful stakeholder with no on-going interaction with the firm, but need to be considered as potential future more salient stakeholders if they also acquire a second attribute.
Discretionary	Legitimacy	This group possesses legitimacy, and could for example be NGOs or community groups who currently have no claim on the firm.
Demanding	Urgency	This group has urgency only and could be a small community group lacking in power and legitimacy.
Expectant stakeholders		
Dominant	Power and legitimacy	Possessing both power and legitimacy and would typically have an on-going relationship with the firm, e.g. investors, government, community leaders.
Dangerous	Power and urgency	This group possesses power and urgency and might therefore be a potential threat and could use coercive power, for example terrorist groups.
Dependent	Legitimacy and urgency	Legitimate stakeholders with an urgent claim, for example residents in an area that has been

		polluted by the firm.
Definitive stakeholders		
Definitive	Power, legitimacy, urgency	This group possesses all three attributes and are therefore the most powerful.

This framework is conceptual and the authors call for empirical research to verify the validity of their model, and whether the three dimensions of power, legitimacy and urgency are the correct and conclusive choices. Some additional thoughts raised are: (1) that the framework is dynamic and that a stakeholder's saliency might change over time and dependent on circumstance and that latent stakeholders must therefore be considered (in line with suggestions of Savage et al. 1991); and (2) that effectively it is perhaps not the actual power or legitimacy or urgency that will determine the saliency of a stakeholder, but rather the perception of the managers, and therefore management perception is suggested as a moderator to this model.

3.5.1   Critique of the saliency framework

The saliency framework by Mitchell et al. (1997) has had a huge impact in the stakeholder academic literature and their paper is still being widely cited (Parent and Deephouse 2007). There have, however, been critical voices and suggestions of alternative categorisations and prioritisations, arguing that the Mitchell framework takes a very instrumental approach, which is not coherent with a normative stakeholder philosophy (Kaler 2002; Beer 2004). Another way to classify stakeholders is suggested by Kaler (2002), who takes a normative approach to stakeholder prioritisation in his conceptual paper. He classifies stakeholders into three groups of 'claimants', 'influencers' and 'combinatory' stakeholders. 'Claimants' are viewed as stakeholders based on a moral definition, as they possess high levels of legitimacy as the organisation is indebted in some ways to these stakeholders. In contrast, the 'influencers' occupy power and/or urgency, and have thus more of a strategic character and less of an ethical or moral one, according to Kaler (2002). Finally the 'combinatory' stakeholders have a claim and influence over the firm. From an ethical perspective, Kaler argues that it is the 'claimants' that should be prioritised.

Gibson (2000), on the other hand, argues that although prioritisation of stakeholders according to power, legitimacy and urgency can be seen as instrumental, it can be justified as normative if the prioritisation is based on the firm's historical relationship with the stakeholder. This standpoint argues that stakeholders to whom the firm is in debt (this can be both financial and non-financial), or stakeholders who the firm in the past has harmed should be prioritised.

There have also been subsequent claims that the saliency framework is too simplistic, founded on the presumption of one focal organisation managing its stakeholders, when in reality the organisation is part of a wider network of stakeholders and is not likely to be controlling this process (Roloff 2008). Instead, Roloff argues in a conceptual paper that the reality of stakeholder management is the significant challenge of managing multiple stakeholders, who might have contradictory objectives and claims on the organisation, and who might also be more powerful than the organisation. Roloff's paper further highlights that although stakeholder management is widely discussed by companies, there seems to be a lack of a clear understanding on how to best deal with multiple stakeholder demands in an effective way. Roloff argues that many activities that, from an organisation point of view, are stakeholder management are still simply one-way PR communications through publications and websites to inform stakeholders. This is however changing as it is recognised that some issues are too complex for an organisation to deal with on its own, and that therefore multi-stakeholder networks, with actors from a wide range of stakeholders, are joining forces to find solutions to address multifaceted challenges. Roloff (2008) therefore challenges traditional stakeholder theory as it fails to address the more complex multi-stakeholder networks. This leads to a suggested more contemporary definition of stakeholder as:

"In the context of multi-stakeholder networks a stakeholder is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the approach to the issue addressed by the network" (Roloff 2008, p. 238).

While this description bears considerable resemblance to the Freeman definition, Roloff points out that this statement goes beyond the singular firm's objectives to reflect the network approach, and also extends the multi-stakeholder approach with a strong focal orientation, as proposed by Rowley (1997). In a multi-stakeholder network, it is not a focal

organisation setting the agenda, but a number of different stakeholders coming together because of an issue that is relevant to all parties.

"The foremost inspiration is an issue that is relevant, urgent and complex; relates to various actors and is difficult to approach. Managers choose to seek an information exchange and collaboration with their stakeholders, because they believe that ignoring the issue may lead to future problems or conflicts, or they already experience such tensions" (Roloff 2008, p. 243).

Apart from the focal point being an issue and not an organisation, other key differences between the traditional stakeholder theory and multi-stakeholder networks are the means of communications. While a traditional approach involves one-way communications channels like press releases, reports etc., an issue focused approach favours dynamic two-way communications for participants. It is also argued that the multi-stakeholder approach takes more of a moral legitimacy, compared to the traditional stakeholder view, which takes a more pragmatic stance to legitimacy (Roloff 2008).

Another conceptual stakeholder network framework based on Mitchell et al.'s saliency model, with influence from Rowley's (1997) theories of stakeholder networks, is suggested by Neville and Menguc (2006). They choose to call this complex network of conflicting and/or complementary relationships, a formation of alliances, and refer to the exertion of influence over fellow stakeholders as 'multiplicity'. Their framework focuses on environmental issues and the resulting reactions from three stakeholder groups – government, customers and employees. The proposed conceptual framework suggests an important consideration for how managers must be aware of multiplicity in order to predict possible alliances so as to be able to identify increased saliency through co-operation between stakeholder groups. The authors also argue that being in the centre of a network (which means more relationships) together with being in control of more resources, is likely to result in more saliency, compared to stakeholders who are at the border of networks and who control less resources. Consequently, they argue, the government will have a higher saliency compared to customers, who will have higher saliency compared to employees.

Mitchell et al. (1997) suggest that the saliency framework should be viewed as dynamic and this notion is further developed by Jawahar and McLaughlin (2001) who study how the saliency of stakeholders evolves with the organisational life cycle. They critique the model by Mitchell et al. as lacking advice on how to manage stakeholders of varying importance, and an understanding of who the salient stakeholders might be. Therefore, Jawahar and McLaughlin (2001) set out to identify the key stakeholders and how these evolve over the organisational life cycle and how to manage these stakeholders. Drawing on resource dependency theory as a foundation for identifying salient stakeholders, they claim that:

"...organizations will be concerned with, pay more attention to, and deal with sources of critical resources to ensure continued survival" (Jawahar and McLaughlin 2001, p. 402).

Their conceptual paper proposes that the prioritisation of stakeholders will be based on the level of risk-taking at each stage, where a low level of risk-taking –risk aversion – is characterised with the strategy of accommodating all stakeholders, whereas when there are more threats, a risk-taking strategy is more resource effective and only critical stakeholders will be dealt with on a proactive or accommodative basis. Thus, during the start-up stage of an organisation, shareholders and creditors, together with customers form the most important stakeholders as they supply funding and revenue, and that a proactive strategy is most appropriate. Employees and suppliers are seen as important in the longer term and the strategy to address these stakeholders is accommodative. Community groups will be dealt with via a defensive strategy, and finally trade associations and environmental groups are in the lowest priority and will be dealt with on a reactive basis, and only addressed if required. As the life cycle moves into the emerging growth stage, a more risk-averse stance is taken, with priority given to creditors, employees, suppliers and trade associations, followed by stockholders, customers, governments, etc. In the mature stage, an even more risk-averse stance is taken, addressing all stakeholders, with creditors taking second priority. Finally in the decline stage, a more risk-taking strategy is taken, again prioritising stockholders, creditors and customers.

Linked to the dynamics of organisational lifecycles, 'issue-attention' cycles is another notable phenomenon, whereby a sustainability problem comes suddenly into the spotlight of media and political agendas, and after a while gradually vanishing. Typically the

'fading' of interest takes place when it is discovered that significant costs are involved in order to resolve the issue under attention, or because the public does not have the endurance to engage in issues that are not directly threatening them (Downs 1972). The 'issue-attention' cycles could therefore be linked to Mitchell et al's (1997) urgency criteria.

The saliency framework has also been discussed with a view on the natural environment as a stakeholder (Driscoll and Starik 2004). Their conceptual paper add to the saliency framework by suggesting that an additional parameter should be included – proximity. Proximity, describing how physically close a stakeholder is, suggests that relationships are more likely to be formed with a 'neighbouring' stakeholder. Proximity could also include members in the same value chain.

The discussion above has highlighted some of the key arguments and support to the saliency framework, however all these papers are conceptual. The next section will discuss findings from empirical research of the saliency framework.

3.5.2 Empirical testing of the saliency framework

Parent and Deephouse (2007) question that the model of Mitchell et al. (1997) is widely taken for granted and used without further thoughts on its validity. Their systematic literature review of articles citing Mitchell et al. under the period of 1997 to 2007 reveals significant citing but only one empirical test of the model (by Agle et al. 1999). This is not fully accurate as a literature search for this research project reveals a few additional empirical studies of the saliency framework during this time period (Harvey and Schaefer 2001; Winn and Keller 2001; and Eesley and Lenox 2006). From 2007 to 2013 there have been some additional empirical studies conducted on the saliency framework (Parent and Deephouse 2007; Aaltonen et al. 2008; Magness 2008; Boesso and Kumar 2009; and Myllykangas et al. 2010). This section will discuss the findings of these empirical tests.

The first empirical test of the saliency framework was conducted by Mitchell and his colleagues (Agle et al. 1999). The authors develop a number of hypotheses from the saliency framework (Mitchell et al. 1997), specifically focusing on the saliency of five stakeholder groups: shareholders, employees, customers, government, and communities. In

addition, the values of CEO as a moderator is incorporated in the test, where values are suggested as having two opposites, either 'self-interest' (the CEO acting in his/her own interests) or 'other-directed' (the CEO is interested in taking actions that will not necessarily benefit him/her). The empirical test finds strong evidence for power, legitimacy and urgency as attributes for stakeholder saliency. It is not as clear however how the values of CEOs moderate saliency, nor if saliency is linked to corporate performance, and more research is called for. It should be noted that the test was conducted with a survey distributed to 80 CEOs in the US, so the results indicate a US perspective and one could therefore question if the results would be transferable to other countries. Another empirical study looked into comparisons between regions, comparing the US to Italy (Boesso and Kumar 2009), suggesting that stakeholder saliency and engagement is country specific. The results of this study support the notion of power, legitimacy and urgency as drivers for stakeholder saliency, but does not find evidence that corporations would actually engage more with salient stakeholders.

Another European empirical study of the saliency framework is conducted in the context of 'green stakeholders' in utility companies in the UK (Harvey and Schaefer 2001), examining the perceived saliency of green stakeholder groups and how the companies manage those groups. The qualitative study interviews senior managers across six organisations and concludes that there appears to be a lack of systematic management of green stakeholders. Stakeholders with the highest level of power were identified as those stakeholders with 'institutional power', i.e. power through legislation such as governments and environmental and economic regulators. Economic stakeholders (shareholders and investors) show relatively low interests in green issues, as is also the case for most customers (where commercial customers show the least interest). Customers, however, together with local communities and the public are seen to possess the highest level of legitimacy. Media is considered as hostile and companies prefer to keep a low profile to avoid unnecessary attention. In general it is found that companies prefer to interact with stakeholders that "*they perceive to be co-operative and non-threatening*" (Harvey and Schaefer 2001, p. 251), which is also supported by previous research (Fineman and Clarke 1996). The authors conclude that the saliency framework of Mitchell et al. (1997) is highly relevant. This study is of course rather dated now, and one can expect that the situation has changed as the environmental agenda has increased in the public debate since then, so some of these findings might be out of date. Another limitation to this study is that the

context of green stakeholders in utility companies that had recently moved from being public to private companies is a rather special context and may not reflect the situation in businesses that have been private since foundation or for a long period of time. Furthermore, as this industry had recently been very monopolistic the findings regarding customers might also not be applicable in a highly competitive industry setting.

Another qualitative study tests the saliency framework in a case study exploring how a company took decisions on changing its strategy to only sell dolphin-friendly tuna (Winn and Keller 2001). The model by Mitchell et al. (1997) is confirmed but with some additional notions. Firstly it is found that media is the only stakeholder that can impact the saliency of other stakeholders. Secondly, the empirical test also indicates that where there is a positive history between the firm and stakeholder, that stakeholder is more likely to gain positive response by the firm also for future claims. Thus we have two interesting additions to the saliency framework, worth further research to confirm also in other contexts.

There is also empirical research testing the saliency framework from the stakeholders' perspective (Eesley and Lenox 2006; Aaltonen et al. 2008; and Magness 2008). The study by Eesley and Lenox (2006) maps actual actions taken by the focal firm, rather than just interviewing managers about their perceptions. This approach, the authors argue, allows them to go beyond managers' perceptions of stakeholder saliency. Managers may prioritise stakeholders based on their perception, but it is the actual actions taken by the managers in response to a certain request that reveal the actual saliency of that stakeholder request. Their quantitative study extends the saliency framework (Mitchell et al. 1997) as for example it is found that legitimacy is divided into legitimacy of the stakeholder and the legitimacy of the request, and likewise urgency can be divided into the urgency of the stakeholder and the urgency of the request, where the urgency of the request is more important. There are also indications that the tactics (e.g. protests, boycotts, civil suits etc.) used by the stakeholders might be more important than group legitimacy in creating saliency. It is also suggested, in line with previous research, that stakeholders co-operating with other stakeholders can create a higher saliency, with the effect of their requests more likely to be met by the firm. One might however question some of the constructs, as power is tested by the financial assets of the stakeholder, and that of course limits the view of

power to be based only on financial resources, when control of resources could be based on other aspects as well.

Magness (2008) provides empirical testing of the Mitchell saliency framework in an 'issue-related' setting from a stakeholder perspective. Magness's research paper studies stakeholders' responses to two mining accidents. While Magness's empirical test provides interesting insights into the response of two important stakeholder groups, it is limited to just that – the response of two stakeholders and does not give empirical evidence for how managers prioritise stakeholders. It is further limited to a very specific context.

Also Aaltonen's study (2008) uses a very specific context – one pulp mill in Uruguay. The study identifies strategies that stakeholders can take in order to increase their saliency, for example through withholding resources, developing resources seen as critical for the focal organisation, forming coalitions with other stakeholders, escalating and/or going into direct conflict, raising their credibility (through networking with credible organisations), and finally through an effective communications strategy (i.e. through selecting suitable media for communications).

A limitation previously discussed to the empirical test by Agle et al. (1999) is the focus on CEOs only. It would also be interesting to know if the results would have been confirmed had less senior managers been interviewed to depict how stakeholder prioritisation takes place on a more operational level. Parent and Deephouse (2007) test the framework by Mitchell et al. (1997) by asking managers at different levels open-ended questions, asking them to identify the stakeholder, in order to avoid directing the managers to consider only stakeholders from a given list (as in the case of Agle et al. 1999). They empirically test the framework through a comparative case study of two large-scale sporting events. The findings indicate that higher level managers identify a higher number of stakeholders, and that managers who work together have a higher tendency to identify the same stakeholders as key. In addition it is found that stakeholders with more than one type of power (out of normative, utilitarian and coercive), are more salient, and those with utilitarian power (power over resources) have a higher degree of saliency compared to those with normative or coercive power. There are also indications that urgency is higher ranked than legitimacy when ranking important stakeholders. The authors also conclude that managers' hierarchical level and role have a direct and moderating effect on stakeholder saliency

perception. Stakeholder identification also varies with time, issue and manager. Power is most important for prioritisation followed by urgency and legitimacy. While the findings contribute well to the saliency framework, the type of organisation under study can be seen as quite different from a traditional business organisation, in the sense that it is a temporary organisation, which only lasts for a few years to prepare for, conduct and evaluate a specific sports event. One could therefore question how transferable the results are to a traditional business organisation.

Another more recent study (Myllykangas et al. 2010), empirically tests the 'evolution over time' of the saliency framework in a case study of a company that went through a transition from part of a large organisation to an independent company. The authors critique the stakeholder salience framework as too static; in reality stakeholder saliency is dynamic and evolves over time. In addition the saliency framework fails to take the value creation process into consideration. The case study involves interviews with the company's managers and employees (eight interviews) and with external stakeholders (three interviews), questioning the respondents' views on power, legitimacy and urgency of stakeholders over the time period of the transition (2004–2007). It is found that stakeholder salience changes during this period, as depicted in Table 3.3 and Figure 3.2.

Table 3.3: Stakeholder salience according to the saliency framework in different strategic periods (Myllykangas et al. 2010, p. 68)

	Period 1 (6/2004– 12/2004)	Period 2 (1/2005– 6/2005)	Period 3 (7/2005– 12/2006)	Period 4 (12/2006– 3/2007)	Period 5 (4/2007)
Owners	P, L, U	P, L	P, L	P, L, U	P, L, U
Personnel	L, U	P, L, U	P, L, U	P, L, U	L, U
Customers	P, L, U	P, L, U	P, L, U	P, L, U	P, L, U
Management	L, U	P, L, U	P, L, U	P, L, U	L, U
Industry area	L	P, L	P, L	P, L	L
Suppliers	L	L	L	L	L
Competitors			L	L	L

Note: P Power, *L* legitimacy, *U* urgency.

Figure 3.2: Mapping of the stakeholders according to the stakeholder classifications of Mitchell et al. (1997). (Myllykangas 2010, p. 68).

	Period 1 (6/2004–12/2004)	Period 2 (1/2005–6/2005)	Period 3 (7/2005–12/2006)	Period 4 (12/2006–3/2007)	Period 5 (4/2007)
DEFINITIVE stakeholders	Customers / Owners	Customers / Personnel Management	Customers / Personnel Management	Customers / Personnel Management / Owners	Customers / Owners
EXPECTANT Dominant Dependent	Personnel Management	Owners / Industry area / Potential customers	Owners / Industry area / Potential customers	Industry area	Personnel Management / Competitors
LATENT Discretionary	Industry area / Suppliers / Development organizations	Suppliers / Development organizations	Suppliers / Development organizations / Competitors	Suppliers / Potential customers / Competitors	Industry area / Suppliers / Potential customers
NON-stakeholder	Potential customers	Competitors			

As can be seen above, the stakeholder situation is highly dynamic during the examined time period. The authors further investigate the relationships between the managers/employees on the one hand and key stakeholders on the other hand, to determine what characteristics are important for value creation. Based on this, the authors argue that in the context of value creation when an organisation is undergoing change, the saliency model needs to be extended to incorporate six additional factors: history of the relationship, objectives of the stakeholders, interaction in the relationship, information sharing in the relationship, trust between stakeholders, and the competence of the stakeholder to learn. The authors close the paper by suggesting that Mitchell et al.'s (1997) seminal salience model needs to further evolve to also incorporate value creation:

"To conclude, we argue that analyzing stakeholders is not enough with regard to value creation; an analysis of stakeholder relationships is needed. The question of who and what really counts should be replaced by the question of how value is created in stakeholder relationships" (Myllykangas 2010, p. 70).

Although this study raises some interesting limitations to the saliency framework, it is a rather narrow empirical study, only including one case company and 11 interviews. The study would also benefit from a more detailed explanation of what constitutes the six suggested factors.

3.6   Summary

This chapter has introduced stakeholder theory, and methods to identify and classify stakeholders. Importantly the discussion introduces tools for categorising stakeholders, with the notion of the seminal 'saliency framework' (Mitchell et al. 1997). Mitchell et al. offer this framework to assist managers in the identification of those stakeholders that need the highest level of attention. It can be concluded that the saliency framework is one of few existing tools for categorisation of stakeholders, and in addition to being widely cited in academic literature it has also been empirically tested and verified in a few different contexts. The framework will thus be used in this study as a starting point for how stakeholders are categorised, with the notion however of taking advice from the above mentioned suggestions for extensions to the model.

The next chapter will continue the discussion on stakeholders, but with a management focus, further depicting theories of how to manage complex, and sometimes conflicting stakeholders through the use of communications.

4 STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT THROUGH CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

4.1 Introduction

The stakeholder management literature is another source for ideas on stakeholder classification, but as opposed to the stakeholder theory literature as discussed in the previous chapter, it takes the concept a step further as it also offers suggestions on how to manage the different categories of stakeholders. The next section will continue this discussion on stakeholder management, eventually leading up to the notion of corporate communications as a central point for stakeholder management. Some suggested frameworks for corporate communications strategies will be reviewed and the discussion will continue on how to effectively design communications to diverse stakeholders, where the literature of strategic ambiguity is consulted.

4.2 Stakeholder management frameworks

An early framework for the management of stakeholders was offered by Freeman (1984), who proposed a 2x2 stakeholder strategy matrix based on the one hand the relative threatening potential of stakeholders, and on the other hand of the relative cooperative potential, suggesting four generic stakeholder management strategies, as depicted in Figure 4.1 below. The matrix highlights that for stakeholders with both high threatening potential and high cooperative potential, the firm should strive to influence the rules on stakeholder interactions (Freeman 1984); it may be more appropriate for an ethical company to approach this group with a collaborative strategy as is suggested in a later study by Savage et al. (1991). Stakeholders that have low threatening potential but have an interest in cooperation should, according to Freeman (1984), be exploited; whereas Savage et al. (1991) call for a more positive approach in using the term 'involvement strategy' for this group. Both Freeman and Savage et al. suggest a 'defence' strategy for stakeholders who have a high threatening potential but low cooperative potential. Finally stakeholders with both low cooperation and low threatening potential are the least prominent and should just be monitored in case their position evolves.

Figure 4.1: Stakeholder strategy matrix model by Freeman (1984) and Savage et al. (1991) as depicted in Polonsky and Scott (2005, p. 1201).

		Relative Threatening Potential	
		High	Low
Relative Cooperative Potential	High	Friedman - SWING Group Strategy - Change the Rules Savage- MIXED BLESSING Group Strategy - Collaborate	Friedman- OFFENSIVE Group Strategy – Exploit Savage – SUPPORTIVE Group Strategy - Involve
	Low	Friedman- DEFENSIVE Group Strategy- Defend Savage– NON SUPPORTIVE Group Strategy - Defend	Friedman- HOLD group Strategy - Hold Current Position Savage - MARGINAL Group Strategy - Monitor

Savage et al. (1991) critique the classical categorisation of stakeholders into primary (those with a formalised relationship with the organisation) and secondary (those that can have an impact on the organisation or are impacted on by the organisation despite the lack of a formalised affiliation with the organisation). They suggest that it is rather the situation or issues that will determine which the most salient stakeholders are and whether those stakeholders are likely to cooperate or threaten the organisation. Therefore managers will need to constantly re-assess the situation, as the key stakeholders will differ from issue to issue. The potential of the stakeholder to threaten or cooperate will depend on its capacity, opportunity and willingness to do so.

"Managers should account for such factors as relative power, the specific context and history of the organisation's relations with it, specific issues which may be particularly salient, and other key stakeholders influencing the stakeholder. These factors will determine the stakeholder's capacity, willingness, and opportunity to either threaten or cooperate with the organization" (Savage et al. 1991, p. 72).

When it comes to the potential to threaten the organisation, Savage et al. (1991) use the word power to describe the capacity as a key factor. The stakeholder will exert higher

power on the firm if the firm is dependent on the stakeholder, for example if the stakeholder controls important resources. However also opportunity and willingness are important factors, where the willingness to threaten the organisation can be evaluated by considering the quality of the relationship between the firm and the stakeholder. For the other determinant – cooperation – willingness is listed as the key driver together with the business environment, where a stakeholder with higher level of dependence on the organisation is more likely to be willing to cooperate. By combining the two dimensions in a 2 by 2 matrix, the resulting four generic stakeholder management strategies are obtained: Collaborate (high potential to threaten and cooperate), Involve (low threat, high cooperation), Defend (high threat, low cooperation), and Monitor (low threat and cooperation). The 'Involve' strategy is suitable for the supporting stakeholder types, which are suggested as employees and possibly suppliers. It is indicated that sometimes organisations overlook these stakeholders and should be more proactive in involving them to benefit from their potential to cooperate. The 'marginal stakeholder' belonging to the 'monitor' strategy is for example consumer interest groups. The 'non-supportive stakeholder' in the 'defend' strategy includes for example competitors, media, and employee unions, and could also be local or national government groups. Finally the 'mixed blessing stakeholder', for example customers, firms with complementary products etc. there is both potential for threatening and cooperation. It is here advised that collaboration is an important tool to strengthen those who are willing to cooperate but importantly also to collaborate with those that potentially could threaten the organisation (Savage et al. 1991).

Drawing on marketing theory, Polonsky (1996) suggests an extension to the Freeman/Savage matrix, taking into consideration also as a third attribute the stakeholders' potential to influence other stakeholder groups, leading to a fifth stakeholder group the 'bridging group', which could include, for example, media. The inclusion of this fifth stakeholder group to the matrix also calls for additional strategies and Polonsky's conceptual paper suggests 'aggression' to reduce the credibility of the bridging group, 'isolation' to make efforts to be less dependent on these stakeholders, 'cooperation' to involve these stakeholders and thereby reduce criticism, or 'adaptation' to take on board the opinions of this stakeholder group. The proposal is later tested in the context of incorporating environmental aspects in new product development, confirming the existence of the influencing stakeholder group (bridging group), and giving evidence to the

use of an 'adaptation' strategy, whereas a more collaborative approach still seems to be very limited (Polonsky and Ottman 1998).

In addition to these listed stakeholder strategies, an empirical study by Bunn et al. (2002) suggests six generic stakeholder management strategies: lead, collaborate, defend, educate, involve, and monitor. Lead here denotes where the focal organisation takes a leading role in driving innovation, and educate is a strategy to improve communications with influencing stakeholders by for example participating in industry wide initiatives.

While Freeman/Savage et al.'s four strategies suggest a differentiation in the importance of stakeholders, Polonsky and Scott (2005) build hypotheses around the Freeman/Savage matrix with one aim: to prove that all these stakeholder groups are viewed as important by marketing managers. The results are however vague, with some indication that no stakeholder group should be ignored as all stakeholders are important. Clearer support is found however for the usefulness of the matrix to guide managers. It should be noted that the research is concentrated on the perceived applicability of the strategy matrix rather than an evaluation of actual performance. One should also note that the respondents are members of the Australian Marketing Institute, and while several have a long experience of marketing there is no information on the respondents' actual positions within a firm. It would be interesting to see the results for respondents in senior corporate marketing positions or CEO level, as the view of stakeholders on a strategic corporate level might be different from an operational marketing management level as was found by Parent and Deephouse (2007).

Drawing on management literature, Harrison and St John (1996) offer a quite simplistic approach to stakeholder prioritisation and its link to stakeholder management strategy, proposing three key factors to determine an external stakeholder's strategic importance: the stakeholder's contribution to environmental uncertainty affecting the firm, and its ability to reduce this uncertainty, and finally the firm's strategic choice where a stakeholder who is seen as important for supporting the firm's strategy consequently will be of high priority. It is then suggested that the higher strategic importance of a stakeholder, the closer the collaboration with that stakeholders is advised. On a similar note, Aspara and Tikkanen (2008) question the motivation of managers to engage with all stakeholders to build a corporate brand and suggest rather that stakeholders who have an impact on reaching

management's goals would be prioritised. The notion of the firm's strategic direction as an important driver for categorising stakeholders is also tested in a CSR context, indicating that different stakeholders will be prioritised based on firms' environmental commitment. It was found that firms taking proactive environmental responsibilities perceive all stakeholders, apart from media, as important, whereas reactive firms prioritise media as a key stakeholder (Henriques and Sadorsky 1999).

Similar to the Freeman/Savage matrix, Johnson and Scholes (2002) map stakeholders based on a power/interest matrix, to assist the identification and prioritisation of stakeholders (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: The power/interest matrix for stakeholder management (adapted from Johnson and Scholes 2002 p. 208, based on Mendelow 1991).

Level of Interest

		Low	High
Power	Low	A. Minimal Effort	B. Keep Informed
	High	C. Keep Satisfied	D. Key Players

Interest here refers to the likelihood of the stakeholders to actively impress expectations on the corporation's objectives and strategies, and power refers to what means the stakeholders possess in order to pursue their interest in the corporation.

Power is defined as *"the ability of individuals or groups to persuade, induce or coerce others into following certain courses of action"* (Johnson and Scholes 2002, p. 212), a very

similar notion to the power attribute as presented by Mitchell et al. (1997), and also to the 'relatively threatening potential' of the Freeman/Savage matrix. In fact one could argue that the matrix is a version of the Freeman/Savage matrix, as also the 'interest' attribute resembles the 'relative cooperation potential', which is based on the capacity, opportunity and willingness of the stakeholder to cooperate with the firm. Johnson and Scholes (2002) offer a more exhaustive explanation of the 'power' attribute, and make the distinction of internal versus external power as depicted in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Sources of power (adapted from Johnson and Scholes 2002, p. 213)

	Internal power within the firm	Power of external stakeholders
Examples of power:	- Hierarchy - Influence - Control of strategic resources - Possession of knowledge & skills - Control of the environment - Involvement in strategy implementation	- Control of strategic resources - Involvement in strategy implementation - Possession of knowledge - Through internal links (informal influence)
Indicators of power	- Status - Claim on resources - Representation - Symbols	- Status - Resource dependence - Negotiating arrangements - Symbols

The Johnson and Scholes matrix (fig. 4.2) offers four generic stakeholder strategies, from the least intensive 'minimal effort', to 'key players' with whom the firm need to actively engage to ensure continuous support for its strategies. The matrix is empirically tested in a corporate marketing context by Gregory (2007), who illustrates the stakeholder engagement process as a spiral, where the firm's core values are continuously reviewed and refined in an iterative progression. Importantly she extends the Johnson and Scholes matrix, and presents a four by four matrix of communications strategies, ranging from 'inform', 'consult', 'involve' to 'partner' (communications typologies as developed by the UK Central Office of Communication) as presented in Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 4.3: A communications strategy matrix (adapted from Gregory 2007, p. 66).

Level of Interest

	Low	High
Low	Inform	Consult
High	Involve	Partner

Power (labelled to the left of the matrix, aligned with the row headers)

The 'inform' category is described as one-way communications, where the stakeholders' interest in being involved is low. Mass communications are suggested with built in feedback mechanism, e.g. corporate publications, website, mass meetings.

The 'consult' category is described as two-way communications, where response, feedback and suggestions are requested from stakeholders. This stakeholder groups is categorised as important as they actively are seeking information and furthermore they are likely to have a high level of knowledge from which the firm can benefit. It is also suggested that this group, if gaining power, could move into partnership, and thus it is important to nurture this group to keep good relations, gain from their knowledge and manage the risk of conflict with this group. Communications channels suggested include Q&A sessions, sponsorship, invitation only meetings etc.

The third categorisation, 'involve', suggests closer collaboration, but warns that the level of interest is here low (e.g. shareholders). Gregory suggests: *"The modus operandi for engaging with this category of stakeholders is to find areas where mutual interest is*

served" (Gregory 2007, p. 67). Communications channels suggested for this group are panels, workshops etc.

The final group 'partner' is categorised of the necessity to work together, not just for a wish for mutual benefits, but because this group can make significant contribution to the firm and could pose a threat to the firm's reputation if they are not collaborating. It is therefore suggested that communications need to be two-way (symmetrical) to build trust, and that as the level of involvement increases with this stakeholder group, the more it will benefit from tailored communications. Suggested channels are intranet, webinars, one-to-one briefings, knowledge sharing seminars, etc. It is suggested that a 'partner' will have the highest level of power to influence the direction of the firm.

Three conclusions are drawn from the study:
1. By allowing stakeholders to co-create the stakeholders feel positive towards the organisation and have a sense of co-ownership, which increases their loyalty.
2. Too much stakeholder involvement can be very time consuming and can lead to a more confused picture.
3. The role of corporate communicator is complex and requires deep analysis and management of the continuously evolving stakeholder community.

While the research offers interesting suggestions to a more comprehensive communications strategy model, it is rather simplistic as the categorisation criterion is limited to only 'power' and 'interest'. In addition the framework has only been subject to limited empirical testing as it is based on only one case company – an NHS trust in the UK, which, further, is quite a special form of organisation – and takes the form of a descriptive theory methodology.

This section has furthered the insight into stakeholder categorisation, drawing on theories from both the stakeholder management and marketing literature. Many of the articles discussed, similar to Mitchell's saliency framework, apply 'power' as a factor to categorise stakeholders into different stakeholder management strategies, whereas 'legitimacy' and 'urgency' is downplayed in favour of 'cooperation potential' or 'interest' as suggested attributes for classification of stakeholders. The predisposition of an instrumental view of

stakeholders in the management literature can possibly explain the lack of especially the legitimacy factor.

A number of management strategies were presented for the different stakeholder categories. While the different frameworks offer advice on how to broadly manage different categories of stakeholders, they lack in more precise advice, e.g. following Freeman's matrix, what does for example a collaborative, or involvement strategy really entail? Gregory's (2007) matrix introduces more specific strategy advice through the lens of corporate communications. The communications perspective will be further developed in the following section, seeking to establish a better understanding of appropriate communications strategies.

4.3   The role of corporate communications in stakeholder management

4.3.1   Corporate communications – an introduction

The previous section introduced various strategies for stakeholder management. A firm might have a number of objectives with stakeholder management, from strengthening relationships with stakeholders, building corporate image (for definition see appendix 13) and trust, enhancing stakeholder advocacy behaviours (Du et al. 2010), reducing unfavourable negative publicity and litigation (Harrison and St John 1996), managing corporate identity (Simoes et al. 2005), encouraging brand co-creation (Gregory 2007), and in a sustainability context to seek collaboration with stakeholders to drive positive change along the value chain. Stakeholder theory also highlights the importance of co-creation with stakeholders through *"participation, dialogue and involvement"* (Andriof et al. 2006, p. 325). Irrespective of the ultimate aim, communications are a key aspect in the effective delivery towards any of the above objectives, as corporate communications (for a definition see appendix 13) is an important tool for an organisation's senior management to achieve their vision (Gregory 2007; Polonsky 1995, 1996). Communications are also raised as an important tool by Maignan et al. (2005), who argue that clear and explicit organisational values and norms are prerequisites for a coherent CSR strategy and to effectively deal with conflicting stakeholder demands, should these arise. Their proposed conceptual eight steps model especially highlights the importance of communicating (and promoting) the companies' CSR activities through the use of PR and advertising, with the

notion of encouraging stakeholder involvement and feedback. Communications further take place at a multitude of levels in an organisation, from internal informal communications to external formal communications, e.g. in the form of marketing communications, PR, sponsorships, etc.

In the context of CSR/sustainability communications, according to Podnar (2008), there are two suggested questions for marketing and corporate communications practitioners to dwell on:

- How to strategically communicate on CSR/sustainability and what are the consequences?
- How can tools be used to effectively deliver strategic communications ensuring stakeholder expectations are met?

Before starting a discussion on corporate communications strategies, however, it is essential to establish some foundations of corporate communications and their impact on the image of the firm. Drawing from the concept of corporate identity offers a good departure point for this discussion and this will be addressed in the section below.

4.3.2   The importance of consistency in corporate communications

A corporation possesses several identities: actual, communicated, conceived, ideal and desired, and while these might differ slightly it is imperative that these are managed to achieve consistency with its stakeholders (Balmer and Greyser 2002). With the increasing interest of corporations into CSR and ethical positioning, Balmer and his colleagues (Balmer et al. 2007; Fukukawa et al. 2007) further developed the concept of corporate identity (see definition in appendix 13), questioning if perhaps the notion of 'ethical corporate identity' might be appropriate to describe the movement of firms into taking a more ethical stance in their operations, and if so what would it entail? It is suggested that if ethical corporate identity does exist it would expand the boundaries of the organisation and would be founded on strong relationships between the corporation and its stakeholders, which are not static but continuously in development (Balmer et al. 2007). Communications are here at the centre to nurture and monitor those relationships. It is however imperative for a corporation to ensure that the identity is congruent with its

communications and this includes also non-controllable communications, e.g. media, word of mouth etc., and importantly also corporate actions, as stakeholders otherwise will see communications as mere rhetoric (Fukukawa et al. 2007; Balmer et al. 2011). Simoes et al. (2005) also highlight the importance of a coherent communications strategy in order to create and manage a firm's corporate identity:

"Although our focus is the internal management of the process, internal dimensions should reflect consistent messages about the organization so that a reputable corporate image is transmitted across audiences. Although the molding of identity may be varied for each stakeholder group, we suggest that there is a common platform for identity management" (Simoes et al. 2005, p. 157),

and further:

"*We argue that the main dimensions to be managed are marketing communications, corporate communications, and the intended consistency among all communication vehicles and messages*" (Simoes et al. 2005, p. 158).

Simoes et al. (2005) presents a model of corporate identity management from the perspective of how internal stakeholders need to harmonise their communications to provide a consistent reputable brand image. The importance of integrated marketing communications is raised here as co-ordination is vital for the consistent development of the organisation's brand value (see appendix 13 for definition):

"What a company does or does not communicate influences how it and its brands are perceived. An integrated communications process, which is guided by the firm's overall business philosophy and mission, minimizes the likelihood of contradictory messages" (Simoes et al. 2005, p. 156).

A firm should therefore aim to harmonise its mission and values, with communications, also taking into consideration visual identity. A communications challenge in this context is the paradox of the requirement for a corporation to be seen to conform to social and environmental standards to obtain organisational legitimacy, and at the same time exhibit differentiation (Johansen and Ellerup-Nielsen 2012). It is suggested that the conformity

aspect could effectively be communicated through referrals to certifications and participation in joint sustainability initiatives (round tables and similar), but in order to highlight the unique aspects of the organisation, differentiation can be achieved through the emphasis of the corporation as the initiator or leader of such joint projects. Another idea for differentiation, possible for firms with a heritage, is offered in the form of linking communications on CSR values to the corporate heritage. This claim was empirically verified in a study of consumer perception of the trustworthiness of 199 brands (Blomback and Scandelius 2013).

CSR communications will not only create awareness of an organisation's values and intentions but because of this nature, CSR communications also have a significant impact on the corporate identity (Du et al. 2010). A major challenge in CSR communications is to effectively and favourably portray the corporate motives and to reduce stakeholder scepticism (Du et al. 2010), and it has been suggested that for consumers this can be achieved by ensuring consistency between sustainability/CSR objectives and general corporate objectives (Forehand and Grier 2003). This can be done by ensuring the presence of the following four factors in CSR communications: clear description of the organisation's commitment to a cause, the impact its actions have on the cause, the rationale for addressing this cause (highlighting both corporate and social/environmental benefits), and the fit between the cause and the corporate objectives The conceptual paper by Du et al. (2010) concludes that these factors will be moderated by company specific factors, where an existing corporate reputation will increase the credibility of the CSR communications, and that an organisation that is actively positioning themselves as a responsible/sustainable company is more likely to attract a favourable perception by stakeholders (consumers predominantly). There are also external factors moderating the credibility of the communications, with stakeholder type as one critical moderator. As various stakeholders have different expectations and interests, the message, it is argued, should be tailored accordingly to ensure best credibility with each stakeholder group. This view is also supported by Powell et al. (2009), who in the context of internal communications argue that a monolithic approach to all divisions can be counterproductive. The importance of consistency in communications is not limited to oral but also to visual communications, through logo, colours, corporate slogan etc. and in order to support a consistent ethical corporate identity, communications channels around

ethical values must be coordinated (Borgerson et al. 2009), and the rationale behind this must be fully understood by the employees (Van den Bosch et al. 2006).

There is also knowledge to be drawn from research linking marketing and communications theory, where Duncan and Moriarty (1998) argue for a wider stakeholder engagement in brand communications management. They stress (based on theories by Schultz et al. 1993) that a company's actions or lack of actions, for example regarding environmental performance, have implications on stakeholders' perception of the corporate brand and consequently it is vital that (1) brand messages are strategically managed to ensure consistency, (2) all stakeholders are considered and not just customers, and (3) communications are two-way.

"We argue, however, that communication, because of its meaning-making and organizing functions, plays a unique role in building brand relationships" (Duncan and Moriarty 1998, p. 2).

Duncan and Moriarty (1998) therefore suggest that all activities of a company, e.g. its mission statement as well as its philanthropic activities, will impact the brand relationship, and also Duncan and Moriarty's research paper emphasises the importance of consistency to allow coherent stakeholder perception to build trust. It is accentuated here that consistent messages don't necessarily means the same messages, but to adapt messages to the situation and to the audience, with the aim of delivering a consistent image, which they call 'perception quality' (like consistency in product quality, it is likewise important with perception quality). All internal sources for communications thus need to be managed for consistency, from the overarching corporate communications level, to the marketing mix and marketing communications mix level.

The notion by Duncan and Moriarty (1998) of building trust in CS communications has also been raised by a number of scholars. With consumers growing sceptical from experiencing corporate green washing, trust is a foundation for a firm to gain legitimacy (De Blasio 2007). Trust can in addition increase the competitive advantage of the firm (Hillestad et al 2010, Dowling 2004) through the establishment of a favourable reputation (Siltaoja 2006, Jahdi and Acikdill 2009) and brand image (Jahdi and Acikdill 2009 Porter and Kramer 2006). One essential element of trustworthy communication is the motives

behind the corporation's sustainability strategy, or as Jahdi and Acikdilli (2009) argue: *"Mere rhetoric will not fool stakeholders";* and *"...the company must also walk the talk"* (pg 110).

Source credibility and reliability must be the focus and it is important that motives and values are transparent in communication and the top management is key to effectively implement and communicate on sustainability (Dowling 2004). Hillestad et al (2010) point out that genuine motivation leads to consistency between communication and behavior, and thus reinforcing a trustworthy image. On this note one could expect that if a normative approach can be linked to an instrumental approach it should easier convince stakeholders about genuine motives.

One should also note the issues around institutionalisation of sustainability communications, i.e. *"the translation of expectations, definitions of CSR and constructions of institutional norms"* (Schultz and Wehmeier 2010, pg. 22). This is depicted in how a business makes sense of the concept of CSR or sustainability and makes efforts to integrate its meaning into its business strategy. As there are many actors involved in this process the risk is that there are divergent translations which may seem blurry from the viewpoint of external stakeholders. One-way symbolic communications in the form of sustainability reports and presented corporate values may be used to morally justify the firm with the objective to gain legitimacy and to build trust (Schultz and Wehmeier 2010). This lack of dialogic communications can however counteract trust building (Grunig and Hunt 1984), as while standardised one-way communication might seem like a good solution to ensure consistent image and to avoid accusations of hypocrisy, the reality with inhomogeneous communicators/receivers and contexts pose a source for different and sometimes unintended interpretations (Crane and Livesey 2003). In addition, if the communications are too simplistic to counteract diverse translations, it may appear as merely symbolic, or if it is too intense it might lead to distrust especially if the firm has low legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Schultz and Wehmeier 2010). Rather it is suggested that trust is a result of negotiations and co-construction with stakeholders (Morsing and Schultz 2006). There are however pitfalls also with dialogic communications as it might have its risks in the format of cacophony, fragmentation and paralysis (Crane and Livesey 2003), resulting in distrust which can start a vicious circle of the firm increasing its institutionalisation of sustainability leading to further decrease of legitimacy (Schultz and Wehmeier 2010). Based on a case study, Schultz and Wehmeier (2010) suggest that this vicious circle can be counteracted by 'organised hypocrisy', whereby the firm apply different strategies to

different stakeholder groups while alternating between communications, decisions and actions. Thus it can combine 'defaulted communications', a silent approach according to the philosophy of *"simply being good might be more appropriate than being good and talking about it"* (Schultz and Wehmeier 2010, pg 22) during the implementation phase of sustainability strategies, and symbolic one-way communications to get attention from certain stakeholders. In other contexts two-way communications might be more appropriate, for example when responding to public pressure.

4.3.3   Corporate communications models

Whilst the previous section highlighted the importance of consistent communications that are aligned with the organisation's values and mission, the challenge remains unanswered on how to effectively address a multitude of stakeholders in a structured manner in sustainability communications.

An early model for sustainability communication is presented by McDonagh (1998), depicting how a focal organisation should interact with its stakeholders based on the foundation that: *"….for effective communications both senders and receivers of messages need to share overlapping fields of experience."* (McDonagh 1998, pg 602)

This calls for two-way interaction where both the firm and stakeholders have certain capabilities and knowledge in order to have a fruitful dialogue. McDonagh further suggests that the communication model is based on four building blocks:

(1) Ecological trust: based on the discussion in section 4.3.2, credibility is an essential starting point for any sustainability dialogue and that this stems from genuine management commitment (Hillestad et al 2010).

(2) Ecological access: allowing stakeholders to judge the commitment by management (as suggested in the previous point) through transparent communication and collaboration

(3) Ecological disclosure: firms admitting to mistakes and practices that are not optimal from a sustainability perspective, are more likely to receive trust by stakeholders.

(4) Ecological dialogue: Communication needs to take an iterative two-way approach allowing the firm and its stakeholders to make sense of each other's perspectives, and implement those thoughts into an evolving sustainability strategy.

While this model provides a much needed clarification to the concept of sustainability communication and its challenges it is based on the notion of both the firm and stakeholders to have (as mentioned previously) certain capabilities and knowledge. With these notions the model seems to be suitable for a seemingly ideal context where both the business and its stakeholders possess experience and interest into ecological and social issues. In reality however, the situation is far more complex, with some firms having advanced capability in sustainability challenges and others a more novice understanding. It is therefore unlikely that all stakeholders can and should be approached with one communications strategy.

In order to shed some light into differentiated communications strategies, the PR literature is consulted, as PR is *"the management of communication between an organisation and its publics"* (Grunig and Hunt 1984, p. 6). While this definition seems to encompass only external communications from an organisation, the authors describe how PR includes all incoming and outgoing communications, including information dispersion within the organisation. It is suggested that there are four different types of communications strategies within PR, as depicted in Figure 4.4 below

Figure 4.4: PR communications strategies (adapted from Grunig and Hunt 1984, p. 22).

Characteristics	Press Agentry / Publicity	Public Information	Two-way asymmetric	Two-way Symmetric
Purpose	Propaganda	Dissemination of information	Scientific persuasion	Mutual understanding
Nature of Communication	One-way; complete truth not essential	One-way; truth important	Two-way; imbalanced effects	Two-way balanced effects
Communication model	Source -> Rec.	Source -> Rec.	Source < = > Rec. [Feedback]	Group ⇔ Group
Nature of Research	Little, "counting house"	Little; readability; readership	Formative; evaluative of attitudes	Formative; evaluative of understanding
Leading Historical Figures	P.T Barnum	Ivy Lee	Edward L. Bernays	Bernays, educators, professional leaders
Where Practiced Today	Sports, theatre, product information	Government, nonprofit associations, business	Competitive business; agencies	Regulated business, agencies
Estimated Percentages of Organizations Practicing Today	15%	50%	20%	15%

The first communications strategy described above, 'Press Agentry/Publicity' represents the aspect of PR that has been criticised as not having a role in ethical communications, as it suggests a propaganda style where the information being disseminated is not necessarily truthful (Morsing and Schultz 2006), as in the case of green washing. One could however argue that as long as the information is truthful and not misleading it may be an appropriate sustainability communications strategy. This first model is the oldest form of PR, and while still in practice, newer models have evolved over the years, firstly 'public information', which is another form of one-way communications but with the emphasis that information should be complete and truthful. According to Grunig and Hunt's definition then, the only difference between the press agentry model and the public information model is this element of honesty, further supporting the suggestion by Morsing and Schultz that the press Agentry strategy should not be applied in sustainability communications.

The importance of also seeking feedback from the target audience is visible in the following two communications models: Two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric communications. While both these communications models seek feedback from the

audience, the asymmetric model primarily aims at changing the attitudes of the audience only, not the organisation, and a feedback channel is therefore perhaps primarily provided to ensure that the audience has received and understood the message. The symmetric communications model, on the contrary, seeks a dialogue with its audience, and the firm is here prepared to change as much as it expects the audience to be prepared to change (Grunig and Hunt 1984). The Grunig and Hunt model (1984) is proposed as a starting point for CSR communications by Morsing and Schultz (2006), and viewing CSR communications strategies from a sense-giving and sense-making perspective, a framework is presented incorporating three communications models, depicted in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Three CSR communications strategies (Morsing and Schultz 2006, p. 326)

	The stakeholder information strategy	**The stakeholder response strategy**	**The stakeholder involvement strategy**
Communication ideal: (Grunig & Hunt 1984)	Public information, one-way communication	Two-way asymmetric communication	Two-way symmetric communication
Communication ideal: sense-making and sensegiving:	Sensegiving	Sensemaking ⇓ Sensegiving	Sensemaking ⇕ Sensegiving – in iterative progressive processes
Stakeholders:	Request more information on corporate CSR efforts	Must be reassured that the company is ethical and socially responsible	Co-construct corporate CSR efforts
Stakeholder role:	Stakeholder influence: support or oppose	Stakeholders respond to corporate actions	Stakeholders are involved, participate and suggest corporate actions
Identification of CSR focus:	Decided by top management	Decided by top management. Investigated in feedback via opinion polls, dialogue, networks and partnerships	Negotiated concurrently in interaction with stakeholders
Strategic communication task:	Inform stakeholders about favourable corporate CSR decisions and actions	Demonstrate to stakeholders how the company integrates their concerns	Invite and establish frequent, systematic and pro-active dialogue with stakeholders, i.e. opinion makers, corporate critics, the media, etc.
Corporate communication	Design appealing	Identify relevant	Build relationships

	The stakeholder information strategy	**The stakeholder response strategy**	**The stakeholder involvement strategy**
department's task:	concept message	stakeholders	
Third-party endorsement of CSR initiatives:	Unnecessary	Integrated element of surveys, rankings and opinion polls	Stakeholders are themselves involved in corporate CSR messages

As was mentioned earlier, the first communications model suggested by Grunig and Hunt – 'Press Agentry/Publicity' is here excluded as it is reasoned that this propaganda stance is not compatible with honest and transparent CSR communications. One could however argue that as there seems to still be 'greenwashing' being practised by businesses, this press agentry model is still pursued in some CSR communications; therefore an assumption that propaganda communications don't exist might give a false picture. However, following an instrumental approach to CSR/sustainability, the 'press agentry model' might very well still exist, but when developing frameworks for organisations to use in the future, this form of communications should be excluded, not only from an ethical perspective, but also to benefit the firm's image from building trustworthy communications. The Morsing and Schultz framework, also suggests new names to the remaining three communications strategies, whereby Grunig and Hunt's public information (one-way) is named 'the stakeholder information strategy', the Two-way asymmetric/imbalanced strategy is named 'the stakeholder response strategy', and finally the two-way symmetrical/balanced strategy is named 'the stakeholder involvement strategy'.

The 'stakeholder information strategy' is presented as a strategy where the corporation wants to present itself in a positive light to gain endorsement from stakeholders and to stimulate customers to continuing purchasing from the organisation. It is thus a passive approach, or almost a box-ticking exercise. It is suggested that third party endorsement is unnecessary for this communications strategy, however one could argue that if the stakeholders are not interested in engaging actively with the focal organisation, they still want to ensure that the company does the right things, and a third party endorsement could thus be seen as an objective verification strengthening the reliability of the information material. Secondly, one might argue whether there is anything like one-way

communications, as most organisations will have a function to allow feedback, even though it is not direct, but through customer care centres, or press/media contacts. Maybe a correct term for this strategy is communications not requiring response, or response-limited communications.

The stakeholder response strategy, on the other hand is described as a strategy where the corporation wants to encourage the stakeholders to change or take action, and they specifically suggest that:

"...the two-way asymmetric assumes an imbalance from the effects of public relations in favour of the company, as the company does not change as a result of public relations. Rather, the company attempts to change public attitudes and behavior" (Morsing and Schultz, 2006, p. 327).

This means that the company does not really seek constructive feedback on how they should change their policies, but is, rather, seeking endorsement of their strategy. This strategy is further explained by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as asymmetric as the corporation sets the topics and actions to discuss, and it is not the public raising issues for the corporation to address.

The third strategy, 'stakeholder involvement strategy', is used when a corporation is open to change as an effect of stakeholder suggestions.

"By engaging in dialogue with stakeholders, the company ideally ensures that it keeps abreast not only of its stakeholders' concurrent expectations but also of its potential influence on those expectations, as well as letting those expectations influence and change the company itself" (Morsing and Schultz, 2006, p. 328).

This strategy means that stakeholders need to be involved on an on-going and systematic manner and also that the company is willing and prepared to change.

The Morsing and Schultz study (2006) is based on an 'empirical illustration' of communications challenges for corporate managers, based on reputation surveys in Scandinavia, and thus not involving a direct test of the proposed communications

framework. The empirical illustration also indicates challenges rather than looking into the nature of communications, in the sense that it highlights survey results indicating that while about half of the population prefers corporations to broadly and openly communicate about CSR efforts, the other half prefers subtle and limited communications. The article thus focuses on what the public prefers in terms of CSR communications and does not test the conceptual communications framework.

4.3.3.1 *The importance of collaboration and co-creation in sustainability communications*

Adopting a CSR/sustainability strategy calls for closer collaboration with stakeholders (Du et al. 2010; Balmer et al. 2007), where collaboration can be defined as the application of information, differing understandings and spontaneity in order to find solutions to issues or to develop new ideas or products/processes (Lozano 2007, Denise 1999). This idea suggests that more symmetrical two-way communications strategies would be most suitable, proactively involving stakeholders, but there is still limited evidence this is being practised. Morsing and Schultz (2006) find, for example, limited opportunities for stakeholders to feed back communications, with Novo Nordisk being one exception – a company where stakeholders write commentaries in the CSR reports. Morsing and Schultz here argue that by inviting external stakeholders to comment, admittedly still controlled by the corporation, there is a channel for introducing new issues for the corporation to address. The paper concludes that perhaps there are no real examples of true two-way symmetrical communications, but that several companies are striving in that direction. It is stressed that "*CSR is a moving target*" (Morsing and Schultz 2006, p. 336), meaning that stakeholder expectations are continuously changing and corporations therefore should be prepared to respond accordingly. The involvement strategy is suggested as the best option for CSR communications (based on the notion of stakeholder theory and involving stakeholders) but as it is also found that some stakeholders prefer subtle minimal releases (for example in the form of annual reports or responsibility reports) one might question if the involvement strategy is appropriate and practical for all stakeholders. Critical voices to close stakeholder collaboration with all stakeholders, suggest that this can be time consuming and expensive (Crane and Matten 2010), and therefore managers might take a pragmatic approach, not engaging in symmetric communications with individual

stakeholders, but rather tailor communications to what is perceived as the most generic stakeholder expectations (Rowley 1997). There is also the perceived risk of co-optation, whereby stakeholders becoming too close to corporations will lose their objectivity (Crane and Matten 2010), or the risk of transparent communications is exploited by competitors (Hatch and Schultz 2010).

The branding co-creation literature is an interesting source for ideas on co-creation and collaboration with stakeholders, with the notion of the contemporary view of brands as dynamic and social processes between the brands and all their stakeholders (Merz et al. 2009), which is not dissimilar from a sustainability context. We have already seen interesting notions of communications strategies in the previous section (Gregory 2007), and there is a range of other research papers that could offer valuable insights. Hatch and Schultz (2010) for example, address the challenge of transparency in brand co-creation, in their longitudinal case study of the Lego Group and its brand community. They illustrate through the Lego case study that stakeholder engagement (through dialogue and access) brings positive co-creation and value building, but at the same time this organisational self-disclosure, with its transparency opens the company for more scrutiny, and exposes it to risks such as ownership of intellectual property. They argue however that transparency is not just about risks as it brings several benefits to the organisation, from better understanding of its stakeholders' needs, to finding ways to partner with stakeholder groups like NGOs. Another example of collaboration between competitors is offered by Lemmetyinen and Go (2010) in their empirical case study of the cruise sector, exploring collaboration to co-create a network brand of Cruise Baltic's destinations. They identify the relevant phases in this collaboration, of which the second phase – functional level of cooperation – indicates the time when each individual stakeholder realises the benefits of collaboration, in this case in the form of more effective marketing. At a later phase in this process, the participants see the benefits of the collaborative network brand project as also helping their individual brand-building activities. Collaboration with stakeholders should perhaps not be all-inclusive, and it might also be beneficial to stage the collaboration, starting with certain key stakeholder groups. An inside-out approach is suggested, meaning that corporations should first communicate to get internal stakeholders on-board, before CSR/sustainability communications target external stakeholders, and also that CSR/sustainability communications should be focused on employee related

responsibilities, as that is found as the most important aspect of CSR in a Danish reputation survey (Morsing et al. 2008).

According to this suggested approach, the second step is to engage with local communities and then thirdly to extend initiatives and communications to the broader stakeholder community. This also highlights the importance of employees, not only as a target for CSR activities but also as ambassadors for carrying out other CSR activities. This proposition is verified by case studies of two corporations perceived by the public as pioneers in CSR strategies (Novo Nordisk and Danfoss); in addition, the findings suggest that while it is important to have endorsement from top management, the ownership for initiatives needs to lie with the employees. As an example Novo Nordisk relates that its internal campaign called 'Take Action' encourages employees to pro-actively search for relevant initiatives and to be able to argue for why and how. A CSR communications model was developed that outlines two CSR communications processes: the 'expert CSR communications process', targeted to 'experts' or opinion formers (NGOs, politicians, media); who then indirectly could endorse the corporation through the 'endorsed CSR communications process' targeted to customers and the general public. As a positive side effect, it was found that some of these experts became partners in developing the firm's CSR strategy. On this note, the authors warn however that a risk of using the experts as a 'filter' is that they might not have the same opinions on what is important as the consumers, and that the corporation depends on the experts to provide the relevant information to the consumers.

4.3.4   Message formulation for effective communications

The previous sections have discussed various communications models, and with the importance of two-way communications in a sustainability context, close collaboration and co-creation was discussed in more detail. The presented models inform on interaction levels according to various stakeholder segmentation criteria, however no further advice exists on the content of communications. Should communications be tailored for each category, or following the notion of the importance of creating consistent messages, should an organisation aim for a more general message across these segments?

Annual reports (financial and CSR reports) are key tools in corporate communications, and as they are targeted to a broad range of stakeholders, they offer a great opportunity for building a consistent image of the corporation's sustainability ethos (Ellerup-Nielsen and Thomsen 2007), and research into corporations' sustainability communications into annual reports or sustainability reports could shed some lights into the communications practices. Ellerup-Nielsen and Thomsen (2007) find in their study of six Danish companies' CSR reports, that the reports are very different on topics and reporting strategies. It is nevertheless suggested that for a company to achieve consistency in CSR communications, the company needs to address the issues by taking viewpoints pointing in similar directions. One might argue that the fragmented findings are an effect of choosing companies from different industry sectors, which was suggested in an earlier cross-industry study including 28 FTSE4Good companies (Sweeney and Coughlan 2008). It was found that the focus of CSR communications varies between industries and depends on the key issues for each industry, e.g. the automobile industry has a significant focus on environmental issues. Also the focus on key stakeholders would differ significantly, with for example industry sectors closer to consumers (here the retailers,) likely to focus more on consumers as a stakeholder. In addition to the above noted differences on CSR communications between industries, it was also seen that a number of the organisations would have both an annual report as well as a CSR report, but that the annual report would always include a summary of CSR efforts. It is argued that as CSR reports and annual reports are sent to shareholders, the shareholders would be seen as the target stakeholder for these communications, even though other stakeholders easily can access the information online. An implication of the findings is that as the audience for the annual report is very wide the communications should be tailored accordingly, ensuring a broad appeal. A challenge in sustainability reporting in annual reports or responsibility reports is that some reporting on, for example, CSR performance can involve a rather complex technical language, and might even require pre-existing knowledge, which is easily followed by expert stakeholders (e.g. NGOs) but not by all consumers (Morsing et al. 2008).

A noteworthy aspect of corporate reporting on social and environmental performance, is the underlying motive which may not primarily be seeking two-way interaction. Elkington (1997, pg 171) suggests for example *"…a large part of companies engaging in corporate social reporting view their reports as public relation vehicles, designed to offer*

reassurance and to help with 'feel-good' image building". On the other hand, sustainability reporting is driven by a perceived need from senior management to balance negative media debates. On this note, Hooghiemstra (2000, pg 60) highlights the practice of impression management, i.e. "*how individuals present themselves to others in order to be perceived favourably by others*". While this concept originates from social psychology Hooghiemstra suggests it can be applied in sustainability reporting. Based on a case study of Shell and its infamous decision to sink the Brent Spar (an oil storage and tanker loading buoy) in the Atlantic Ocean in 1995, it is highlighted how a firm's sustainability reporting, within the concept of corporate communication, is primarily aimed at "*...protecting or enhancing its image or reputation*" (Hooghiemstra 2000, pg 64). Four principal communication tactics are illustrated (Hooghiemstra 2000, Tedeschi and Ries 1981):

(1) Entitlements: when the firm try to take credit of an event.

(2) Enhancements: the firm highlights the appropriateness of an event that it is responsible for.

(3) Excuses: the firm denies responsibility for an event.

(4) Justifications: the firm admits responsibility for an event but rejects the action as immoral.

These tactics raise the question how firms should respond to accusations in an ethical manner. There is a need for improved methods and transparency of sustainability reporting and reporting should also follow standardised recognised codes (Mathews 1995, De Tienne and Lewis 2005). Statements should further be audited by independent party/parties to improve credibility (Sillanpaa 1998, Stoll 2002, De Tienne and Lewis 2005).

Another communications channel with a large audience is website communication, which has been suggested as very important in a CSR context both because of its reach (Esrock and Leichty 2000) and also as it is viewed as an effective method for a company to build its image as that of a responsible organisation (Bondy et al. 2004). Insch (2008) conducted a corporate website content analysis of 18 energy firms, where the ranking and frequency of communications format revealed that press releases were the most common, followed by FAQs, online publications, newsletters. Notably only 6 per cent used blogs and only 11 per cent used case studies to communicate environmental issues. Encouragement for two-way communications was most frequently seen in the form of 'contact us', followed by webmaster email, enquiry form, etc. She concludes that companies are still not using web communication to stimulate two-way communications but, rather, as a push strategy,

which also lacks in a description of the companies' motives behind this strategy, a conclusion supporting earlier studies in the field (Esrock and Leichty 1998; Cooper 2003). Another aspect of interest found in the study was that the majority of companies would prioritise 2 to 4 stakeholders in this web communication, where customers were considered by far the most important stakeholder, followed by media, and a number of groups like investors, community, general public, etc. (Insch 2008). The limitation of two-way CSR communications was also supported by a more recent study in the context of US professional sports teams (Walker et al. 2010), indicating that generally, messages about CSR initiatives were given as a one-way communication to primarily inform stakeholders of the sports teams' commitments. It was concluded that one-way communication is important to create awareness, but as has also been suggested by Morsing and Schultz (2006), a two-way communications strategy would allow the teams to better understand what initiatives would seem most important from their fans' perspective, allowing both the stakeholders and the 'cause' to benefit. They here suggest the use of social media as a platform for two-way communications to allow sense-giving as well as sense-making. These website communications studies thus add a contemporary angle to the Morsing and Schultz model (2006), with social media and blogs as promising platforms for two-way communications.

In corporate communications, there is also the notion of CSR communications being integrated with, versus decoupled from, the corporate business strategy (Weaver et al. 1999), a phenomenon studied by Basil and Erlandson (2008) in a longitudinal study of Canadian companies. They use the theories of integration and decoupling to compare how companies might integrate their CSR activities into business strategy versus the notion of companies using CSR as a superficial activity, which easily can be 'decoupled' from the business strategy. They suggest that internal CSR features like posted 'codes of ethics' and 'environmental policies' can easily be added to a corporate website without being connected to a corporate strategy, whereas the presentation of external CSR activities (i.e. sponsorships, cause-related marketing, employee volunteerism, etc.) on the other hand are more difficult to claim without underlying substance as these activities can easily be checked by external stakeholders.

This section set out to increase the understanding of sustainability communications strategies for a corporation addressing its various audiences. The existing frameworks

(especially from the PR literature) indicate some possible communications models that could prove useful in a sustainability context (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Morshing and Schultz 2006; Gregory 2007). The corporate communications literature offers ideas on how to compose effective messages, with the notion that consistency is paramount for credible communications (Balmer et al. 2007; Fukukawa et al. 2007; Balmer et al. 2011; Simoes et al. 2005; Borgerson et al. 2009; Powell et al. 2009). Questions remain however as to how to create consistent and effective messages to a diverse stakeholder audience. In order to shed some further light on this dilemma, in the next section we look into the literature on strategic ambiguity, a strategy that has been suggested for delivering complex communications to diverse stakeholders (Eisenberg 1984; Eisenberg and Witten 1987; Leitch and Davenport 2002, 2007; Davenport and Leitch 2005; Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010).

4.4   The role of strategic ambiguity in CS communications

4.4.1   Introduction

The previous section saw the challenge of formulating a sustainability communications strategy to diverse stakeholders. Strategic ambiguity has been proposed in the academic literature as a management tool to deal with complex and conflicting stakeholder demands. This section reviews previous research into strategic ambiguity and proposes further research to improve the understanding on how strategic ambiguity could be useful in a sustainability context.

4.4.2   Definitions of strategic ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity was first brought into the organisational communications literature by Eisenberg in his seminal article (1984), where he defines strategic ambiguity as "*those instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals*" (Eisenberg 1984, p. 230). Eisenberg argues that while clarity is an important aspect of communications, it might be more pragmatic in certain occasions to avoid being too specific. Where multiple contradicting goals exist, ambiguous messages can be effective to overcome differences between stakeholders. He therefore suggests that: "a*mbiguous statement on core values allows them* [the stakeholders] *to maintain individual*

interpretations while at the same time believing that they are in agreement" (ibid. p. 231). Eisenberg's definition is also supported by more recent research; for example Davenport and Leitch define strategic ambiguity as:

"*…the deliberate use of ambiguity in strategic communication in order to create a 'space' in which multiple interpretations by stakeholders are enabled and to which multiple stakeholder responses are possible.*" (2005, p. 1604).

The notion of ambiguity in communications has also been addressed in other contexts and assigned other labels, such as 'umbrella constructs' (Hirsch and Levin 1999) or 'boundary objects' (Star and Griesemer 1989) to facilitate consensus among academic researchers, and more recently 'pragmatic ambiguity' to describe the life-cycle of management buzz words where "*the equivocality of concepts allows for different courses of action while maintaining a semblance of unity*" (Giroux 2006, p. 1232).

Giroux further notes that:
"*Since too much clarity or precision could bring differences to the fore and trigger open conflict, ambiguity acts as a kind of social lubricant, reducing potential friction between different points of view and allowing for smooth shifts of gears from one set of interests and concerns to the next*" (2006, p. 1230).

Ambiguity is similar to the concepts of 'generality' and 'vagueness', but Giroux (2006) claims that there are distinctions, where 'ambiguity' refers to words that have more than one definition or denotation, whereas 'general' covers various elements belonging to a group/category/system, and 'vague' means indefinite or indistinct.

4.4.3   Contexts for the use strategic ambiguity

Eisenberg (1984) postulates four situations where ambiguous communications might be preferable to clear messages. These instances include: (1) to promote 'unified diversity', (2) to facilitate organisational change, (3) to preserve privileged positions, and (4) to maintain the possibility of denying certain interpretations of a message.

A fifth use for strategic ambiguity is suggested by Leitch and Davenport (2002), who empirically conclude that an organisation can use strategic ambiguity to buy itself time while undergoing a change of internal procedures or strategies while still being able to communicate the changing goals to external stakeholders. In addition, Wexler (2009) suggests using strategic ambiguity in crisis communications, as crisis often leads to conflicts between stakeholders (Ullmer and Sellnow 2000). Strategic ambiguity might be particularly useful early in a crisis situation, when the cause for the crisis is not clear, or when the best cause of action to resolve the problem is not established. In this situation a clear and open statement of committing to a certain strategy to deal with the problem that may later need a different angle might undermine the trust stakeholders have in the managers (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000). Thus, also in the crisis context, strategic ambiguity will help the business in 'buying itself time' (Leitch and Davenport 2002), or to allow deniability at a later stage (Eisenberg 1984). Finally Wexler (2009) suggests a seventh use of strategic ambiguity; in messages of early plans or mission statements. This situation could arguably be seen as a combination of Eisenberg's 'unified diversity' and 'deniability'; and Leitch and Davenport's 'buying time' in a pressed situation, and is therefore not treated as a separate point in this thesis.

4.4.4   Advantages and pitfalls of strategic ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity has been empirically verified as a useful management tool in a range of contexts, and for example Yannopoulou and Elliott (2008) find that ambiguous messages in advertising are received positively by audiences as they have to engage more in the communications and therefore the message is more memorable. Strategic ambiguity can also have a positive contribution in the creation of common ground in social enterprise marketing on sensitive topics (Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010), in facilitating organisational change or merger (Leitch and Davenport 2002; Davenport and Leitch 2005; Miller et al. 2000; Contractor and Ehrlich 1993; Denis et al. 2011), in finding consensus on controversial topics in policy documents (Tracy and Ashcraft 2001; Leitch and Davenport 2007), and to allow flexibility in crisis communications (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000).

A recent study in the marketing field also raised the benefits of ambiguous wording (albeit not specifically referring to strategic ambiguity) to resolve issues that require actions from

a multitude of actors (Ritvala and Salmi 2011). A case study was conducted, with ecological issues in the Baltic Sea as the focus, suggesting that:

"… if the issue and its possible solutions were framed in an interesting but loose manner, firms responded positively, because they could incorporate the issue into their strategies and control needed resource commitments" (Ritvala and Salmi 2011, p. 895).

While the authors mentioned above, agree on the usefulness of strategic ambiguity, there are warnings of instances when strategic ambiguity may cause more harm than good. There is empirical evidence suggesting that lack of clarity could reduce trust in contexts where trust is important, and especially where previously the management style was characterised by strict control (Davenport and Leitch 2005). It is further claimed that strategic ambiguity can cause indecision and passivity (Jarzabkowski et al. 2010; Denis et al. 2011; Davenport and Leitch 2005), or active resistance through unconstructive interpretations (Davenport and Leitch 2005), and create 'false consensus' where stakeholders believe they are in agreement and take actions accordingly that later on may lead to more tension (Kutzschenbach and Brown 2006). The issue of delayed tension, is also raised by Denis et al. (2011), who studied the relationship between reification (defined as firm decisions creating 'no point of return') and strategic ambiguity, where reification is practised to create commitment between the stakeholders, but where the contract is phrased in an ambiguous manner to ensure participants are willing to sign. The ambiguous wording however, requires further decision-making, leading to more tension and indecision. The authors therefore question whether strategic ambiguity might only delay the tension. They find that reification works well in a short term, as it creates short term commitment, however much tension can stem from this. Likewise they argue that strategic ambiguity can be short term as it may lead to postponed decisions.

Leitch and Davenport (2002) further warn that ambiguous messages inviting stakeholders to participate can portray the management as incompetent, not capable of taking decisions on their own. It has also been suggested that activities related to safety and legal issues need clarity and might not benefit from strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg and Witten 1987). This delicate balance in strategic ambiguity, of on the one hand creating unified diversity between complex stakeholders, and on the other hand ensuring that the use of ambiguous

communications does not backlash on the organisation is well summarised in the following quote:

"*Ambiguity-prone contexts thus present a challenge to strategic action. On the one hand, ambiguity is a political resource that might help with generating action. However, ambiguity also enables partial and multiple meanings and interests to proliferate, which obscure action*" (Jarzabkowski et al. 2010, p. 221).

4.4.5   Prerequisites for the successful use of strategic ambiguity

The discussion above has highlighted the many benefits of strategic ambiguity, and being aware of potential pitfalls is vital in order to use strategic ambiguity effectively. Despite the many dangers, the majority of the authors in the strategic ambiguity literature agree on the usefulness of ambiguous communications if applied responsibly. It is advised to refrain from using wordings that are negative, inconsistent or contradictory as this might lead to even more tension. In addition, to make strategic ambiguity work, it is important to frame the message in accordance with the capability of each stakeholder group and not least to ensure that the message and the objective of the communications are fully understood within the organisation itself (Leitch and Davenport 2002). It is also stressed that it is important to frame the ambiguous message correctly based on the knowledge and complexity of stakeholders receiving the message (Ullmer and Sellnow 2000). Leitch and Davenport (2002) also question whether strategic ambiguity is appropriate for all stakeholder groups.

It is suggested (Leitch and Davenport 2002, p. 137) that in order for strategic ambiguity to work the stakeholders must possess:
- *The internal resources and capability to respond*
- *A strong incentive to engage*
- *Goodwill and trust towards the organisation.*

Denis et al. (2011) also raise the importance of strong leadership supported by sufficient resources (also suggested by Miller et al. 2000), and the avoidance of too long time horizons.

4.4.6   Formats of strategic ambiguity

We previously learnt the definitions of strategic ambiguity and when it is advisable to use this concept to facilitate communications to diverse audiences. But how is strategic ambiguity exercised? Denis et al. (2011) identified the following practices of ambiguity:

- Equivocal language: the use of vague words or complete removal of certain details regarding sensitive topics in contracts or other official documents to stimulate more participants to feel comfortable to sign such documents.

- Inflation: slightly exaggerated promotion of proposals to encourage participation. It is suggested that it should be obvious to the participants that the exaggeration is not fully realistic, but to keep it unclear on what aspects that will need to be removed during implementation,

- Postponement: "*leaving controversial issues open in order to maintain commitment*" (ibid., p. 239)

- Preservation of rights to participate in the future: to encourage settlement on a particular issue where there are still some aspects that are not agreed, it is suggested to give all participants reassurance of equal rights in future decision making, and also commitment on revision possibilities at a later date.

- Equivocal commitment: when participants sign a commitment they are allowed to add conditions, thus giving the actors a chance to be ambiguous back.

While the suggestions above are based on contracts and policy documents, there is also research into other contexts suggesting the use of ambiguous wordings in job descriptions (Eisenberg and Witten 1987; Miller et al. 2000), or in an organisation's mission statement (Contractor and Ehrlich 1993), or using metaphors in mission statements as in a case study from the public sector in New Zealand where an 'investment metaphor' was deployed to stimulate a dialogue with stakeholders (Leitch and Davenport 2002). Another study (Frischherz 2010) based on 56 texts accessed on websites from a variety of organisations, revealed a significant tendency to use metaphors in sustainability communications, with 'sustainability as a journey' and 'sustainability as war' being the most frequently used metaphors. It is suggested that verbal metaphors allows multiple perspectives to co-exist.

While most of the above examples stem from the organisational change literature, there has also been a study into the context of social enterprise marketing of a Trappist beer

brand in Belgium (Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010). Trappist beer businesses are categorised as hybrid organisations, acting "*commercially to pursue social agendas*" (Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010, p. 1856) and is therefore particularly prone to contradicting stakeholder claims. The authors identify the market, religion and marketers as the key three sources for stakeholder tension, where for example the market is subject to development pushing for change and/or modernisation of the product and its distribution channels, the religious values that clash with some market demands, and finally marketing trying to generate healthy business without exploiting religion in an unethical fashion. The case study reveals that an effective method to balance these conflicting stakeholder demands is to use strategic ambiguity in communications. By tailoring (downplaying certain aspects) communications messages depending on the stakeholder, the management could create consensus, where all stakeholders could find common ground in the importance of authenticity of the brand. As an example, modernisation of production equipment may be played down or left out in communications to the market to retain the image of old fashioned production methods. Importantly, it is found that stakeholder tension can be minimised by using the ambiguous keyword 'authenticity' in marketing positioning, which appeals to the diverse stakeholder groups like the monks producing the beer (religious aspect) and the society with concerns of responsible alcoholic use, the market forces (consumer behaviour and preferences) and the marketers' needs of finding a unique positioning. The use of ambiguous keywords has also been suggested by Leitch and Davenport (2007) in policy documents with the purpose of driving the development of the biotechnology industry in New Zealand. Keywords like 'growth', 'co-existence', 'community', and 'sustainability' are used frequently throughout the documents, and with multiple meanings assigned.

One might argue how some of these practices like 'equivocal language' and 'inflation' sit within an ethical organisation, and how to balance the intent of creating collaboration and agreement with the risk of being accused of deception. The ethical aspect of strategic ambiguity is thus of great importance and this will be discussed further in the section below.

4.4.7 Strategic ambiguity and ethics

Fernando and Sim (2011) claim that strategic ambiguity is a very powerful tool but that it can be used both in an ethical and an unethical fashion; they illustrate through a case study how irresponsible management use such a strategy with the sole aim to maximise profit. This instrumental approach of sustainability communications, sometimes called 'green-washing' referring to "*...., a firm's efforts at improving its reputation with customers, financiers, communities, and other stakeholders by attempting to deflect blame for the firm's negative environmental impacts and by providing misleading or incomplete information in an attempt to distract critics*" (Koerber 2009, pg 467) and 'blue-washing' i.e. to communicate liaisons with the United Nations to create a perception of reputable behaviour (Laufer 2003), have lead to increased consumer and public scepticism to corporate communications (Belz and Peattie 2012, Elving and van Vuuren 2011, Bae and Cameron 2006).

On this note, Davenport and Leitch (2005) warn that where trust is important between a business and its stakeholders, ambiguity can result in just the opposite. This is partly opposed by Conchie and Burns (2008), who empirically find that clear communications are beneficial for trust in an organisation where there already is trust. However, in an organisational context where there is poor trust, any negative information is more likely to further deteriorate trust and this is where communications must be carefully managed. These observations are noteworthy as they raise the question as to how strategic ambiguity sits in an ethical context.

Research on the ethical aspect of strategic ambiguity suggests that ambiguous communications are unethical if the objective is to create preferential treatment for certain stakeholders (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000), or to avoid responsibility (Paul and Strbiak 1997), or to create false perception (Sellnow 1993).

Paul and Strbiak conclude that:

"*Strategic ambiguity is ethical when communicative behaviors are congruent with communicators' rational, logically consistent espoused-ethics*" (1997, p. 157).

Or, as expressed by Ulmer and Sellnow:

"[*C*]*ommunication that emphasizes competing interpretations of questions focussed on evidence, intent and locus that, based on the information that is available is reasonable complete and unbiased is ethical*" (2000, p. 149).

In a sustainability context, creating trust with stakeholders is vital, especially with the notion of consumer scepticism following the practice of 'greenwash' by some organisations. Therefore, in order to reap the benefits of strategic ambiguity it is thus imperative that it is practised in a responsible and ethical fashion.

4.5   Summary

This chapter started by reviewing the literature on stakeholder management, highlighting specific advice for managing stakeholders through the lens of corporate communications (Gregory 2007). Frameworks for corporate communications strategies were reviewed and critiqued together with theories on strategic ambiguity as a potential tool for corporate communications. Following these insights together with the views on stakeholder theory (reviewed in Chapter 3), some ideas for CS communications are emerging. These will be further discussed in the next chapter, summarising the key understandings from Chapters 3 and 4, leading to a proposed framework for CS communications.

5 DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapters introduced the concepts of sustainability and CSR, and the central notion of stakeholder theory within those ideas. Models for stakeholder categorisation were presented as they provide an important tool for managers to classify the multitude of stakeholders into different groups, which might facilitate stakeholder management. Consulting the PR literature, communications strategy models were discussed along with the notion on how to combine stakeholder classification with an optimal communications strategy. In order to find effective communications strategies on the complex subject of sustainability to a diverse audience of stakeholders, the literature strand on strategic ambiguity was researched, offering some thought provoking aspects.

In this chapter, insights from the previous discussions on models for stakeholder classification, and communications strategies, with the notion of strategic ambiguity will be crafted into a conceptual framework for 'CS communications' (see Table 5.1). The following section will explain and justify this proposed framework, starting with insights from stakeholder theory, followed by discussions on stakeholder management, communications strategies and finally strategic ambiguity.

Table 5.1: Conceptual framework: CS communications strategies

Categorisation attributes	Power, Legitimacy, Urgency, Proximity, Interest, Business Strategy Relevance ------------------→ (The higher degree of these the closer interaction)			
Communication strategies	Inform	Consult	Involve	Partner
Communication model	Dissemination of information. Source -> Rec.	Seeking input and feedback. Source < = > Rec.	Seeking collaboration to drive sustainability agenda. Source ⇔ Rec.	Mutual two-way balanced collaboration. Group ⇔ Group
Primary Communication Objective	Legitimacy/Image, Initiate public debate, Influence consumer behaviour	Advice / Legitimacy / Image	Stakeholders to collaborate with the firm to support the firm's Sustainability agenda.	Drive change in the entire value chain. Collaboration and co-creation
Strategic Ambiguity rationale	Preserve privileged positions, Deniability, Buy time, Promote unified diversity	Preserve privileged positions, Deniability, Buy time, Promote unified diversity	Promote unified diversity, Facilitate change, Preserve privileged positions, Deniability, Buy time	Promote unified diversity, Facilitate change
Strategic Ambiguity format	Non-specific communication on the organisation's Sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords.	Non-specific communication on the organisation's Sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords.	Non-specific communication on Sustainability objectives. Specific communication in certain relationships where there is a clear, specific objective that needs compliance.	Non-specific communication on Sustainability objectives. For certain very close relationships a more tailored communication strategy might be required.

5.2 Stakeholder classification and prioritisation in a sustainability context

Chapter 3 discussed stakeholder theory, the underpinning philosophy of CSR and sustainability. While a normative stakeholder stance is suggested as more ethical (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Kaler 2002; Beer 2004), a more pragmatic instrumental approach is suggested for businesses to more effectively address stakeholders (Mitchell et al. 1997). The instrumental approach has however been criticised as it sometimes is too narrow, for example the marketing discipline with a traditional constricted focus on primarily the customer/consumer.

This thesis supports the instrumental arguments of Mitchell et al. (1997), in that it is neither practical nor economical for a business to address all its stakeholders with equal intensity. This position does not however suggest that some stakeholders are more important than others, but rather that some stakeholders call for more intense attention. As an example, a supplier is likely to have a closer relationship with the focal organisation than maybe the local community, as there is already an on-going necessary dialogue with

suppliers due to their operational importance. Research has indicated however that interaction with stakeholders is a dynamic process (Mitchell et al. 1997; Jawahar and McLaughlin 2001; Myllykangas et al. 2010), which further highlights the importance of viewing all stakeholders as prominent.

While all stakeholders should be considered, a pragmatic approach calls for an effective system to segment stakeholders into categories, and to assess each category's need and interest for interaction with the focal organisation. Questions then remain on how to categorise stakeholders, and what drivers should be used to determine how close an interaction is required. The saliency framework by Mitchell et al. (1997), presented in the previous chapter, offers a simplistic method for a pragmatic stakeholder classification and prioritisation. Maybe the word 'prioritisation' is incorrect here, as it may imply that a higher priority stakeholder is more important. In this research however, a stakeholder classified as having higher prioritisation, is a stakeholder with whom the organisation needs a closer relationship in order to further its sustainability performance. The saliency framework (Mitchell et al. 1997) suggests three drivers for the classification of stakeholders: power, legitimacy and urgency; and it is claimed that stakeholders that possess all three of these should be considered as having the highest prioritisation to the organisation. While the saliency framework is presented as a conceptual framework by Mitchell et al. (1997), it has subsequently been empirically tested in a number of contexts (Agle et al. 1999; Harvey and Schaefer 2001; Winn and Keller 2001; Eesley and Lenox 2006; Parent and Deephouse 2007; Aaltonen et al. 2008; Magness 2008; Boesso and Kumar 2009; Myllykangas et al. 2010) and verified, albeit with notions of necessary extensions or modifications to the framework, some of which also have been raised in conceptual papers. These suggestions are summarised below:

- Stakeholders that hold a positive historical connection (Winn and Keller 2001; Gibson 2000 (conceptual) and Savage et al 1991 (case study)), and those with proximity (Driscoll and Starik 2004 (conceptual) and Rivera-Camino 2007 (empirical)), to the firm are more likely to enjoy a positive response from the firm.
- Stakeholder identification also varies with time, issue and manager (Parent and Deephouse 2007).
- Stakeholders and firms participate in networks rather than in dyadic relationships (Roloff 2008; Rowley 1997; Neville and Menguc 2006 (conceptual)) and

furthermore relationships are not static but evolve with organisational life cycle (Jawahar and McLaughlin (2001 (conceptual))).

- The saliency model needs to be extended to allow for more dynamism and for the notion of value creation for the firm. Six additional factors should be incorporated: history of the relationship, objectives of the stakeholders, interaction in the relationship, information sharing in the relationship, trust between stakeholders, and the competence of the stakeholder to learn (Myllykangas et al. 2010).

- Media is the only stakeholder that can impact the saliency of other stakeholders (Winn and Keller 2001).

- Legitimacy is divided into the legitimacy of the stakeholder and the legitimacy of the request, and likewise the urgency can be divided into the urgency of the stakeholder and the urgency of the request, where the urgency of the request is more important. There are also indications that the tactics used by the stakeholders might be more important than group legitimacy in creating saliency. It is also suggested, in line with previous research, that stakeholders co-operating with other stakeholders can create a higher saliency, with the effect of their requests being more likely to be met by the firm (Eesley and Lenox 2006).

- Higher level managers identify a higher number of stakeholders, and managers who work together have a higher tendency to identify the same stakeholders as key. In addition, stakeholders with more than one type of power (out of normative, utilitarian and coercive), are more salient, and those with utilitarian power (power over resources) have a higher degree of saliency compared to those with normative or coercive power. Furthermore, urgency is higher ranked than legitimacy when ranking important stakeholders. A manager's hierarchical level and role has a direct and moderating effect on his/her stakeholder saliency perception. Power is most important for prioritisation followed by urgency and legitimacy (Parent and Deephouse 2007).

- Stakeholders can increase their saliency through a number of actions e.g. coalitions, building up or withholding critical resources, communications strategy etc. (Aaltonen 2008).

- Stakeholders with institutional power (through legislation) have the highest saliency (Harvey and Schaefer 2001).

- Pressure groups are important stakeholders if they are co-operative and non-threatening, and are considered an important source for advice and management of public opinion (Harvey and Schaefer 2001).

Despite the critique of the 'saliency framework', there is plenty of evidence of its value through the empirical studies listed above, and therefore for the purpose of this research, the categorisation attributes as suggested by Mitchell et al. (1997), power, legitimacy and urgency, will form the base for developing the 'CS communications framework'. Acknowledging empirical findings however, this research paper suggests the addition of 'proximity' (Driscoll and Starik 2004, Rivera-Camino 2007) to the three attributes.

The stakeholder management literature, with its instrumental predisposition, offers management models based on a simplistic selection of stakeholder segmentation attributes. Similar to Mitchell's saliency framework, 'power' is widely applied as a factor to categorise stakeholders into different stakeholder management strategies, whereas 'urgency' and specifically 'legitimacy' are downplayed in favour of 'cooperation potential'. 'Cooperation potential' can also be described as the willingness of the stakeholder to cooperate (Savage et al. 1991), or labelled as 'interest' (Gregory 2007). Additionally, the stakeholders' potential to influence other stakeholders is offered as an attribute (Polonsky 1996), however this can also be seen as a form of 'power' (Harvey and Schaefer 2001) and will in this study not be considered as a separate attribute. Importantly, also the business strategy relevance of the stakeholder (Harrison and St John 1996, Aspara and Tikkanen 2008) is suggested as an attribute for prioritising stakeholders. Harrison and St John further suggest the stakeholders' ability to contribute and reduce the environmental uncertainty affecting the firm as an attribute for stakeholder categorisation, however these notions are quite vague and the assumption here is that they could be covered by the attribute of 'power'. This thesis thus proposes the following:

Proposition 1: Stakeholders should be classified into categories based on power, legitimacy, urgency, proximity, interest and business strategy relevance, where those stakeholders possessing a higher degree of the six attributes, should have the highest level of interaction with the focal organisation.

This proposition is illustrated in the top section of the 'CS communications Framework' in Table 5.1.

Some further assumptions need to be made regarding the six attributes for stakeholder saliency:

Power:

The notion of power will here indicate stakeholders having access to coercive power, normative power, and/or controlling resources that are of importance to the focal organisation (Mitchell et al. 1997). In addition, Harvey and Schaefer (2001) claim that non-threatening stakeholders are more likely to gain attention or collaboration from an organisation; they suggest that one valid example of coercive power is through legislation, where penalties or fines are threats to on-compliant organisations. It has also been suggested that power also constitutes 'possession of knowledge' (Johnson and Scholes 2002). Furthermore, it should be noted here that stakeholders can gain power through joining forces in collaboration (Eesley and Lenox 2006).

Legitimacy:

The description on what constitutes a legitimate stakeholder is vague, with some scholars arguing for a broad definition of stakeholders and others a narrow definition. Palazzo and Scherer (2006) divide legitimacy into: 'cognitive', 'pragmatic' and 'moral', where moral legitimacy is seen as the most appropriate choice according to normative stakeholder theory and by public opinion. It is important to note that legitimacy is socially constructed as opposed to a legal requirement (Bunn et al. 2002). Therefore this research paper will consider those stakeholders to whom an organisation has a moral obligation as legitimate stakeholders.

Urgency:

For urgency, the definition as suggested by Mitchell et al. (1997, p. 867) will be used:

"We define urgency as the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention."

Proximity:

Driscoll and Starik (2001) and Rivera-Camino (2007) suggest the addition of 'proximity' as an attribute to stakeholder categorisation, where proximity denotes the physical

closeness of a stakeholder. This could include neighbours in the form of the local community, but also those closest to the firm in the value chain. This thesis also suggests that a stakeholder could enjoy high proximity through positive historical connections between the stakeholder and the firm (Savage et al. 1991; Winn and Keller 2001; Gibson 2000).

Interest:

The attribute of interest is described as the 'willingness' to collaborate (Savage et al. 1991) and the probability of the stakeholder to want to influence the firm's strategy (Johnson and Scholes 2002). It should be noted that while interest and legitimacy can have some overlapping features, it is here suggested that these are different attributes as there may be legitimate stakeholders that don't have an interest (or resources) in actively collaborating with the firm. Similarly, there may be stakeholders with a lower degree of legitimacy, who still have an interest in actively engaging with the firm (Kaler 2002).

Business strategy relevance:

It is suggested, based on the notion of Harrison and St John (1996) and Aspara and Tikkanen (2008), that a stakeholder that is important for the firm to achieve its objectives will enjoy a higher degree of prioritisation, which is a prominent feature of instrumental stakeholder theory.

In addition to these clarifications of the attributes driving stakeholder categorisation, some assumptions will be made for the purpose of this research project:

- Following suggestions as discussed earlier in this chapter, it is acknowledged that the saliency or prioritisation of stakeholders is a dynamic process, evolving with time (Jawahar and McLaughlin 2001), and that the categorisation process is rather biased as it is based on managers' perceptions (Parent and Deephouse (2007).

- It is further acknowledged that while communications between organisations and their stakeholders can and possibly should be viewed from a network perspective (Roloff 2008; Rowley 1997; Neville and Menguc 2006), this research will, for practical purposes, consider communications from a focal organisation's perspective.

- Finally, following suggestions on stakeholder classification being issue based, this research aims at understanding stakeholder classification in a sustainability context,

which might not concur with findings from other contexts.

This section has proposed attributes for stakeholder categorisation based on stakeholder theory, but also drawing on insights from the stakeholder management and marketing literature. The next section will review strategies for managing the different stakeholder categories, specifically from a communications perspective.

5.3   CS communications strategies for effective stakeholder management

The previous chapter highlighted the importance of communications in the management of stakeholders, and presented the Grunig and Hunt (1984) PR communications model to facilitate a structured approach into stakeholder management and engagement. While PR primarily deals with communications to external stakeholders, it could also offer important ideas for communications with internal stakeholders. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest four communications strategies, ranging from one-way dissemination of information where complete truth is not essential, to a two-way communications strategy based on mutual understanding where the firm's strategy is negotiated in full collaboration with its stakeholders. The model has been subject to some limited empirical testing in a CSR context by Morsing and Schultz (2006), reducing the number of communications strategies to three, as it was suggested that the notion of untruthful propaganda does not have a place in a CSR context. Morsing and Schultz (2006) therefore suggest three communications strategies: 'the stakeholder information strategy' (based on the 'public information' strategy of Grunig and Hunt), 'the stakeholder response strategy' (based on Grunig and Hunt's two-way asymmetric/imbalanced strategy), and finally 'the stakeholder involvement strategy' (based on Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetrical/balanced strategy).

While these communications strategy models give indications that can assist an organisation to design its communications strategy to its stakeholders, it fails to provide a mechanism to categorise its stakeholders for the different communications strategies. Gregory (2007) provides some useful insights to this enquiry as she consults the stakeholder management literature to align stakeholder categorisation with stakeholder communications strategies. She proposes four communications strategies: 'inform',

'consult', 'involve', and 'partner', presented in a 2x2 matrix where stakeholder power and interest are the suggested attributes for segmenting stakeholders. The model offers interesting suggestions to a more comprehensive communications strategy model, but as discussed in the section above regarding stakeholder categorisation attributes, it is rather simplistic as it limits the classification process to only the two attributes of 'power' and 'interest'. In addition the framework has only been subject to limited empirical testing as it is based on just one case company – an NHS trust in the UK, which is further quite a special form of organisation – and takes the form of a descriptive theory methodology. Gregory's work does not specifically consider CSR/sustainability issues, but as it deals with the interaction and collaboration with a multitude of diverse and possibly conflicting stakeholders in the development of corporate brands, the context suggests similarities to sustainability collaboration. Therefore, it is suggested that communications strategies of 'inform', 'consult', 'involve', and 'partner' will form the base for the stakeholder categories in this research, as depicted in Table 5.1, also highlighting details on the communications model and the primary communications objectives. Propositions regarding these categories will now be further detailed:

Communications strategy 1 - Inform: This communications strategy origins from Grunig and Hunt's 'Public Information Strategy' and also resembles Morsing and Schultz's 'Stakeholder Information Strategy' with its notion of 'sensegiving' to stakeholders aimed at raising the image, gaining endorsement (Morsing and Schultz 2006). In addition a one-way communications strategies can be used to raise the public debate about certain issues (Meriläinen and Vos 2013) and to influence consumer behaviour (Schmeltz 2012). One can argue here that a debate suggests the initiation of a dialogue and as such requires two-way communication. However, one could possibly consider a public debate taking different intensity levels, where sometimes a firm's objective is to create a public debate but is not necessarily prepared to engage in this dialogue, and in this case therefore an inform strategy might be appropriate. An inform communications strategy is therefore essentially a one-way communications model, aimed at the dissemination of information to stakeholders with a relatively low level of 'priority' either due to limited legitimacy, power, urgency, proximity, interest, and/or business strategy relevance. Despite this being primarily a one-way communications strategy, it is however suggested that it is beneficial to provide a mechanism for stakeholder feedback (Gregory 2007). Thus the following is proposed:

Proposition 2: The primary communications objective with the *inform* communications strategy is to receive legitimacy to operate, to raise the image of the company, create public debate about issues, and to influence consumer behaviour.

<u>**Communications strategy 2 – Consult**</u>: This strategy is seen as two-way asymmetric, as it offers a more robust feedback mechanism compared to the 'inform strategy', with the firm actively seeking advice and input to its sustainability agenda. However as both Grunig and Hunt (1984), and Morsing and Schultz (2006) consider a two-way asymmetric strategy as an extended stakeholder information strategy, with the notion of 'scientific persuasion' (as labelled by Grunig and Hunt 1984), and Morsing and Schultz's (2006, p. 326) suggestion that the objective is to "*demonstrate to the stakeholders how the company integrates their concerns*", the strategy is imbalanced as the firm does not necessarily change its strategy as a result of listening to feedback. While Grunig and Hunt (1984) and Morsing and Schultz (2006) depict a communications strategy for imbalanced two-way communications, Gregory (2007) divides this into two categories: 'consult' and 'involve', where the 'consult' category is aimed at stakeholders with high interest and low power, a category to which the primary communications objective is to gain legitimacy to operate and to raise the image, but also to benefit from the expertise of this stakeholder group.

Proposition 3: The primary communications objective with a *consult* communications strategy is to gain legitimacy and to raise the image, but also to draw upon the knowledge of this stakeholder group.

The next category of imbalanced two-way communications is 'involve' which is described below.

<u>**Communications strategy 3 – Involve**</u>:
The 'involve' strategy is the second type of two-way asymmetric strategy, but with a slightly stronger interaction level compared to the consult category as it is suggested that this category will enjoy closer engagement with the firm compared to the consult category and might be actively involved in the design and implementation of the firm's sustainability strategy, but with a relationship that is not as close as the 'partner' category (Gregory 2007). This leads to the next proposition:

Proposition 4: The primary communications objective with an *involve* communications strategy is to encourage stakeholders to collaborate with the firm to support the firm's sustainability agenda.

Gregory (2007) suggests that this is the appropriate communications strategy to stakeholders that possess high power and low interest, and mentions shareholders as an example. One could however debate whether a stakeholder of low interest would actively participate with the firm on sustainability initiatives.

<u>**Communications strategy 4 – Partner:**</u>

This strategy is what Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe as a two-way symmetric model based on mutual understanding, deployed through a balanced collaboration between the firm and its stakeholders, where both the firm and the stakeholders collaborate and are prepared to change their strategy as a result of this engagement, and as suggested by Morsing and Schultz (2006) to establish a co-constructed CSR effort that can have a positive impact across the value chain. Therefore it is proposed:

Proposition 5: The primary communications objective with the *partner* communications strategy is to drive change in the value chain through a collaborative effort with stakeholders.

Four communications strategies have here been suggested and described and aligned to the stakeholder categorisation attributes. The communications strategies offer useful advice on the level of interaction with each category, but fail to guide managers as to how to address diverse stakeholders on the complex subject of sustainability, taking into consideration the notion of consistency as being paramount for credible communications (Balmer et al. 2007, 2011; Fukukawa et al. 2007; Simoes et al. 2005; Borgerson et al. 2009). The strategic ambiguity literature was consulted to shed some light into this challenge, and the emerging suggestions to complete the conceptual framework in Table 5.1 are discussed in the section below.

5.4   Strategic ambiguity in CS communications

The previous chapter on strategic ambiguity highlighted the usefulness of ambiguous messaging to manage stakeholder conflicts in crisis communications, organisational change or to gain commitment from diverse stakeholders on a complex subject. These proposed contexts for strategic ambiguity share similarities to circumstances when businesses take, or don't take, actions to become more sustainable. Sustainability initiatives, or lack of initiatives, may cause stakeholder tension for several reasons. Firstly, several unclear definitions of sustainability co-exist (Smith and Sharicz 2011), secondly, there is not enough evidence that sustainability is beneficial for all stakeholders of a business (Spar and LaMure 2003; Ogden and Watson 1999), thirdly sustainability is difficult, if not impossible, to measure accurately (Hunkeler and Rebitzer 2005). In addition, if considering the definitions on sustainability discussed previously, sustainability actions cannot be performed by one business in isolation, but require collaboration along the whole value chain, taking into consideration all activities during the whole life cycle of a product or service. Businesses therefore need to address sustainability in collaboration with other stakeholders along the whole supply chain. These challenges and the sheer number of potential stakeholders involved in a sustainability context, indicate that tension or even conflict between stakeholders is likely to arise as an effect of sustainability efforts (Scandelius and Cohen 2011), or as phrased by Reynolds et al. (2006, p. 287):

"*Whether the resources are capital, profits, effort, or time, stakeholders can and do disagree about how or where each should be utilized.*"

This tension, if not managed properly, could become dysfunctional, which may not only harm a business's performance (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000) but may also delay actions towards more sustainable business practices. It is therefore vital to find ways to harness possible tension between stakeholders to create collaboration instead of conflict.

We saw in the previous section that strategic ambiguity can be efficient when dealing with diverse stakeholders with competing goals, or as expressed by Leitch and Davenport (2002, p. 130):

"Arguably, the more diverse the stakeholders and goals that an organisation has to serve, the more useful strategic ambiguity may be in promoting unity".

They later expand this to:

*"However, when the goal is less clear, when stakeholders are not compliant and, perhaps, have power bases from which to resist the goal, or when achievement of the goal requires a creative engagement between the organization and its stakeholders, strategic ambiguity may be more appropriate" (*Davenport and Leitch 2005, p. 1607)

Strategic ambiguity to create 'unified diversity' can be efficient when dealing with competing business goals such as quality versus cost (Miller et al. 2000) to "*masking but maintaining divergence*" (Denis et al. 2011 p. 239). The notion that mission statements often are vague can be a deliberate tactic of strategic ambiguity (Miller et al. 2000), allowing for diverse interpretations.

Strategically ambiguous mission statements can enhance the creation of new loosely coupled organisations through the possibility to interpret the statement in different ways, leading to buy-in from diverse stakeholders (Contractor and Ehrlich 1993). Contractor and Ehrlich argue that stakeholder groups with great autonomy respond well to an ambiguous message. This could therefore work in a sustainability context, where there is a range of different stakeholders with different agendas.

One might therefore be inclined to think that strategic ambiguity might be a useful tactic for achieving collaboration between stakeholders to stimulate sustainable production and consumption practices. Sustainability is in itself characterised with some contradicting forces, as was discussed above. There is however very limited research into strategic ambiguity in a sustainability context, with some conceptual papers (Wexler 2009; Scandelius and Cohen 2011), one empirical case study on social enterprise marketing (Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010), and another empirical study where 'sustainability' was found as an ambiguous keyword (Leitch and Davenport 2007). Table 5.2, below, lists key contributions in the strategic ambiguity literature and highlights the limited research of strategic ambiguity beyond organisational studies, and beyond the context of the public sector.

Table 5.2: Strength of intra-organisational aspects in the context of the public sector within extant research on strategic ambiguity

Reference	Context			Methodology
	Organi-sational context	Public sector	Other contexts	
Conchie and Burns 2008	√	√		Quantitative survey of occupational risk in high-risk health organisation.
Contractor and Ehrlich 1993	√	√		Case study on academic research centre
Davenport and Leitch 2005	√	√		Case study of public sector research funding organisation
Denis et al 2011	√	√		Case study of teaching hospitals
Dickinson-Delaporte et al 2010			√	Case Study of non-profit Trappist beer company
Eisenberg 1984	√			Conceptual paper
Eisenberg and Witten 1987	√			Conceptual paper
Giroux 2006			√	Quality management texts
Jarzabkowski et al 2010	√			Case study of intra-organisational knowledge organisation
Leitch and Davenport 2002	√	√		Case study of organisational change in the public sector
Leitch and Davenport 2007		√		Case study of policy documents.
Miller et al 2000	√	√		Case study on role descriptions in health care context.
Paul and Strbiak 1997	√			Conceptual paper on ethics of strategic ambiguity

Ring and Perry 1985		√		Conceptual paper on public organisations
Sillince et al 2012	√	√		Case study of internationalisation strategy of a business school
Thiessen and Ingelhoff 2011			√	Conceptual paper on crisis communications
Tracy and Ashcraft 2001		√		Case study of policy documents in public organisation
Ullmer and Sellnow 2000			√	Case study of crisis communications of fast food chain.
Wexler 2009			√	Conceptual paper
Yannopoulou and Elliott 2008			√	Interviews of consumers on how they interpret advertising
Zimmermann et al 1996	√			Quantitative survey in an intra-organisational context.

Wexler (2009) presents a conceptual model suggesting that strategic ambiguity can be beneficial to creating collaboration between the three stakeholder groups: profit, planet and people. He particularly studies the TBL reporting, whereby a corporation in its annual report not only reports on its financial performance but also on social and environmental performance. Wexler's conceptual paper (2009) applies an inter-organisational focus and more specifically how knowledge is transferred between network participants. He suggests that the diffuse and contradicting definition of TBL open opportunities for the three contradicting forces, as he calls profit, planet and people, to gain from co-existence. Because of TBL's ambiguous nature, contradicting communities can identify with some aspect of this concept and use it as common ground in collaboration with stakeholders of different opinions. Thus TBL is an ambiguous tool to create collaboration. TBL is vague enough to allow different interpretations. One could critique Wexler's work as taking a too simplistic stance on stakeholders, as he reduce stakeholders to only three groups: people, planet and profit. Stakeholder formations can be a lot more complex, and stakeholders might adopt different stances depending on the context. Thus stakeholder formation cannot

be viewed as static. It can also be argued that the TBL reporting has a limited audience in that it is reporting facts and figures that may primarily communicate with shareholders and NGO's but maybe not be actively read by stakeholder groups like consumers and the local communities. Despite these limitations, the research by Wexler (2009) provides a conceptual contribution to the academic literature by taking strategic ambiguity into a context outside crisis communications and organisational change, and into the context of sustainability.

Other recent significant contributors to the strategic ambiguity literature are Dickinson-Delaporte et al. (2010), who bring strategic ambiguity into the social enterprise marketing literature. Their empirical case study revolves around social responsibility, which is one of the three pillars (social, environmental and economic responsibility) of sustainability and concludes that strategic ambiguity has a role in marketing in a social context to reduce tension and increase reputation, in the application of brand authenticity. While this specific study is limited as it only concerns one very specific type of industry in one country (Belgium), it gives indications of the value of strategic ambiguity also in corporate marketing. It would however be interesting to understand how corporate communications could be used to manage conflict in a sustainability context in a wider for profit industry context. While the articles discussed above point to the benefits of using ambiguous communications in a sustainability context, there are critical voices outside the strategic ambiguity literature raising the issue of false consensus in sustainability communications (von Kutzschenbach and Bronn 2006). Their empirical study, taking a quantitative approach in the context of the Norwegian forest industry, warns against false consensus, where stakeholders believe they are in agreement when in reality they are not, which might at a later stage be unexpectedly revealed and hit back. Instead, they argue, it is important to seek transparency in communications between stakeholders, to achieve long-term stakeholder satisfaction. The study has some possibly significant limitations, for example the survey only includes two stakeholder groups, which are also very distant from each other: forest owners and consumers of paper products, where the forest owners were all Norwegian, and the consumers German. The study does not make any reference to strategic ambiguity, and the question of whether strategic ambiguity may lead to false consensus remains.

The sections above introduced the dilemma of balancing conflicting stakeholder demands and how important it is to find ways to harness conflicts to create long-term satisfaction for all stakeholders. Strategic ambiguity has been suggested in the academic literature as a communications tool to facilitate collaboration between diverse audiences on complex topics, and while there is some valid criticism to the ethicality of strategic ambiguity, the concept is worthwhile to investigate further. It can thus be questioned:

- Can strategic ambiguity work to find common ground among stakeholders with competing interests in a sustainability context?
- How can strategic ambiguity be used without compromising the ethical image of a company?

Adding to the conceptual framework in Table 5.1, the following propositions are therefore made for each of the communications strategies:

Inform strategy: Eisenberg (1984) implies that strategic ambiguity can provide value to an organisation possessing high credibility, as too much information may lead to negative reconsideration of the organisation's character. He labels this rational for strategic ambiguity as 'preserving privileged positions'. In an 'inform' strategy, with the objective of creating legitimacy and a positive image, it can thus be beneficial to formulate communications in a less clear manner to ensure the positive image remains with the stakeholders. In addition, Eisenberg (1984) suggests that clear communications can reduce flexibility in the firm's strategy formulation and implementation, resulting in fixed commitments that can be costly to modify at a later stage, and therefore he posits that strategic ambiguity can offer the organisation a possibility for 'deniability'. It should be warned here that both the option of 'deniability' and 'preserving privileged positions' have an unethical side if used by immoral business leaders with the wrong intentions (Leitch and Davenport 2002).

Related to 'deniability' is the view of using strategic ambiguity for the organisation to 'buy itself time', which is found from qualitative research on a public research funding agency (Leitch and Davenport 2002, p. 138):

"This role was to provide the time and interpretive space for an organisation to develop fully its policies and procedures internally while still clearly signalling to external stakeholders the goals of change and the outcomes that were sought."

In addition, Eisenberg (1984) suggests strategic ambiguity to promote 'unified diversity', which can be applied in the form of vaguely formulated mission statements to allow multiple interpretations from diverse internal and external stakeholders (Eisenberg 1984; Leitch and Davenport 2002). Also this view should prove useful in the 'inform' strategy as it is aimed toward a diverse range of stakeholders.

The format of strategic ambiguity in this communications strategy could be the use of ambiguous wordings in mission statements or sustainability objectives, maybe through the use of keywords that appeal to broad audiences (Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010; Leitch and Davenport 2007; Wexler 2009). It is therefore proposed:

Proposition 6: For the inform communications strategy, the rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to: 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', for the organisation to 'buy itself time', and to 'promote unified diversity'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations.

<u>**Consult strategy:**</u> The primary communications objectives for this category of stakeholders resemble the 'inform' category, with legitimacy seeking and image building, thus it is proposed that the same motivations for the use of strategic ambiguity are also applicable here. The 'consult' strategy actively seeks feedback and advice from its stakeholders; however communications are still highly asymmetric, and the organisation keeps the stakeholders at 'arm's length' even though there are stronger feedback mechanisms (Gregory 2007). For this reason the format of strategic ambiguity will resemble that of the 'inform' strategy, with the use of non-specific words in communications on sustainability objectives. It is therefore proposed that for the consult strategy, the same motivations as for the inform strategy apply for the use of strategic ambiguity.

Proposition 7: For the consult communications strategy, the motivations for the use of strategic ambiguity are to 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', for the organisation to 'buy itself time', and to 'promote unified diversity'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations.

<u>**Involve strategy**</u>: The stakeholders falling into this communications strategy are invited to collaborate with the organisation in order to support the sustainability agenda. The stakeholders can thus enjoy fairly close relationships with the firm (Gregory 2007). In this context, 'unified diversity' will be a key motivator for strategic ambiguity as it is important to get the stakeholders on board to actively support the firm's sustainability strategy. Strategic ambiguity can here offer better opportunities for creativity and initiatives with stakeholders, compared to very specific and clear communications (Leitch and Davenport 2002). Another important motivator for this category is to 'facilitate change', which is suggested in contexts with interpersonal relationships. Ambiguity can here assist in forming and strengthening relationships, and avoiding conflict as a result of too strict or too limited possibilities in respect of the interpretations of a project goal (Eisenberg 1984; Leitch and Davenport 2002). This communications strategy is still slightly asymmetric in the sense that it is primarily expected that the stakeholders should take actions benefiting the firm's agenda (Grunig and Hunt 1984), therefore the motivations of 'preserve privileged positions', 'deniability', and for the organisation to 'buy itself time', might still be applicable in certain relationships.

With regards to the format of strategic ambiguity for this communications strategy, the notion of the need of active engagement by the stakeholders could call for a mixed approach, with ambiguous communications on areas where the goal is not clear to stimulate innovation and initiatives (Davenport and Leitch 2005) and the use of more specific communications in certain relationships where the organisation has a clear specific objective requiring its stakeholder to comply (Leitch and Davenport 2002), for example in relationships with suppliers. Thus it is proposed:

Proposition 8: For the involve communications strategy the motivators for using strategic ambiguity are primarily to 'promote unified diversity' and to 'facilitate

change', but also to some extent to 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', and for the organisation to 'buy itself time'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations, but to use specific communications in certain relationships where there is a clear, specific objective that needs compliance.

Partner strategy: This strategy is characterised by fully symmetric communications, where the firm and its stakeholders communicate on equal terms and where both are prepared to make changes in order to achieve a common goal (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Gregory 2007). Therefore, similar to the 'involve' strategy, it is important to facilitate change through the creation of solid relationships with the stakeholders, and to leave sufficient room for interpretation to stimulate innovation (Eisenberg 1984; Leitch and Davenport 2002). In this context however, it should be less appropriate to 'preserve privileged positions' and to seek possibilities for 'deniability' and to 'buy time', as this category calls for equal terms between participants and transparent communications.

The format of strategic ambiguity for this communications strategy needs to consider the strong aspect of balanced mutual communication. The focal organisation should not specify to its stakeholders what should be achieved but should remain open and flexible. As in the 'involve' strategy, ambiguous communications can help to facilitate change through the stimulation of innovation and initiatives (Davenport and Leitch 2005), while considering the suggestion of Gregory (2007) that the closer relationship, the more tailored the communications are called for. It is however not clear whether these tailored communications should be ambiguous or more specific. Thus it is proposed:

Proposition 9: For the partner communications strategy, the motivators for using strategic ambiguity are primarily to 'promote unified diversity' and to 'facilitate change'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the suggested sustainability objectives for the value chain. For certain very close relationships, a more tailored communications strategy might be required.

5.5 The CS communications framework and its academic contributions

This chapter has presented a conceptual framework for CS communications strategies (see Table 5.1), drawing on insights from theories on stakeholders and their management, corporate communications and strategic ambiguity. The conceptual framework connects the traditional communications theories considering communications as an information transferral process viewed through a mathematical lens (Shannon and Weaver 1962, Schramm 1955), with the contemporary view of communications as a social exchange process. The information strategy for example highly resembles the linear model of communication developed by Schramm (1955), with the firm sending a message that is being decoded by the receiver leading to some form of feedback to the firm. While this approach is still widely practiced, there are contexts where interaction and dialogue are essential factors like in the consult and involve strategies (Grunig and Hunt 1984). Finally the last category – the partner communications strategy - characterised of a fully balanced dialogue where stakeholders as well as the firm might be driving the communications process (Rowley 1997, Roloff 2008, Nevill and Menguc 2006), completes this bridge between the traditional and contemporary views of communications.

It should be noted that while the application of metaphors could be an interesting and important aspect of strategic ambiguity, it is a vast area and could constitute the sole focus of a PhD thesis. Metaphors as a form of strategic ambiguity are therefore not the focus of this study.

The conceptual framework extends existing knowledge and adds to the gap in the academic literature in following ways:

- While stakeholder theory with its normative underpinning promotes stakeholder categorisation based on 'legitimacy', 'power', 'urgency' (Mitchell et al. 1997) and 'proximity' (Driscoll and Starik 2004; Rivera-Camino 2007), theories on stakeholder management generally take an instrumental approach, limiting classification to fewer and sometimes different attributes such as 'business strategy relevance' (Harrison and St John 1996; Aspara and Tikkanen 2008) and 'interest' (Eisenberg 1984; Savage et al. 1991; Gregory 2007). This study attempts to further clarify this haziness, suggesting that a corporation making sustainability claims should not only consider stakeholder power and interest when categorising

stakeholders, but should also address the normative attributes, especially the legitimacy of the stakeholder. The conceptual framework thus takes a novel approach by suggesting that in a sustainability context stakeholder categorisation attributes should not only include the more instrumental aspects (as frequented in the stakeholder management literature) but also the normative aspects of stakeholder theory.

- Based on the PR communications strategy model (Grunig and Hunt 1984), Morsing and Schultz (2006) propose suitable strategies to use in CSR/sustainability communications, and while this opens an interesting avenue there is only limited empirical evidence confirming the suggestions, and in addition the framework lacks insights into the category drivers behind the communications strategies and on how to formulate the communications strategies to the different stakeholder categories. This thesis therefore adds value as it bridges stakeholder categorisation to stakeholder communications strategies and also proposes the application of strategic ambiguity to effectively deliver a consistent message to diverse stakeholders.

- Arguably, Gregory (2007) has already presented a stakeholder communications strategy framework linking stakeholder categorisation attributes (limited however to only power and interest) to communications strategies, but her research has only seen limited empirical confirmation, which was conducted in a specific context, and further was not related to sustainability but to the creation of a brand.

- Finally the CS communications framework introduces the notion of strategic ambiguity in sustainability communications, a concept that has primarily been researched in the context of organisational change and crisis communications (as depicted in Table 5.1 above). This research therefore also adds to this strand of literature by providing empirical evidence on the use of strategic ambiguity in a sustainability context.

The CS communications framework as depicted in Table 5.1 has the potential to add to several strands of the academic literature. The next chapter will discuss in detail the research methodology employed in order to verify, and possibly extend the conceptual framework.

5.6   Summary

This chapter develops a number of propositions, founded on the theories discussed in chapters 2, 3 and 4, and based on this a conceptual framework for CS communications is presented. The framework depicts four communications strategies with details on communications objectives and application of strategic ambiguity for each strategy. In addition the framework illustrates how the attributes for categorising stakeholders is linked to these communications strategies. Further explanations on the links between the research objectives, propositions and the conceptual framework are provided in appendix 1 and 2. Having established a conceptual framework, the next step in the research process is to verify this framework. The following chapter will thus discuss the research methodology applied, from the overall research philosophy to details on data collection and analysis.

6   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1   Introduction

This chapter will discuss and justify the methodological choices made for the research project. The research onion suggested by Saunders et al. (2012), illustrated in Figure 6.1 below, will form the backbone to the structure of this chapter. The research onion depicts very clearly the various steps that need to be considered before actual data collection can take place. The outer layer of this onion represents the overall philosophy of the researcher, the next layer depicts the research approach, followed by the methodological choice regarding a qualitative versus quantitative stance, the research strategies, time horizon, through to the data collection and analysis. Following this un-layering of the onion the discussion will start with the research philosophy.

Figure 6.1: The Research onion (adapted from Saunders et al. 2012 p. 128).
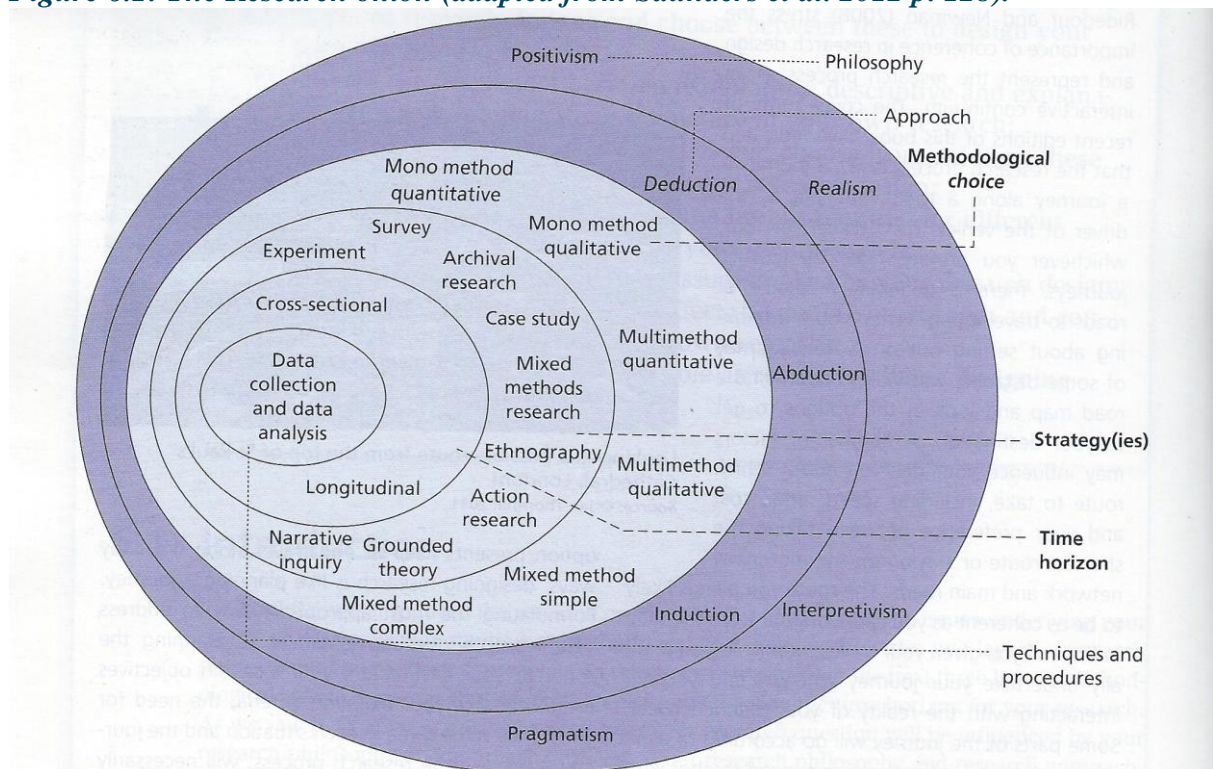
6.2   Research philosophy

This section will discuss the applied ontology and epistemology, which form the base for not only the collection and analyses of data, but also underpin the fundamental approach to the research problem, and the formulation of the research aim and questions. The

philosophy will indicate the researcher's stance on his or her level of objectivity, and how knowledge is generated from that position (Johnson and Clark 2006).

The first step involves understanding one's view of "*the nature of reality*" (Saunders et al. 2012, p. 130) or ontology. Ontology spans from objectivism to constructivism (or subjectivism), where constructivism "*views reality as being socially constructed*" (Saunders et al. 2012, p.132). The epistemological consideration refers to what the researcher considers as acceptable knowledge in the field of research. One key question here is whether the phenomenon being researched is tangible with the possibility to collect measurable data, as in the natural sciences, or whether the phenomenon has more of an intangible character, for example attitudes and feelings, that might be more difficult to measure (Bryman and Bell, 2007). This leads to the question of what stance the researcher takes: the principles of a natural scientist (positivism where phenomenon can be studied objectively with good possibilities for replication), or the contrasting philosophy of interpretivism (which suggests that sense making of social actors and their complex interactions cannot be collected in a perfectly repeatable and non-biased manner (Saunders et al. 2012). Hatch and Yanow (2008) make an analogy between research philosophies and modes of painting, where the epistemology will describe how the painter sees the object. The painter might try to create a photographic image from one point of time, like Rembrandt, or take a contrasting perspective, like the Cubist painters (e.g. Picasso), adding complexity through introducing different dimensions to the same painting, be it perspectives from different angles or the adding of elements of time to a single painting. With this analogy, the Rembrandt painting style can be described as an objectivist-realist ontology derived from a positivist philosophy, as opposed to Picasso's constructivist-interpretive presentation. So, while Rembrandt's positivist philosophy was to objectively observe and re-create a valid impression, Picasso's interpretive position illustrates a more complex picture, where he portrays the object as a continuous evolving situation in which he himself participates. This notion of the painter participating in the painting, or in this case the researcher partaking in her research, is important as the scientist is a multicultural object that will read the world based on his/her background in class, gender, race, culture etc. (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). This researcher's background in engineering through education and early career, would suggest an approach whereby the world is seen as being measurable, with an expectation to objectively observe logical patterns. However, while the researcher thus from previous education has a positivist's mind-set, later work experience including 17 years in the field of marketing and management has provided

exposure to contexts with complex social interactions that are not easily measurable. The PhD journey was therefore embarked upon with an interpretive perspective, acknowledging a research context where reality might change over time, which cannot easily be described by laws.

There are however elements of positivism entangled in this research process, with an interview protocol ensuring that the same questions are asked at all interviews and an attempt to objectively 'collect' data from the respondents. However the reality is very different, where each interview session has a unique setting formed by the chemistry between the interviewer and the interviewee, so that even if the same questions are asked in a neutral, objective tone, the interviewer and respondent co-create the reality of the phenomenon. In addition, even if the questions are asked to get facts, the respondent will either reply according to his/her subjective understanding (which might differ if someone else in the organisation is asked the same question), or what he or she thinks should be the case to put the organisation in a good light. So even if the question is asked from a positivist angle the answer can take an interpretive stance. It should also be noted that the research topic itself, CS communications to stakeholders, is challenging to observe in an objective manner as the respondent might consider the researcher as a stakeholder and thus will communicate the message to that stakeholder group, rather than answering questions around the communications strategy.

This research thus builds primarily on interpretive epistemology with a social constructionist ontology. To make an analogy with Picasso's paintings, in this study where several stakeholders interact with each other and the researcher in an evolving process, it is possible to portray valid interpretive observations, even though from a positivist's perspective they might look distorted (Hatch and Yanow 2008).

On this note Burrell and Morgan's observation suggesting that science (positivist thinking) might not be as objective as it claims, adds an interesting perspective. They claim, for example:

"*Science is based on 'taken for granted' assumptions, and thus, like any other social practice, must be understood within a specific context. Traced to their source, all activities which pose as science can be traced to fundamental assumptions relating to everyday life*

and can in no way be regarded as generating knowledge with an 'objective', value-free status, as is sometimes claimed" (2001, p. 255).

They further explain that what is considered objective in the school of positivism is largely shared knowledge within that community and should perhaps not be named objective knowledge.

6.3   Research approach

Moving on to the next layer of the research onion (as depicted in Figure 6.1), reveals the layer called 'research approach', which describes the relationship between theory building and theory testing. A deductive research approach uses data collection to evaluate propositions or hypotheses, whereas an inductive approach involves data collection to explore a phenomenon resulting in the presentation of hypotheses or a conceptual framework. There is also a third approach, abductive research, in which collected data is used to explore a phenomenon and locate emerging patterns in a conceptual framework, which is subsequently tested (Saunders et al. 2012). For any of these research approaches, it is vital to first read the existing literature on the topic to form a solid foundation of knowledge.

In the early days of this research project, the literature search was focused on CS communications, which appeared to have relatively limited previous research. It was therefore thought that an inductive approach would be the appropriate approach. After a few pilot interviews it was, however, discovered that there is confusion on what sustainability versus CSR means, and that organisations are using these concepts interchangeably. Following this observation, the literature review was expanded to include also the literature on CSR, where some models on communications strategies already existed. Subsequent interviews explored whether these practices from the CSR literature are applicable in a sustainability context. The whole approach therefore moved from theory to interviews, back to theory, and then to new interviews. This approach has been described by Van Maanen et al. (2007, p. 1146), who highlight the importance of interplay between theory and method:

"What seems apparent to those who have carried out organizational research projects is that method can generate and shape theory, just as theory can generate and shape method. There is a back-and-forth character in which concepts, conjectures, and data are in continuous interplay."

During the early stage of the data collection phase, the author discovered the theories of strategic ambiguity, which seemed an interesting angle from which to investigate communications on complex topics like sustainability. Subsequent interviews would look for signs if strategic ambiguity was indeed used in sustainability communications, how it was used and under which circumstances.

Based on existing knowledge from the academic literature, a conceptual framework was developed, underpinned by research on stakeholder theory (Mitchell et al. 1997), corporate communications strategies by Grunig and Hunt (1984), Gregory (2007), and Morsing and Schultz (2006), and combining those theories with the strand of research concerned with strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg 1984; Leitch and Davenport 2002, 2007; Davenport and Leitch 2005; Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010). The conceptual framework was subsequently used as a platform from which these theories could be further explored and developed, thus taking a deductive approach.

An inductive approach would have taken the opposite stance, starting with data collection to develop theory; however as there already existed some theories for communications in this context, it was judged more appropriate to further develop those theories. The deductive approach applied in this project still allowed for flexibility and openness to new insights through the iterative process between theory and data, which is also reflected on by Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 14):

"However, just as deduction entails an element of induction, the inductive process is likely to entail a modicum of deduction".

6.4   Methodological choice

Methodological choice refers to the option of conducting research following one single method (quantitative or qualitative), or several methods that are either qualitative (multimethod qualitative) or quantitative (multimethod quantitative), or mixing both qualitative and quantitative methods (Saunders et al. 2012).

Interpretive research philosophy is often associated with a qualitative research strategy, where the phenomenon is explored through in-depth interviews or focus-group interviews (Denzin and Lincoln 1998), or as expressed by Saunders et al. (2012, p. 171):

"*An exploratory study is a valuable means to ask open questions to discover what is happening and gain insights about a topic of interest. It is particularly useful if you wish to clarify your understanding of a problem, such as if you are unsure of the precise nature of the problem.*"

This view resembles the context for this research project, where the aim is to increase the knowledge on CS communications by exploring how CS communications are applied to diverse stakeholder audiences, thus suggesting a qualitative research strategy. A quantitative approach would not sufficiently answer why and how a certain communications strategy is applied.

One important element of this research was to study motives behind the application of strategic ambiguity, and as the application of this concept might even be seen as controversial, a quantitative survey would not be able to dig beneath the surface of managers' intentions satisfactorily in order to fulfil that part of the research aim, especially as strategic ambiguity has very limited empirical verification outside the context of organisational change.

A qualitative method is therefore suggested to best validate the conceptual framework and to answer the research questions. In order to add more rigor to the research methodology, it was decided to collect qualitative data using more than one data collection method, thus following a multimethod qualitative research design. The methods used were therefore in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method, one focus group and one panel

debate observation. In addition, secondary research was conducted to add further triangulation to the research design. These data collection methods are further discussed below in Section 6.7.5.

6.5 Research strategy

A case study design is suitable when research questions seek to explore in-depth why and how a complex social phenomenon occurs (Yin 2009), or as defined by Schramm (1971, cited in Yin 2009, p. 17):

"The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result."

A case study method allows for exploring the decision making of senior managers or directors to design a CS communications strategy, and by incorporating multiple cases (different companies and stakeholders), it also permits comparison, contrasting, and verification from the stakeholders receiving the communications (Yin 2009).

The preference of a qualitative case study strategy is also evident when studying research methodologies that have been applied by previous researchers on strategic ambiguity, where a qualitative approach is the most frequently chosen strategy, especially taking a case study approach. For example Dickinson-Delaporte et al. (2010) justify their choice of a qualitative single case study methodology on the basis of lack of previous research combined with their aim at achieving a broader understanding of the topic. Another factor pointing towards a case study strategy for this research project is the complexity in attempting to combine stakeholder categorisation with the corresponding communications strategies, and the application of strategic ambiguity. Gregory (2007) calls for more thorough empirical testing of her communications framework, suggesting the inclusion of several organisations. While her study includes one example from one case company, taking a multiple case-study approach would offer a more robust validation of her suggested communications strategies.

There are however plenty of critical voices regarding case study research strategy and some of the key arguments are: (1) The risk of an unstructured and biased approach, (2) provides limited chances for generalization, (3) the time consuming element, which also might result in very complex data to analyse (Yin 2009).

As will be described later in this chapter, this research has followed a structured approach, conducting semi-structured interviews following an interview protocol, and while introduction of bias cannot be completely avoided, being aware of this as a weakness and therefore taking precautionary actions will limit the negative effects of this. Secondly, the criticism of a case study research strategy as not providing a base for generalization, is here addressed through the conduction of interviews across multiple cases, and in addition stakeholder interviews, which allow for cross-case analysis. A case study design, taking into consideration not only a broad range of companies but also a number of other key stakeholders in the food and drink value chain offers a more solid and broader view of a subject (Miles and Huberman 1994).

6.6   Time horizon

Due to the time constraints characterising a PhD study, this research is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, meaning that it studies the phenomenon during a brief period of time. The findings will thus represent a 'snapshot' time horizon (Saunders et al. 2012).

6.7   Data collection strategy

This section will address the data collection strategies, explaining and justifying in detail the employed methods. However before the data collection methods are discussed in detail, the research context will be briefly reviewed together with a clarification of the strategy for selecting the case companies and respondents within those companies.

6.7.1   Research context

The context for the research is the Western European food and drink value chain, with a focus on the food and drink manufacturers and retailers. The selected case companies

consisted of six retailers and seven food and drinks manufacturers/brand owners. In addition seven key stakeholders were interviewed, thus providing a rich set of data from a total of 20 organisations. While many of these case companies are multinational organisations, the focus of the interviews has been on Western European business practices. Some of the smaller case companies only operate in the UK, so the geographical context for the research can be said to take a Western European wide perspective but with a UK focus.

6.7.2 Defining the unit of analysis

It is suggested that the unit of analysis should be distinct with clear boundaries to the case study context (Yin 2009). In this research, each organisation was seen as one individual case, and therefore each interviewed organisation can be seen as a unit of analysis, which has a clear boundary. Thus, each retailer and food/drink manufacturer was seen as an individual case.

In the early data collection phase, the trade organisations for food/drink manufacturers and retailers were interviewed. These interviews provided both an indication of companies who, according to the respective trade organisations, take a significant interest in sustainability issues and consequently have implemented communications strategies around these issues and provided introductions to relevant people in the suggested companies. Each trade organisation has been analysed as an individual unit of analysis, and have been considered as stakeholders to the industry. Furthermore, as the interviews progressed it became evident that some additional stakeholders play important roles in this value chain and consequently it was decided to also interview a few of these. The food and drink value chain and its key stakeholders are illustrated in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2: The food and drink value chain and some key stakeholders.
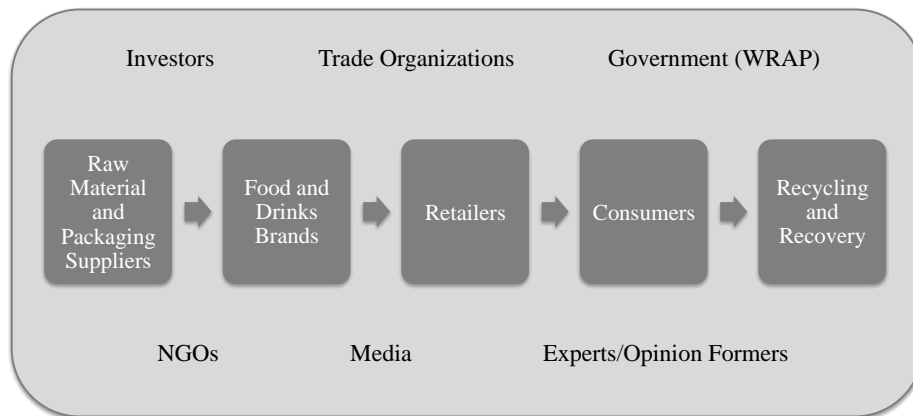
It was thus decided that the scope for the research would include food/drinks manufacturers and retailers, and seven key stakeholders including a food/drinks trade organisation, a retailing trade organisation, a European trade organisation for retailers, the government (in the form of WRAP[1]), one opinion former/expert in this area, a food/drink industry consultant, and finally a trade organisation of the packaging industry. Although other stakeholders also have important roles in this value chain it was decided, in order to avoid too much complexity, to exclude interviews with stakeholders such as media, NGOs, and investors. Likewise, consumers play an important role; but the scope here will only explore how retailers and food/drink manufacturers communicate to various stakeholders, including consumers, but not how communications are perceived by consumers.

The following section will discuss more into detail the selection of the individual units of analysis.

6.7.3 Selection of companies

The sample selection technique applied in this research project is non-probability sampling, as the data collection includes in-depth interviews with one or more senior manager/directors of an organisation with an implemented communications strategy on sustainability (Saunders et al. 2012).

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[1] WRAP, Waste and Resource Action Programme, is a non-profit company funded by the English, Scottish, Welsh Governments, Northern Ireland Executive, and the European Union, with the aim of "*minimising resource use and diverting priority materials from landfill*" (www.wrap.org.uk/content/our-goals).

Non-probability sampling covers a wide range of various techniques, and the specific techniques within non-probability sampling that was followed was convenience sampling combined with snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is defined by Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 197) as "*one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility*", and in contrast snowballing sampling, which is also a non-probability sampling technique, "*the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others*" (Bryman and Bell 2007, p. 200).

Initially, the researcher contacted organisations within the food and drink value chain where the researcher already had some established contacts, and in addition the researcher also cold-called organisations within this industry sector to find senior managers that would be available and interested in participating in an interview (convenience sampling). Subsequently when interviews with these contacts were carried out, the researcher asked for introductions to the respondents' contacts within the value chain (snowball sampling). In total, nine of the cases were sampled through own contacts (convenience sampling), whereas the remaining 11 cases were sampled through the respondents (snowball samples).

The organisations interviewed were split between retailers (six cases), brand owners (seven cases) and stakeholders (seven cases). The selection was made to ensure this range included a wide range of company sizes both for retailers as for brand owners (see Table 6.1).

In addition to the companies listed in the Table 6.1, three types of stakeholders were interviewed: trade organisations, the government, and also opinion formers/experts in the area, as depicted in Table 6.2.

Table 6.1: Sampled food/drink brand owners and retailers case companies

Company	Number of Employees	Turnover (million £)	Value chain position	Number of interviews	Interview Position(s) (F2F= Face to face meeting; P = phone interview)
Nestlé	330,000	56,400	Brand owner	1	Packaging environmental sustainability expert (P)
Unilever	171,000	37,900	Brand	2	Chairman packaging and

			owner		environment group (F2F); Company buyer margarine packaging (F2F)
Ahold	218,000	24,700	Retailer	1	Vice president corporate responsibility (P)
Morrisons	131,000	17,700	Retailer	1	Packaging development manager (P)
M&S	78,000	9,900	Retailer	1	Head of climate change (P)
Coca Cola Enterprises	13,200	5,100	Brand owner	2 + focus group + panel debate observation	Head of stakeholder engagement and CR (F2F); recycling manager UK (P); Focus group: public affairs and communications focus group; Panel debate: CEO and head of corporate responsibility and sustainability, and a number of stakeholders.
Eurostar	803	1,500	Retailer	2	Chairman (F2F); General manager energy and environment (F2F)
Apetito	8,723	562	Brand owner	1	Health, safety and sustainability manager (F2F)
Adnams	408	55	Brand owner	1	CEO (P)
Abel & Cole	380	36	Retailer	1	Project manager (F2F)
Suma Wholefoods	150	N/A	Retailer	1	Project manager (P)
Rude Health	8	N/A	Brand owner	1	Founder/marketing director (F2F)
Rare Tea Company	4	N/A	Brand owner	1	Founder (F2F)

Table 6.2: Sampled stakeholders

Organisation	Type of stakeholder	Number of interviews	Interviewee position (F2F= Face to face meeting; P = phone interview)
Food and Drink Federation	Trade organisation for UK food and drinks manufacturers	2	Director of communications (F2F); Environment policy manager (F2F)
British Retail Consortium	Trade organisation for UK retailers	1	Head of environment and chair of communications working group at product sustainability forum (P)
The Packaging Federation	Trade organisation for the UK packaging industry	2	CEO (F2F); and Director (F2F)
WRAP	Non-profit organisation for reducing waste and resources	1	Head of food and drinks programme (P)
European Retailer Roundtable	Trade organisation for European retailers	1	European affairs manager (P)
Julia Hailes	Opinion former/expert, independent consultant	1	Opinion former/expert (P)
Independent food industry consultant	Food industry consultant focussing primarily on SMEs	1	Food industry consultant (F2F)

The trade organisations interviewed were the Packaging Federation, which serves to represent packaging manufacturers supplying the food and drinks industry, the Food and Drinks Federation (FDF) representing a united voice for a wide range of food and drinks manufacturers in the UK, the British Retail Consortium (BRC) which is the retailers' united voice, and finally the European Retailer Round Table (ERRT) serving to represent retailers across Europe. WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme) represents the voice of the government, as this is a not-for-profit organisation financed by the government with the aim of driving change towards less waste and more efficient use of resources in the UK food and drink value chain.

In addition, an expert and opinion former, Julia Hailes, was selected, both in the role of public opinion former, and also as she played an important role as a consultant for M&S for developing their sustainability strategy (justification for naming this respondent is explained in section 6.10). Finally an independent food and drink industry consultant was selected as an expert/consultant to small and medium sized food and drinks manufacturers.

Seeking information from all key stakeholders was considered at the onset of the research; however it was judged that while additional perspectives from further stakeholder organisations would be interesting the time spent to accomplish this would be more useful on the food/drinks manufacturers and retailers in order to focus on the depth rather than the breadth. Or as expressed by Liedtka (1992, p. 167): "*Regardless of how many samples is obtained, some trade-off between breadth and depth is unavoidable for the qualitative researcher.*"

The samples as discussed above represent companies ranging from those who market and sell their products nationally in the UK only, to those that market their products globally. Some of these organisations have their headquarters outside the UK, but still within the European Union (Nestlé, Ahold and European Retail Roundtable). While it was suggested (in interviews with European Retail Roundtable and British Retail Consortium) that many of the sustainability objectives are pan-European, there are some differences in recycling and recovery practices within the European Union, and also slightly different messages to consumers. However, while the content of messages might vary slightly to consumers between the European countries, it was also suggested (Ahold, M&S, Unilever, Coca Cola Enterprise) that corporate communications strategies within these organisations are harmonized to achieve a consistent image of the organisations across Europe. This research is furthermore not focussed on the message content, but on the overall communications strategies. It should also be stressed that the selection of the companies does not include an assessment as to how sustainable the organisations are, but that the criteria for selecting case companies was evidence of a communications strategy on sustainability.

An alternative approach would have been to select case companies with successful CS communications, as this would have generated an indication on how to build effective communications on sustainability. However, the challenge with such an approach is how to assess what successful communications are. Would it mean a company that is perceived as

being pro-active in sustainability initiatives, as that would then indicate that their communications have been successful? Or, should the case companies be selected according to their ranking in sustainability indices, like FTSE4Good? There are, however, critical voices around these indices, accusing them of not portraying a true picture of companies with genuine sustainability objectives, as expressed by Dr Craig Mackenzie, acting chairman of the FTSE4Good Policy Committee in an interview by Cooper:

"*......the sustainability indexes 'rely very, very heavily on what companies say they're doing'*" (www.just-food.com, 2010).

One could still argue that a company scoring highly, for example in FTSE4Good, could be considered as successful in communicating its sustainability strategy and performance, even if there is not a genuine commitment beneath the communications. Equally one could question how it is possible to select companies with a genuine sustainability agenda.

Because of these challenges, the selection process in this study attempts to take a broader stance, also including smaller organisations that are not listed in rankings such as FTSE4Good. The aim is thus to portray a wider picture of CS communications involving both organisations included in sustainability indexes and smaller organisations that position themselves as sustainable.

6.7.4   Selection of interview respondents in the case companies

Within the case companies, senior managers/directors directly involved in formulating the organisation's communications strategy were approached. There are some variations between the case companies in terms of which function holds responsibility for communications on sustainability, but in general it is either the CEO or the communications/marketing director or the sustainability director who is in charge of developing the communications strategies, and often the communications strategies are developed in collaboration between these functions. Hence, for each case company the interviews were conducted with one of the functions mentioned above, and in some cases the researcher had the opportunity to interview more than one function within an organisation, thus providing extra insight. In a couple of cases the interviewer was referred to other functions within the organisation as either the sustainability or communications

director was not available for an interview, or because they felt another function would be more suitable to answer the questions.

As a reflection here, the sample selection may seem inconsistent in the sense that it was somewhat different functions participating as respondents across the case companies. It was however not the function per say that was targeted but explicitly the researcher sought to interview employees with similar responsibility in regards to CS communications.

The decision to interview only one or two individuals per company was taken as it allowed a larger number of organisations to be included in the study. A limitation to this approach is that the respondent's view of the organisation might coincide with the corporation's official view, but might also reflect the respondent's own view, which may or may not provide a true picture of a case company (Bryman and Bell 2007).

In total 20 cases were included in this study, and, as in some cases more than one interview was carried out, a total of 25 interviews were conducted. In addition, for one case company – Coca Cola Enterprises - one focus group interview and one panel debate observation were added to the data collection. This number of interviews was considered as sufficient to fulfil the research aim within the time frame for this project. It was felt that 'data saturation' was reached towards the later interviews, as the amount of new information decreased significantly. The sample size also meets the suggested minimum of 5–25 for semi-structured interviews (Saunders et al. 2012).

Regarding the sampling techniques, there are some raised concerns regarding snowball sampling, or as Saunders et al. 2012, p. 289) suggest:

"*For such samples the problems of bias are huge, as respondents are most likely to identify other potential respondents who are similar to themselves, resulting in a homogeneous sample*" (Lee 1993, cited in Saunders et al.).

In this study, however, about half of the samples were convenience sampling, where the respondents did not know each other, thus there is, despite the use of snowball sampling, a number of non-connected samples included. In addition, as the study is striving to understand communications strategies to a number of stakeholders, the snowball samples

offered an additional opportunity to verify how communications are perceived from the receiver.

Likewise, there are critical voices to convenience sampling, suggesting bias as a significant problem (Saunders et al. 2012), and the risk that such a sample is not representative as: "*They are simply a group of managers who are available to the researcher*" (Bryman and Bell 2007, p. 198). However in this case, the respondents were not just selected because they were senior managers within the researcher's professional network, but they were specifically selected because they were senior managers within the food and drink value chain with a direct involvement in the formulation of sustainability communications strategies. Saunders et al. (2012) support this view as they suggest that when a convenient sample also is representative as a typical case it can be well justified. Or, as is expressed in Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 198): "*Certainly, in the field of business and management, convenience samples are very common and indeed are more prominent than are samples based on probability sampling*". The issues of bias, reliability and validity noted here will be further discussed in depth in Section 6.7.5 below.

6.7.5   Methods for collecting data

The main data collection method in this study was semi-structured in-depth interviews. However, additional sources for information include the use of documentation, one focus group, and the observation of a panel debate. The sections below will discuss and justify the choices of these data collection methods.

6.7.5.1   *Rationale for semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews are suggested when the research is exploratory and requires a deeper understanding on not only what but why (Liedtka 1992). Further contexts where semi-structured interviews are recommended include situations when it is important to establish the trust and interest of the interviewee to get honest and deep (high quality) responses, when questions are open-ended and might need to be varied depending on the case, and when more time is required to address all research questions (Saunders et al. 2012).

It was thought that semi-structure interviews would be more efficient compared to totally unstructured interviews, in order to ensure that the specific issues as formulated in the research questions and the conceptual framework would be covered, and to ensure cross-case comparability (Bryman and Bell 2007).

Saunders et al. (2012) point out a number of quality challenges in semi-structured interviews, which if not considered can affect reliability, bias, generalizability and validity of the results. Below, each of these issues will be discussed with a note on actions taken to enhance the methodological rigor:

Reliability is defined as:

" ...the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions" (Hammersley 1992, p. 67).

Exploratory research trying to make sense of a complex phenomenon requires the flexibility of the researcher to, if needed, venture beyond an interview protocol to investigate new avenues of thought that might be brought up in an interview (Saunders et al. 2012). Critical voices will argue that this will counteract the establishment of data that is "*....stable, objective, and measureable in some way*" (Liedtka 1992, p. 172). However, according to some scholars, that would be a very positivistic view of the world, and not in line with an interpretive research philosophy:

"Positivist notions of reliability assume an underlying universe where inquiry could, quite logically, be replicated. This assumption of an unchanging social world is in direct contrast to the qualitative/interpretive assumption that the social world is always changing and the concept of replication is itself problematic" (Marshall and Rossman 1989, p. 147).

Therefore it seems it is important to balance flexibility to allow unexpected insights into the phenomenon, while at the same time taking precautions to create as much stability, objectivity and measurability as possible. In this study, actions to improve reliability include the use of an interview protocol, ensuring that the same standard questions were covered at each interview, and that the vast majority of the interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow maximum objectivity. In the cases where the respondent did not agree

to recording the conversation, careful notes were taken and completed as soon as possible after the interview.

Some of the interviews were conducted over the phone (as indicated in tables 6.1 and 6.2), as it was not practical to conduct a meeting face to face, due to distance and time constraints. Saunders et al. (2012) warn that there is a risk for reduced reliability, as a phone interview might not give the chance to establish rapport with the respondent and thus may not gain as deep insight. In addition they mention limitations in recording conversations, controlling the length of the interview, and studying non-verbal behaviour. In the majority of interviews conducted over phone, the researcher had already met the respondent at a previous occasion and introduced the topic, thus rapport was already established. For those interviews where a previous meeting had not taken place, the researcher had been introduced to the respondent (snowball sampling) by an industry colleague of the respondent allowing some degree of rapport already before the phone meeting took place. With regards to time limitation, the durations of the majority of phone interviews were, in general, slightly shorter compared to the face-to-face meetings, however all questions from the protocol were covered and the main difference was a limitation of small talk that took place towards the end of the face-to-face interviews. It should also be noted that all the phone interviews were recorded and transcribed, which not only enables telephone interviewing to provide convenience as has been the main advantage suggested in the past, but importantly the textual transcripts from conversations over the phone provide a rich source for qualitative data analysis (Cachia and Millward 2011).

On another note, the somewhat different positions of the respondents (CEOs, corporate communications directors, sustainability directors) can be a source for reliability issues. The researcher attempted to approach those positions with similar responsibilities with regards to sustainability communications and was surprised to find that there appears to be inconsistencies between companies on where this responsibility lies. This insight suggests that there is still limited knowledge on where the responsibility of CS communications ideally should be placed in an organisation. Thus while the respondents possess similar responsibilities, this notion might introduce some limitations to reliability.

Validity and generalisability

"Validity refers to the extent to which the researcher has gained access to a participant's knowledge and experience, and is able to infer meanings that the participant intends from the language used by that person" (Saunders et al. 2012, p. 382).

It is suggested that (internal) validity is relatively high in qualitative interviews, as long as the sampling validity is accurate (Liedtka 1992, p. 172):

"Validity is least problematic, for the most part. Interview research, especially with an interpretive orientation, is uniquely positioned to ensure both semantical and construct validity, both of which are enhanced by research that focuses on understanding, in depth, the particular."

The strength of an interview is that it gives the possibility to re-phrase a question or for the interviewer to ensure that the respondent understood the question properly. External validity, or generalisability, is however more uncertain in qualitative interviews. It is for example argued that in case study research, especially if it is a single case, the external validity or generalisability is questionable (Saunders et al. 2012). An argument against this is that the aim of qualitative research is to create "*rich accounts of the details of a culture*" (Bryman and Bell 2007, p. 413). The aim is thus primarily to produce rich understandings of a complex problem, and not in the first instance to create findings that can be replicated outside the research context, and on this note the researcher does not claim that the findings of this study can be generalised beyond the food and drink value chain, or beyond Western Europe.

Bias:

Qualitative research can introduce different types of bias. Interviewer bias means that the behaviour and appearance of the interviewer will negatively impact validity and reliability. Interviewee bias, is also possible, when the respondents might not always share the truth, but want to portray a positive image of themselves or of the firm, or because the respondent has created (positive or negative) perceptions of the interviewer (Watson 2011). Finally participation bias means that there might be a certain type of respondent and/or organisation that accepts taking part in an interview on communications on

sustainability, and that these respondents might not therefore be a representative sample (Saunders et al. 2012).

Another form of bias is raised by Denzin and Lincoln:

"*Close rapport with respondents opens doors to more informed research, but it may also create problems as the researcher may become a spokesperson for the group studied, losing his or hers distance and objectivity, or may 'go native' and become a member of the group and forgo the academic role*" (1998, p. 60).

During the interview process, some of these challenges were noted by the researcher. For example it was sometimes obvious that the respondents wanted to communicate a message rather than answer the questions. They would consider the researcher as a stakeholder, so the researcher would rather receive the message intended for the specific stakeholder group the researcher was thought to belong to, rather than the rationale behind the response. This experience would however highlight how the company communicates about sustainability, so it would provide a partial answer to the questions.

Some respondents would be happy to respond clearly to each question asked, whereas others were keener to tell their story, which might not fully match the interview protocol. Both these reactions however added to the research, as sometimes those respondents who deviated from the protocol themes would bring in new valuable insights.
A major challenge was also the limited time with each respondent and in some instances there was not sufficient time to ask all questions on the protocol.

With regards to the potential problems of bias, these were addressed following advice from Saunders et al. (2012):

- The researcher followed a protocol on how to introduce herself and the topic to the respondents (see appendix 3), and made a conscious effort to keep a neutral and objective tone during the course of the interview, and avoided leading questions. In interviews however, each session is unique and its success depends on the chemistry between the interviewer and respondent. Some respondents might be reluctant to share certain information, and in those instances, in order to establish

good rapport with the respondent, it was judged necessary to also share some emerging thoughts with the respondents, and to show enthusiasm and interest to the respondents' statements.

- A list of standard questions was sent to the respondents prior to the interview (see appendix 4). However, as the research was explorative, the process was iterative, allowing new ideas to develop as interviews progressed and consequently new questions emerged that were asked in subsequent interviews.

- The researcher followed a formal, professional dress code for all interviews.

- The majority of interviews were recorded and transcribed.

- A conscious effort was made to ensure equal weighting for all respondents when analysing the data.

- All respondents were selected to ensure as similar seniority and expertise as possible in the field of sustainability communications to further strengthen the comparability of cases.

6.7.5.2   Rationale for focus group

The strength of using focus groups in qualitative research is that they can assist in identifying important criteria (Kannan et al. 2011), and are a useful form of triangulation (Jankowicz 2000). As the empirical test of the conceptual framework included the identification of stakeholder categorisation criteria, and also to establish criteria for the application of strategic ambiguity in CS communications, a focus group was seen as a valuable data collection method. One could thus argue that focus group methodology should have been the primary method in this study. However, a focus group methodology should be repeated with similar participants (Saunders et al. 2012), and as the respondents in this study are all senior directors with busy calendars, it was seen as too complicated and time consuming to arrange meetings with several participants. A focus group session was however conducted for one of the case companies, Coca Cola Enterprises. The event was initiated by Coca Cola Enterprises, as the researcher was invited to present preliminary findings. The researcher took this opportunity to test the initial findings to get feedback. The focus group consisted of the public affairs and communications team (ten participants in total, including the head of stakeholder engagement and corporate responsibility, whom the researcher had interviewed previously). The focus group was thus homogeneous and

relevant in the terms that they all belonged to the same department of the case company, and importantly this is the department responsible for sustainability communications at Coca Cola Enterprises. The event also took place on their initiative and they were thus very willing to discuss and give feedback on the preliminary findings. The meeting took place at Coca Cola Enterprises' headquarters in Uxbridge and lasted 1 hour. The researcher presented examples on categorisation criteria for stakeholder involvement, communications strategies, and strategic ambiguity, and these examples were then commented on and discussed by the focus group. The discussion supported some of the criteria, added new criteria and raised challenges for some criteria.

Limitations to this event of data collection include that the event was not recorded. The researcher took notes however and wrote up the report within 2 hours of having finished the meeting.

6.7.5.3   *Rationale for observation of a panel debate*

The researcher was invited to observe a webcast panel debate by Coca Cola Enterprises. The researcher took the role as a 'complete observer', meaning that the observer did not participate in the discussions and was not even seen by the participants. The panel discussion was entitled "Collaboration through the value chain – creating a low-carbon future." This event was conducted as part of stakeholder engagement in order to consult stakeholders on Coca Cola Enterprises' newly launched sustainability plan. The event, which lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes, was chaired by Catherine Cameron, Senior Associate of the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership. Other participants included (please see section 6.10 for justification for revealing of names):

- Chairman and CEO, Coca-Cola Enterprises: John Brock

- Head of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability, Coca-Cola Enterprises: Joe Franses

- Head of Sustainable Business, Marks & Spencer: Mike Barry

- Vice President of Research & Development, Smurfit Kappa: Arco Berkenbosch

- Group Environment Director, Tenens Environmental: Catherine Crouch

- CEO, The Carbon Trust: Tom Delay

The observation, as a method, was further not a classical structured observation attempting to quantify behaviour (Saunders et al. 2012), but was rather used as a source to provide examples on how communications take place to external expert stakeholders and also how these external stakeholders respond to the communications. The main limitation of this method is the "*risk of imposing a potentially inappropriate or irrelevant framework on the setting being observed*" (Bryman and Bell 2007, p. 297), and this is especially risky for a context the observer is not familiar with. However, in this case the observation took place after the two Coca Cola Enterprises interviews, and thus the observer had already gained insight about the context, so the event rather offered an additional angle to the interviews.

Further, the event didn't allow the observer to guide the discussions or to ensure that certain topics were covered. In addition it was a singular event not covering all case companies. Nevertheless, it provided an excellent opportunity to see and listen to the key senior directors of Coca Cola Enterprises and to study how they communicate on sustainability with senior directors of other organisations, and offered another form of triangulation. It was particularly interesting that M&S was represented on the panel debate, as M&S is also one of the case companies in the study.

The panel debate was recorded, transcribed and analysed using the same codes as for the interviews.

6.7.5.4 *Rationale for Secondary research*

A range of documentations were analysed as an additional source of data evidence. This involved primarily the case companies' external communications in the form of sustainability reports, annual reports, and their communications on sustainability on their respective websites. A number of previous research papers have highlighted the importance of a firm's website as a vehicle to communicate its sustainability initiatives to its stakeholders (Insch 2008; Esrock and Lechty 1998; Pollach 2005; Maignan and Ralston 2002; Cooper 2003).

These documents were studied following a content analysis approach, searching for certain themes according to the conceptual framework, and more specifically as outlined in table 6.3. While content analysis often takes a quantitative stance, there is a relevant example of qualitative content analysis in the context of sustainability communication by Insch (2008), who in addition to mapping quantitative issues also investigates how companies describe their attitudes to environmental responsibilities.

Dowling argues that internal statements of intent are a good source of information regarding those who are considered as key stakeholders: "*A good way to understand which stakeholders are most important is to examine the organization's internal statements of intent and measures of control*" (2004, p. 24). He explains that most companies will have one, or several, of these documents, which go under names like 'Credo', 'code of conduct', 'code of business ethics', or 'corporate brand value proposition', or it is visible in the strategic plan or the 'Mission' or 'Vision'. This notion was considered as well as sections named 'About us' to get an understanding on the values of the firm, the 'responsibilities' or 'CSR' or 'Sustainability' or 'Ethics'.

Furthermore, communications on sustainability strategy and performance were studied to explore possible signs of the application of strategic ambiguity. Web information can of course be biased, as this is a type of communications crafted to show the organisation in a good light. The objective was however not to judge whether the information was true or not, but rather to study the firms' communications to compare and contrast with the findings from the interviews. It is interesting to note that while there are several web content analysis studies on CSR/sustainability communications (Insch 2008; Esrock and Lechty 1998; Pollach 2005; Maignan and Ralston 2002; Cooper 2003; Walker et al. 2010), most of these studies take primarily a quantitative approach and use the web content as a single method. In contrast, this research project uses this kind of documentation as a means of triangulation.

Content analyses are frequently performed by two or more researchers to measure level of agreement and thereby allowing for improved reliability. In this case, however, taking a qualitative content analysis approach, there were no attempts to measure for example prominence of sustainability communication on the websites or to analyse the meaning of the communications, but rather to explore how companies describe for example their

definition of sustainability and key stakeholders. Therefore the limitation of only one researcher is not so significant. The research could however benefitted from a complementary quantitative content analysis identifying, quantifying, and evaluating key words, evidence for efforts to create two-way communications etc., but as the web and reports content analyses were here considered as a method of triangulation and the prime focus was on the interviews, time constraints didn't allow for this more rigorous approach.

6.7.6   Triangulation

Triangulation, which Saunders et al. refer to as *"the use of different data collection techniques within one study in order to ensure that the date are telling you what you think they are telling you"* (2012, p. 179), is suggested as a method to improve the validity and reliability of a research method (Bryman and Bell 2007), and that this is especially important in case study design (Saunders et a; 2012). Triangulation could include using different methods, different sources of data and different people (Denzin 1970). In this study, triangulation was applied in three ways, firstly through using different methods: semi-structured interviews, secondary research, one focus group, and one panel debate observation; secondly through interviewing multiple organisations; and thirdly as not only the food/drink manufacturers and retailers were interviewed but also comments were cross checked with some of their respective stakeholders. The sampling of both the communicators and those receiving the communications (stakeholders) provides some degree of triangulation. *"The process of triangulation involves corroborating data from multiple perspectives to enhance the depth of understanding of a particular theme and to provide verification"* (Stavros and Westberg 2009, p. 307).

6.7.7   Design of the interview protocol

The interview protocol was developed with careful attention to the conceptual framework. A number of open-ended questions/themes were developed and listed on the protocol (see appendix 5). A shortened version of this protocol (see appendix 4) was sent to the respondents at least 48 hours before the interview, to allow the respondents time to reflect on the questions in advance, which *"may help to promote validity and reliability because it informs the interviewee about the information you are interested in and provides them with the opportunity to prepare for the interview"* (Saunders et al. 2012, p. 385).

The introductory questions were broad, and related to an overall opinion on the definition of sustainability, and the sustainability strategy of the organisation. This allowed the researcher both to get an insight into how the organisations define sustainability, but also to ensure mutual understanding between interviewer and interviewee on the context of the discussion that followed. These subsequent questions followed certain key themes related to the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 5:

o   Categorisation attributes for key stakeholders;

o   Communications strategies to the different stakeholder categories;

o   The format of communications, in the sense of being specific or general/vague;

o   The rationale for not using precise or specific communications.

As the data collection progressed, and knowledge was accumulated, the questions were slightly modified, removed or new questions added in this iterative explorative process, applying a close link between theory and method.

One of the research questions explored the use of ambiguous communications around sustainability, and after a few interviews it became apparent that the word 'ambiguous' had very negative associations among respondents. Many respondents instantly denied the use of ambiguous communications, as they seemed to associate ambiguous with 'false'. Even when the researcher stressed that strategic ambiguity was not about using false claims but phrasing words more generally to allow for multiple understandings, some respondents remained sceptical. Therefore in the subsequent interviews the researcher avoided using the word 'ambiguous' but rather asked whether communications would be specific or more general. This wording invited much more elaboration and positive response from the respondents. In the focus group however, the word ambiguous was used as this setting was seen as a session to test the initial findings. In some of the later interviews, the word ambiguous was used towards the end of the interview when the question had been already asked as to whether the communications were specific or general.

6.7.8   Data collection execution details

A couple of exploratory pilot interviews took place in September 2010 to get an initial understanding of the context for the research. These initial interviews also led to the modification of research context from focusing on the packaging industry to a focus on the food and drink brand owners and the retailers. The main data collection phase started in June 2011 and finished in March 2012. The majority of interviews took place in the UK, in the offices of the respondents. A few interviews with UK participants were conducted over the phone as it was not practical to meet face to face (British Retail Consortium, Adnams, WRAP, Suma, M&S, Morrisons). For the overseas organisations, the interviews were also conducted over the phone for practical reasons (Nestlé, Ahold and European Retail Roundtable). The researcher had, however, in all those cases previously met the respondents in person. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 3 hours. The focus group took place after the main data collection had been completed, in April 2012.

The interviews were always initiated by a brief introduction of the researcher's academic and industrial background to establish credibility (Saunders et al. 2012), followed by an overview of the research aim to provide clarification. Assurance regarding anonymity was given to gain the respondent's confidence. The conversation would then be steered by the researcher towards opening the intended discussion.

The majority of interviews were recorded and then transcribed with verbatim transcription to also capture some non-verbal communications. During the interviews that were recorded, only a few notes were taken. In contrast, for the interviews where the respondents did not agree to the conversation being recorded, extensive note taking was done and a report was written directly after the interviews, while the conversation was still fresh in the interviewer's mind.

6.8   Data analysis

This section will discuss how the collected data was analysed, including coding decisions, case study analyses, and the meta-analysis. The section will also explain the precautions taken to ensure an overall high quality analysis.

6.8.1 Methods of analysis

The first step in the analysis was to condense the vast amount of data derived from the qualitative interviews (Saunders et al. 2012). This was done by creating case studies for each sampled company. At this initial step, each interviewed company was analysed separately, and where more than one interview had been conducted in one organisation, all these interviews were compiled into one company case study analysis. The case study analysis was structured according to themes or codes related to the research questions and the conceptual framework (for details about the coding see next section 6.8.2, and appendix 9). The transcripts were studied, reading row by row (coding according to table 6.3, see also appendix 10 as an example) and noting down relevant material into the case study text. Subsequently, secondary data about the company was analysed using information from the website and from other publications like the Annual Report and the Sustainability Report. This content analysis was conducted for the websites and annual/sustainability reports, using the coding presented in table 6.3. For example, the definition of sustainability and the mention of key stakeholders was observed, and where available an explanation for why they were considered the key stakeholders. The web content was researched during the period of June – October 2012. The most recent published annual reports were studied, which were the 2011 reports in all cases apart from M&S who published the 2012 annual report on their website. For the CSR/Sustainability reports, however, the strategy was to study both the most recent version, which varied between the case companies from 2010 to 2012, and in addition (if available) earlier CSR/Sustainability reports to explore the evolution of sustainability terminology and also to shed some light on the application of strategic ambiguity versus capability, whether strategic ambiguity is applied when the firm's sustainability capability is low, or rather as the capability has evolved. This collected information was summarised and added to the case company analysis to complement the primary data.

While the study took a deductive approach, based on the conceptual framework, there were also inductive elements in the analysis. This is suggested as normal in qualitative research (Saunders et al. 2012, p. 549):

"Consequently, while you may commence with either an inductive or deductive approach, in practice your research is likely to combine elements of both."

For example, the data was initially categorized into codes according to the research questions and conceptual framework, thus primarily concept driven (Saunders et al. 2012). However during the data collection some new patterns emerged, which were subsequently added as new themes. For example the concept of 'branded sustainability programmes' was not known by the researcher at the onset of the data collection.

The case study analysis of each individual firm commenced during the data collection phase and was completed in October 2012. While it would have been more effective to analyse each case before progressing to the next case interview (Saunders et al. 2012), this was not always possible. The process of identifying relevant firms and respondents within these firms, and finding suitable dates for meetings was quite lengthy, given that the respondents were senior directors with busy calendars. This was further challenged by the researcher's work commitment as a full time teaching fellow. Therefore, in some weeks several interviews took place, not allowing time to analyse each case before the next interview had to take place.

After the case analyses had been completed, the next step was to compare and contrast the findings between the case companies. Yin (2009) recommends 'pattern matching' as a particularly suitable technique for analysing case studies. Pattern matching involves comparing empirical patterns with a predicted one, which in this case means comparing empirical outcomes with the conceptual framework. In this study, pattern matching was performed through the process of a meta-analysis. A meta-analysis, or 'cross-case synthesis' (Yin 2009) is especially relevant when there are more than two cases. This can be done practically by creating spreadsheets, adding relevant data from the various cases into a grid for easy cross case comparison. Excel spreadsheets were thus created (see appendix 12), to which key factors were identified and added according to the coding structure (described in the next section, see table 6.4 and appendix 11 as an example). This approach is called a matrix data display and is suggested as a helpful tool in recognizing relationships and patterns, and to verify conclusions (Miles and Huberman 1994). However as an excel spread sheet will not easily display all rich data from the interviews, the case company analyses were also re-consulted and compared by spreading them out over the floor. The excel sheets would thus serve as a starting point for comparing and contrasting, and the case company analyses would be consulted again to add depth. As the meta-

analysis progressed, some of the case studies had to be slightly updated to incorporate information that had previously not been viewed as relevant. For example during a later stage of case study analysis, it became evident that it might be important to consider the company's values and mission/vision. This had not been addressed in the earlier case studies, and consequently those case studies were re-visited and updated. The process was very iterative, and resulted in some categories being changed or removed and some new categories being added.

The importance of developing 'rival explanations as patterns' was noted, in order to strengthen validity (Yin 2009). For each case, the 'how' and 'why' of the outcome was investigated and compared to alternative explanations:

*"By rigorously testing your propositions against your data, looking for alternative explanations and seeking to explain why negative cases occur, you will be able to move towards the development of valid and well-grounded conclusions. The validity of your conclusions needs to be verified by their ability to withstand alternative explanations and the nature of **negative cases**"* (Saunders et al. 2012, p. 562).

Yin (2009) suggests four principles necessary to ensure the highest possible quality:

1. Ensure that the analysis includes all the evidence to build robust evidence, especially paying attention to rival explanations.
2. Address all key rival interpretations.
3. Ensure it is evident that the key aim of the research has been addressed.
4. Base analysis on the researcher's own expert knowledge.

6.8.2 Coding

"Coding is the starting point for most forms of qualitative data analysis" (Bryman and Bell 2007, p. 593), and is a useful tool as it helps to identify what different items of data represent and to categorise that item of data and compare and connect to theoretical ideas. The coding system used in this research, was originally based on the research questions and the conceptual framework, adding and removing constructs following an iterative process. A number of categories (tree nodes) were thus developed to categorise the

interview data from each case study to a more manageable structure. In total, nine tree nodes were identified, and one free tree node was allocated for miscellaneous findings and emerging concepts (See Table 6.3).

Secondly, at the meta-analysis stage, the tree nodes (including their 'branches' and 'twigs') were each connected to the various concepts of the conceptual framework, to allow an evaluation of the collected data against the theoretical proposition (see Table 6.4).

Table 6.3: Coding for the analysis (also described in appendix 9)

Tree nodes	Branches
1. Interview background	
2. Company profile	2.1 Company facts 2.2 Company mission/vision 2.3 Company core values
3. Sustainability definition and strategy	3.1-Word used for Sustainability 3.2-Economic sustainability 3.3-Environmental sustainability 3.4-Social sustainability 3.5 Sustainability strategy
4. Stakeholder strategy	4.1 Key stakeholders 4.2 Stakeholders not mentioned
5. Communications strategy	5.1 Evolution of sustainability communications 5.2 Keywords used in sustainability communications 5.3 Specific versus vague communications 5.4 International communications

6. Communications to stakeholders	6.1 Communications to the wider stakeholder groups
	6.2 Communications to specific stakeholder groups
	      6.2.1 Internal communications
	      6.2.2 Communications to suppliers
	      6.2.3 Communications to customers/consumers
	      6.2.4 Communications to shareholders
	      6.2.5 Communications to local communities, NGOs, and governmental organisations
	      6.2.6 Communications to industry colleagues

7. Driver for change in value chain	
8. Challenges in sustainability communications	
9. Responsibility of sustainability communications strategy	
10. Miscellaneous (Free node)	10.1 Branded Sustainability Programme

Table 6.4: Linking of nodes to the conceptual framework

Conceptual Framework categories	Relevant trees and branches
A. Sustainability definition	3.1-Word used for Sustainability 3.2-Economic sustainability 3.3-Environmental sustainability 3.4-Social sustainability 3.5 Sustainability strategy 5.1 Evolution of Sustainability communications
B. Stakeholder categorisation attributes	4.1 Key Stakeholders 4.2 Stakeholders not mentioned 6.2.1 - 6.2.6 Communications strategy
C. Communications strategy and objective	2.2 Company mission/vision 2.3 Company core values 3.5 Sustainability strategy 6.1 and 6.2 Communications strategy to wider and specific stakeholders
D. Strategic Ambiguity motives	5.1 Evolution of Sustainability communications 5.3 Specific versus vague communications 6.1 and 6.2 Communications strategy to wider and specific stakeholders 8. Challenges in sustainability communications
E. Strategic Ambiguity format	2.2 Company mission/vision 2.3 Company core values 3.5 Sustainability strategy 5.1 Evolution of Sustainability communications 5.2 Keywords used in sustainability communications 5.3 Specific versus vague communications 6.1 and 6.2 Communications strategy to wider and specific stakeholders
F. Other Emerging concepts	10.1 Branded Sustainability Programme

6.8.3   Synthesis and presentation of research results

The research findings are presented in the next two chapters (7 and 8), following a similar structure as the conceptual framework in Chapter 5. The findings are further interpreted and compared to theoretical concepts in the academic literature in Chapter 9, leading up to a revised framework, based on the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 5, but modified to take into account emergent evidence from the data analysis. The importance of allowing modification is stressed by Timulak:

"When a conceptual framework is used, it is important that it is used flexibly, so it could be informed by emergent data and adapted in a way that allows better description and interpretation" (2009, p. 596).

6.8.4   Ensuring validity and reliability of data analysis

For internal validity, it is vital to follow a rigorous and well-defined coding system, as described above, where collected data is broken into phenomena and then re-combined and connected to test the conceptual framework. In order to ensure the reliability of the data analysis, it is important to create a clear analysis trail that can be followed by other researchers (Stall-Meadows and Hyle 2010), which is achieved in this research through the coding system described in the previous section. Timulak (2009) suggests auditing, independent analysis, triangulation, validation by primary researchers and representativeness to the sample, to maximise the credibility of research analysis. While auditing and independent analysis was not practical in this PhD research, and, as in this case the researcher is also the primary researcher, the areas worth focusing on are triangulation and representativeness to the sample. Triangulation is achieved in this study through not only collecting data from interviews but also from other sources (as discussed in Section 6.7.6). There is also a built in mechanism for reliability through interviews with stakeholders to the case companies, thus also representing their perception of communications from the case companies.

The selected case companies are further quite homogeneous in the sense that they all are food/drinks brands or retailers operating in Western Europe, and that the majority of the

respondents are senior managers/directors with a deep insight into the strategies of their respective companies. The difference between the case companies in size and value chain position was deliberate in order to provide further depth to the research context as per RQ6.

6.9 Limitations of the research

A fundamental objective of the PhD process is for the PhD student to develop knowledge and skills in research methodology. As a consequence the researcher can now look back to the early phases of research design and data collection, and identify areas that could have been undertaken more effectively. Lessons have been learnt that will facilitate and strengthen future research. There are also time constraints that limit the number of cases included in the study, and the depth of each case. Previously in this chapter, limitations in terms of bias, validity, reliability and generalization in qualitative interviews were discussed and actions to reduce these issues were listed. In addition to these previously discussed limitations, some other areas need to be addressed.

The data collection was limited to the food and drink manufacturers and retailers, in Western Europe and specifically in the UK, and the researcher cannot claim validity in other industry sectors, nor in other geographical areas. The case samples included a range of company sizes from very large to very small and thus represent a reasonable picture of the food and drink manufacturers and retailers. Additional interviews with stakeholders as well as more retailers and food/drink manufacturers would have been beneficial, as well as more triangulation, for example through focus groups with also other case companies (and not only with Coca Cola Enterprises). However this was not possible due to access and time constraints.

There are a number of qualitative research software packages available to assist data sorting and analysis. The researcher undertook training in NVivo but found the software less user-friendly than expected. Due to time constraints other software programmes were not explored. The analysis therefore was conducted using Excel spreadsheets for cross case comparison. A user-friendly software package might have facilitated this process.

6.10   Ethical considerations

Diener and Crandall (1978) list a number of key ethical considerations in research within social sciences including: 'harm to participants', 'lack of informed consent', 'invasion of privacy' and 'deception'.

To address these suggested issues the following actions were taken:

- The aim of the research was clearly explained both before the interview via email and at the start of the interview, and consent of the respondents was obtained (See appendix 6 and 7).
- The interviews were only recorded with full consent from the respondent.
- The names of the respondents were not revealed in any documents related to the study. It should be mentioned here however that several of the respondents knew each other and volunteered to refer the researcher to their industry colleagues (part of the snowball sampling) and in contacting these referred contacts, the name of the referral would be mentioned.
- Exceptions to the anonymity of respondents are: the participants at the Coca Cola Enterprise panel debate webcast (as discussed in section 6.7.5.3), as this is available to the public on the Coca Cola Enterprise website and on www.youtube.com; and Julia Hailes, who is willing to be named in the thesis (see appendix 8 for her consent).
- The researcher made sure to keep the interview within the time frame that had been agreed to avoid invading each respondent's time.

However, ethical issues are not solely linked to the data collection phase but are also relevant throughout the research process; the researcher has therefore taken advice from Saunders et al. (2012), ensuring integrity and objectivity from the initial stage of formulating a conceptual framework through data collection, data analysis to the reporting of findings.

6.11 Summary

In order to fulfil the research aim, answer the research questions, and test the propositions and the conceptual framework a qualitative multiple case study methodology was proposed, with in-depth interviews as the main data collection method. In addition one focus group, one observation of a panel debate, and secondary research were added to provide triangulation to the methodology. This chapter has described the research methodology process in detail and justified the choices taken. Limitations to the research process were discussed and methods to overcome those were highlighted. Finally ethical considerations were addressed. The following chapters will present the findings as a result of this research process, addressing the case companies' views on sustainability definitions, stakeholder categorisation, communications strategies, and strategic ambiguity.

7 EVIDENCE OF STAKEHOLDER CATEGORISATION ATTRIBUTES AND ITS LINKS WITH CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

7.1 Introduction

As was discussed in the methodology chapter, data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, secondary research, one focus group, and observation of a panel debate. This chapter will review the insights from the data collection, largely following the structure of the conceptual framework. Thus, the stakeholder categorisation attributes reported by the case companies will be presented followed by an overview of the communications strategies. As the application of strategic ambiguity emerged as a rather novel approach to corporate communications strategies, and therefore requiring a higher level of evidence, the findings related to strategic ambiguity will be presented in a separate chapter (Chapter 8). Firstly, however, an overview of how the case companies define and use the word 'sustainability' will be presented, as this is seen as an important starting point to establish the context.

7.2 The concept of sustainability

7.2.1 Definitions of sustainability

Definitions of sustainability vary considerably between the case companies, from relatively simple meanings to more complex and detailed descriptions. The founder of the Rare Tea Company suggests one example of a simple definition including environmental, social and economic aspects in a very short sentence:

> *"Yeah, for me it's about the land and the people, it's about the practices that will benefit." (T18, L576)*

and further on:

> *"This is good on so many different levels; it's good for the land, for the people who work on it, for you as a consumer, for your taste. " (T18, L118-120)*

Another small company with a simple definition is Rude Health, with the following definition suggested by the founder:

> *"So sustainability for us is, I guess, a mixture of literally looking after ourselves. That what we put into it should be energising and positive and in doing that, it should be not negatively impacting the planet, in the land."* (T3, L14-17)

This sustainability understanding seems to focus primarily on the natural environment and people's health (from consuming good quality food). The health aspect could possibly be considered as part of the social aspect of sustainability.

Adnams, while not giving a definition of sustainability, presents sustainability on its website as based on a number of pillars where environmental, social and economic aspects are the key cornerstones. One aspect that is repeatedly mentioned in Adnams' values is product quality. Good product quality could possibly belong to economic sustainability, as it should help to build brand value.

The respondent at Abel and Cole mentions their delivery model (transport efficiency) and packaging returns as its key differentiation in sustainability. Abel and Cole's website however does not really use the word 'sustainability' but highlights the 'guiding principles', which are supposed to go beyond 'organic' and focus broadly on four cornerstones of 'food', 'environment and wildlife', 'animal welfare', and 'fairly traded', thus including environmental and social aspects.

FDF also offer a simplistic definition of sustainability:

> *"Sustainability is about achieving a better quality of life for everyone, now and for future generations to come. The environment is a central facet of this."* (http://www.fdf.org.uk/priorities_sus_comp.aspx, accessed 27.6.11)

While the above companies offer simplistic definitions of sustainability, others, such as the health, safety and sustainability manager at Apetito, suggest a much more complex picture:

> "*Oh, we probably work with two or three ideas and definitions; we actually wrap a lot of stuff into sustainability like health and safety, and environment, ethics and business continuity. We see that sustainability stuff, stuff that keeps the business resilient, I mean, stuff that keeps the business here into the future and that's just not about being effective ourselves but how we tell the community and the wider global, um, community as well, so that keeps the business viable, sustainable, taking account of the environmental society which we are part of; or simply the Brundtland definition of securing the conditions for the future generations, as simple as that*". (T2, L37-44)

This multifaceted view of sustainability is also visible in the company's formal definition on the Apetito website:

> "*As a company committed to sustainability, we are dedicated to continuously improving our nutrition, quality and food safety. We also strive to meet strict social responsibility goals, ensuring we provide exceptional food and service to the most vulnerable people in our community. We are equally responsible for respecting the environment, benefitting the economy and caring for the communities in which we serve.*" (www.apetito.co.uk, accessed 21.6.12)

On the retailing side of the value chain, the British Retail Consortium started an initiative called 'The Better Retailing Climate', which is aimed at addressing sustainability in the retailing sector. The respondent explained that sustainability in this context primarily puts a focus on the environment. However an example was immediately given where also the economic aspect evidently takes a leading role:

> "*The other thing we need to do in a supply chain is not just reduce impact but build resilience and it's as important to a retailer as it is to anybody throughout the supply chain that there is better resilience and when you see commodity prices and food prices, all over the place and longer term challenges of extreme weather events, more droughts and floods and climate change etc., we all need to kind of understand what your risks are there and get the consistency and the quality at a good price if you're going to be a competitive retailer. "* (T26, L65-72)

At an earlier part of the value chain, the packaging industry suggest that the definition of sustainability is very complex and overused, as is highlighted by the CEO of the Packaging Federation:

"Well I mean there are more definitions of sustainability than you can shake a stick at, as they say." (T13, L42-43)

Sustainability in the packaging industry seems very focussed on the environmental aspect, whereas the social aspect was not mentioned in the two interviews with the Packaging Federation. This is probably due to the environmental aspects around packaging being so high on the political agenda in the UK, that it overshadows the social aspects.

Nestlé, a larger corporation, makes several statements on sustainability, linking the concept to value creation:

"Since Henri Nestlé first developed his successful infant cereal "Farine Lactée", we have built our business on the conviction that to have long-term success for our shareholders, we not only have to comply with all applicable legal requirements and ensure that all our activities are sustainable, but additionally we have to create significant value for society. At Nestlé we call this Creating Shared Value."
(http://www.nestle.com/AboutUs/BusinessPrinciples/Pages/BusinessPrinciplesHome.aspx, accessed on 27.09.12)

The wording in this quote suggests that economical sustainability plays a central role, as the shareholders are mentioned explicitly. The complexity of the sustainability definition of Nestlé is visible in following quote from the annual report:

"Environmental, social and sustainability issues are the subject of our Creating Shared Value Report taking a broader perspective on the Board's responsibility."
(Nestlé Annual Report 2011, p. 8)

The quote is rather confusing as it talks about environmental, social <u>and</u> sustainability issues? What is sustainability to Nestlé if not environmental or social?

M&S, primarily present its responsibilities through its branded programme 'Plan A', which is presented as:

"Through Plan A we are working with our customers and our suppliers to combat climate change, reduce waste, use sustainable raw materials, trade ethically, and help our customers to lead healthier lifestyles." (http://plana.marksandspencer.com/about, accessed on 17.9.12)

In addition they explain their views regarding a retailer's areas of responsibility:

"We believe the five key areas that represent the biggest challenges facing us as a retailer are: Climate change, Waste, Natural resources, Health and being a Fair partner." (http://plana.marksandspencer.com/we-are-doing, accessed on 18.9.12)

These statements suggest a broad approach to sustainability covering environmental, social and health issues. The published Plan A report 2012 also adds an economic dimension, which was also confirmed by the interview, where business sense was suggested as a key cornerstone in Plan A.

The concept of sustainability has evolved over the years, as suggested by the chairman of the Packaging and Environment Group at Unilever. He revealed that while sustainability today includes several aspects, in the early days it was primarily a term relating to environmental responsibilities. This evolution of the sustainability concept was also discussed in Chapter 2, where a slight convergence of CSR and sustainability was suggested. This notion will be further explored in the next section.

7.2.2   Sustainability versus CSR

Several of the case companies use both 'sustainability' and 'CSR' in communications. Coca Cola Enterprise for example introduce their stance on sustainability on the website

as:

> "*It is our commitment to be the leader in corporate responsibility and sustainability in the food and beverage industry in Europe.*"
> (http://www.cokecce.com/pages/_content.asp?page_id=72, accessed on 18.07.12)

This indicates a distinction between sustainability and CSR. Morrisons, on the other hand, present sustainability on their website as an element within corporate responsibility (CR) and use CR as the overarching name for issues relating to the environment, animal welfare, health and social conditions; a CR review is published annually covering these aspects.

Ahold also uses the term 'corporate responsibility' to refer to issues related to their responsibilities in relation to the environment, society and people's health, and also publish an annual CR report covering these aspects. When observing their history however, an interesting evolution in the terms used to describe their responsibilities is revealed. The name of these reports has evolved over the years, starting as 'Royal Ahold and the Environment' in 1998, followed by several years of publishing under the name of 'CSR report', until 2004 when the report was named the 'Sustainability report'. It is explained that the name change was deliberate to better reflect the holistic and complete concept of sustainability compared to CSR. The following year, however, (2005) the name reverted to 'CSR report', with no further explanation on the rationale. In 2008 the report changed name again, this time to the 'Responsibility report', where the following definition of CR is offered:

> "*Corporate responsibility benefits all our stakeholders and supports the profitability of our business. We work according to the "Triple P" model. This model aims to balance the interests of people, the planet and profit to create a business that is profitable and sustainable.*"
> (Ahold CR Report 2008, p. 2)

It seems as though the underlying meaning of CR is very similar to Ahold's definition of sustainability:

> *"For us, sustainability has two components. First, in line with the Brundtland definition, sustainability is about development or growth that provides for the needs of today's generation without compromising the ability of future generations to also provide for their own needs.*
> *Secondly, it is about creating value and thus improving the quality of life of current and future generations. Our ambition is for Ahold to continue to be a proactive and forward-looking company on sustainability.*
> *Sustainability is about balancing people, planet and profit."*
> (Ahold Sustainability Report 2004, p. 15, accessed from
> https://www.ahold.com/#!/Corporate-responsibility/CR-Reports)

Historically Ahold have therefore been quite inconsistent with what terminology to use. Since 2008 however they have used the word 'responsibility' as the lead concept.

For M&S, sustainability seems to take a wider and more pro-active stance compared to the traditional CSR concept, as is expressed in the following example from the Plan A report 2012 (p. 4):

> *"Plan A was developed in late 2006 to help us shift from a largely compliance-based approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR), which focused on maintaining the business status quo, to a new mind-set that embraced the broader sustainability challenge and the need to radically improve the environmental and social aspects of our retail business model."*

The chairman at Eurostar sees CSR as being different from sustainability, and explained that as they are government-owned and have been loss-making, and due to the fact that they are a small company with more limited resources, they haven't felt the need nor had the resources to pursue a traditional CSR programme. The chairman suggested that CSR is more important for companies that might have an issue with the image. These statements indicate therefore that CSR, by Eurostar, is seen more as structured management program.

This overview of sustainability definitions among the case companies forms a useful and important starting point for further discussions on CS communications. Following this

foundation, the next sections will present findings in relation to the conceptual framework as depicted in Chapter 5, starting off with an investigation of what attributes the case companies consider when categorising stakeholders into different communications strategies.

7.3   Stakeholder categorisation

7.3.1   Stakeholder categorisation attributes

The interviews revealed a number of attributes used for the segmentation of stakeholders. It was found that sometimes the criteria would be stakeholder specific, e.g. 'expertise/knowledge' was particularly mentioned when categorizing NGOs, and 'shared sustainability ethos' was explicitly quoted as important by some organisations when categorising value chain stakeholders. Table 7.1 below attempts to quantify some of these qualitative findings.

Table 7.1: Empirical evidence of Stakeholder categorisation attributes

Categorisation attribute for close collaboration	Case companies quoting this as an attribute
General / applicable for all stakeholders	
Capability (= time, resources, people)	CCE (Coca Cola Enterprises), Nestlé, Unilever, Ahold, FDF (Food and Drink Federation), WRAP
Knowledge/expertise	CCE, Unilever, Ahold
Power	CCE, Ahold, Eurostar
Business strategy relevance	CCE, Unilever, Ahold, food industry consultant, WRAP
Proximity	CCE, Rude Health, Unilever, Ahold, Eurostar
Interest	CCE, Unilever, Ahold, ERRT (European Retail Roundtable), food industry consultant
Image	Ahold, FDF, food industry consultant, Packaging Federation, WRAP
Sustainability impact	CCE, Unilever, FDF
Risk management	Food industry consultant
Sequence	CCE, Unilever
Value chain stakeholders	
Shared sustainability ethos	Adnams, Apetito, RTC (Rare Tea Company), Rude Health
Capability	Adnams, Packaging Federation
Power	Apetito, Eurostar

Business strategy relevance	Apetito, Eurostar, Rude Health
Sustainability impact	CCE, Eurostar, Adnams
Interest	Adnams, Apetito, Eurostar
Proximity	Apetito, Eurostar, SUMA
Risk management	Apetito
NGOs/Media/Influencers	
Knowledge/expertise	CCE, Eurostar, M&S, FDF
Power	Adnams, CCE
Interest	Adnams, Eurostar, FDF
Image/PR	Adnams, Eurostar, FDF, RTC
Risk Management	Eurostar, FDF, RTC
Business Strategy Relevance	Eurostar, M&S

When talking about general stakeholder segmentation (i.e. applicable for all stakeholders), one of the most prominent attributes for selecting with whom to work closely is 'capability' (raised by six case companies). Capability is described by the focus group of Coca Cola Enterprises as having the people, and/or time, and/or resources. 'Business strategy relevance' (quoted by five case companies for general selection) also seems to be an important factor, carrying the meaning of commercial importance, including stakeholders that are already important from a pure business strategy perspective. 'Proximity' is also frequently quoted (five case companies) as a general categorisation attribute. Proximity here means both closeness in the value chain, as suggested by Apetito and Eurostar (which arguably could also be seen as business strategy relevance), and also the presence of existing networks, e.g. Coca Cola Enterprises mentioning that some collaboration partners were selected because the CEO has contacts with those organisations, or where there already exist close relationships (Eurostar, Ahold). Next, 'interest' is suggested (five case companies), meaning not just interest in sustainability but interest in collaboration on sustainability initiatives. Interest could manifest itself by stakeholders approaching the focal organisation for collaboration. 'Image' is quoted as an important attribute by five respondents, where collaboration with certain stakeholders is prioritised as it would portray the organisation in a good light. Further, 'power' is suggested by three case companies. Coca Cola Enterprises view power as having either resources and/or power based on other aspects. 'Knowledge/expertise' as applicable for general stakeholders is suggested by three companies. 'Sustainability impact' is also suggested by three case companies, carrying the meaning that the organisation would seek

to collaborate with those stakeholders closest to the point in the value chain having the highest negative sustainability impact. Two respondents quote 'sequence' as an attribute, meaning that the priority stakeholders will change with time. Finally, one respondent suggests 'risk management', where collaboration with stakeholders who could pose a threat for the organisation receives priority.

As an example, Unilever present some of their categorisation attributes on their website:

> *"Across all our activities we seek to engage with stakeholders to help us identify issues of concern, guide our strategy and reporting and provide feedback on specific areas of activity. Working in partnership is crucial in developing and delivering some of our major sustainability commitments."*
> (http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/ourapproach/stakeholders/, accessed on 5.7.12)

The quote suggests that Unilever will engage with those stakeholders that can contribute in the form of expertise and feedback. In addition they suggest that the drivers behind the level of engagement include: nature of interest, business relevance, and feasibility to deliver to expectations and drive change, indicating that interactions with powerful and/or resourceful stakeholders are of importance:

> *"This variety of relationships means we engage in different ways, depending on the nature of the interest, the relevance to the business and the most practical way to meet stakeholders' specific needs and expectations."*
> (http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/ourapproach/stakeholders/, accessed on 5.7.12)

Importantly, it is suggested by the former chairman of the Packaging and Environment Group at Unilever, that all the stakeholders are, or might become relevant at some point in time, and need to be managed to effectively respond to a change of dynamics. A 'spider's web' approach is suggested as a useful tool to check the profile on what topic is the hottest at a given point in time. Depending on the hot topic, the relevant stakeholders for that topic are identified and prioritised at that moment in time. A stakeholder management

model is thus highly dynamic.

While the attributes discussed here are quoted as general segmentation factors for stakeholders, there are also instances where attributes are mentioned as specific for certain stakeholder groups, like NGOs and media on the one hand, and value chain stakeholders on the other hand. These attributes will be further discussed in the sections below, starting with the attributes specific for NGOs, media and influencers in Section 7.3.1.1, and finally attributes for value chain stakeholders in Section 7.3.1.2.

7.3.1.1 Stakeholder categorisation attributes specific for NGOs, Media and Influencers

'Knowledge' or 'expertise' is specifically mentioned for the segmentation of NGOs (by four case companies). Eurostar gives an example of knowledge as a categorisation attribute on their website as seen in the quote below:

> *"We're working with some of the leading authorities in sustainability to support good causes, find inspiration and share ideas. We've carefully selected partners who are experts in their own field to help us build the most sustainable programme possible."* (http://www.eurostar.com/UK/uk/leisure/tread_lightly/engage/partnerships.jsp, accessed on 13.8.12)

'Image' is quoted by four cases as an important attribute. The interviews that brought this up suggested that it can be important to work with some stakeholders because that will give them the right image. Unilever, for example, mention their collaboration with NGOs on their website, driven not only by their expertise, and/or to lobby for driving change, but also to build their own image:

> *"...partnering with an organization like the WHF (World Heart Federation) increases Unilever's credibility with opinion formers and consumers."* (www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/ourpeople/profiles/michele-gerlack, accessed on 5.7.12)

The director of communications at the Food and Drink Federation (FDF), as another

example, suggests that collaboration between businesses and NGOs can create a powerful recipe. They (the FDF) have selected WWF (the World Wide Fund for Nature) as an important stakeholder due to its knowledge in this area, and its collaborative nature (as it was expressed that some other NGOs would take a more hostile approach to businesses). On this note, the director of communications at FDF suggests that an alliance with an 'unusual' stakeholder (in their case WWF) is more effective in being picked up on by media and thus successfully reaching out to a large audience:

"And sometimes actually the more unusual the alliance you can create, the more interested and the more you can get people to take notice in government and in the media. I think, you know, if you can create a powerful and yet an unusual alliance, then it helps with your own communications once people go, 'Wow, I never thought those two would work together. That's pretty innovative', and that helps you then to get your… I mean, we think that what's in here is desperately important and these are great stories, but actually getting the media to pick them up is actually quite difficult sometimes." (T5, L289-296)

The chairman at Eurostar mentions 'knowledge' and 'image' as categorisation attributes in relation to selecting NGO partners, and as the quote below reveals, 'risk management' and 'PR/image' are other elements:

"Yes. Well, frankly, it has a double benefit, a, well, it's a treble benefit, I mean, firstly it does give you some useful perspectives and advice, because if you're doing something that they strongly disapprove of I'd much prefer to know about it and try and do something about it, rather than having them attacking me in the media. So it's defensive, in that sense. But, I mean, yeah, secondly I think it does help the, sort of, PR and leadership profile that we've tried to take. And so, hopefully, we can help them a bit by, you know, by giving them some support. So, you know, you can be doing, multiplying your effort somewhat." (T16, L196-202)

In total three cases suggest 'risk management' as a categorisation attribute. Finally 'interest' is suggested (three cases), 'power' (as in access to strong networks and lobbying) in two cases and 'business strategy relevance' (one case).

7.3.1.2 Stakeholder categorisation attributes specific for value chain stakeholders

For value chain stakeholders (suppliers, customers, consumers, employees) 'sustainability ethos' scores highest (four case companies) but this is only quoted by respondents of SMEs (Adnams, Apetito, Rare Tea Company and Rude Health) that also position themselves as sustainable. At a large corporation like Nestlé, as a contrast, the packaging environmental sustainability expert suggests that strategic partners don't need to share sustainability ethos and that the most important criteria for partnership is that the stakeholders can offer something that helps improving sustainability. This can be seen as a resource then in form of e.g. expertise. 'Sustainability impact', meaning stakeholders who are close to a sustainability issue, would be selected for closer collaboration, as this is where greater impact can be made. This is quoted as important by respondents of three organisations in relation to collaboration with value chain stakeholders (CCE, Eurostar, Adnams).

Other important drivers quoted are 'business strategy relevance' (three cases), 'interest' (three cases), 'proximity' (three cases), 'capability' (two cases), 'power' (two cases), and risk management (one case).

The Eurostar interviews highlight differences of rationale for close collaboration between different stakeholder groups, where suppliers are categorised based on the purchase value (business strategy relevance) and on the existence of alternative suppliers (power), whereas NGOs are categorised based on expertise. For customers it is mentioned that the closest collaboration takes place with corporate clients and the reason is that this stakeholder group has actively shown 'interest' in collaboration. The quality of existing relationship (proximity) is mentioned as a very important driver for collaboration by the chairman at Eurostar:

> *"I think… no, I think if you have the same approach everywhere, it doesn't work because, you know, it's like, I mean, in a way it is like the relationship between two individual people, you know, everybody's slightly different. But you can have your style of engagement. So, I think if one tried to influence a stakeholder just on the environment or Tread Lightly, if you've got no other relationship, you need to be a bit*

> *careful. If you want them to do something, why should they, because you've got no other relationship. So I think it starts in the quality of the relationship you have in general."*
>
> *(T16, L558-564)*

'Risk management' is finally suggested by the food industry consultant, in the sense that a risk averse company is more prone to collaborate closely with a greater number of stakeholders as they have more at stake in losing brand image. This respondent also suggests that in general smaller companies are greater risk takers as firstly they have a lesser amount of resources for collaborating broadly with stakeholders, and secondly as they have less to lose in terms of brand image as they are not under as much scrutiny as large corporations. Respondents at both Unilever and Coca Cola Enterprises stress that selection criteria are dynamic and evolve over time, and therefore both key stakeholders and the attributes might need to be updated over time.

7.3.1.3 *Quantifying Stakeholder categorisation attributes*

It is possible that those cases quoting 'general' prioritisation drivers, do so just because the interviewer didn't ask them to specifically explain if there were differences in drivers for different stakeholder groups and thus they might have just listed all they could think of. If we look at the answers from such a perspective, summarising all responses as general stakeholder categorisation attributes, the ranking of the most important drivers would look as follows (if the same case company mentions an attribute both as a general level and for a specific stakeholder category, this case is only counted as once):

1. Business strategy relevance (nine cases), and interest (nine cases);
2. Capability (eight cases), and image (eight cases);
3. Proximity (seven cases);
4. Knowledge/expertise (six cases);
5. Risk management (five cases), and power (five cases), and sustainability impact (five cases);
6. Shared sustainability ethos (four cases);
7. Sequence (two cases).

So how does this ranking differ between large corporations and SMEs? How does it differ depending on the value chain position? From a company size perspective, one notable difference emerges, and that is the driver of 'shared sustainability ethos', which was quoted only by smaller/medium sized companies (Adnams, Apetito, Rare Tea Company and Rude Health). As an example, a small company like the Rare Tea Company will select suppliers (farmers) who share the same sustainability ethos and then work closely with them to make further progress, as expressed by the founder in the quote below:

> *"I pick farmers that I respect and trust and admire, and I think that admiration has to be a double sided thing; I'm proud to work with them, they're proud to work with me."*
> *(T18, L255-256).*

The underlying aim here is to build relationships with the suppliers, based on mutual trust. Also the founder of Rude Health, another small food manufacturer, raises the importance of selecting suppliers with similar sustainability philosophy:

> *"We're trying to work with people who understand what we are doing, who have the same interest in what they are doing, in a way they tend to be relatively small sort of family in business. There's an interest already in, you know, it's the people working there for a start, it's a nice place to work and they are interested also in their suppliers, and that they look after them and it's also that element, it's not just the organic, or ethical thing, it's the whole relationship they take."*
> *(T3, L367-372)"*

There are no drivers mentioned only by large corporations. However, if we consider Eurostar as a large corporation (as it is big from a brand perspective), 'knowledge' emerges as a more important driver for larger corporations and/or large brands. Sequence is finally mentioned by only two large corporations, CCE and Unilever, however sequence is perhaps not a driver but rather a moderator.

From a value chain perspective, there doesn't seem to be any significant difference. The drivers suggested are similar for both brand owners (food and drinks manufacturers) and for retailers. When considering key drivers for the stakeholder case organisations, the most prominent driver is image, which is quoted by Food and Drink Federation, WRAP, the Packaging Federation, and the food industry consultant. This is perhaps not surprising as a key objective for trade organisations is to raise the image of the member companies that they represent.

This section has listed the key attributes for stakeholder categorisation. Using these attributes businesses can categorise their stakeholders and identify the most appropriate communications strategy for each category. The next section will give an overview of the key communications strategies identified during data collection.

7.4   Stakeholder communications strategies

Each case company was asked to describe the communications strategy with their different stakeholder categories, and Table 7.2 below depicts the number of case companies who indicate a certain communications strategy per stakeholder type. During the data collection it soon became evident that the four communications strategies as presented in Chapter 5 were not conclusive, as an additional strategy emerged, which is here named 'influence'. As opposed to the 'involve' communications strategy where the aim is to get the stakeholder to take collaborative action that directly will contribute to the focal organisation's sustainability strategy, the influence strategy aims to encourage the stakeholder to take actions on its own (not in collaboration with the organisation) that do not directly affect or benefit the focal organisation. Thus there seem to be five CS communications strategies: *inform*, *influence*, *consult*, *involve* and *partner*, which will be further described in the sections below, including an overview of the motives behind each of these communications strategies.

Table 7.2: Empirical evidence of communications strategies versus stakeholder category

Number of case companies indicating each communications strategy per stakeholder	Inform	Influence	Consult	Involve	Partner
Employees				3	14
Suppliers				14	9

Customers (B2B)***	3	1	2		1
Consumers	13	7	2	1	
Shareholders /investors	4				
NGOs / experts / influencers	2		5	1	5
Industry colleagues					9
Governments					1*
Local communities	1**		1**		
Media	3				

*Nine case companies mention collaboration with government that takes place indirectly in the form of participating with industry colleagues in forums.

**Interaction with local communities is not explicitly mentioned in the interviews apart from Adnams and Ahold. Most of the case companies however have website information about community projects, which seems more focused on image building than involving the communities in the firms' sustainability strategies.

***Seven case companies (food and drink manufacturers) suggest that they are being dictated to by their B2B customers (retailers) rather than taking an active communications strategy to this stakeholder.

7.4.1   Characteristics of an 'inform' communications strategy

As depicted in Table 7.2, the inform communications strategy is predominantly targeted to consumers. Consumers are not seen as active collaborators on sustainability initiatives, and primarily the reason is the lack of knowledge/expertise, and the heterogeneity of this stakeholder category. For example the head of climate change at M&S mentions that consumers are seen as a very important stakeholder, but because of the heterogeneity and general limited knowledge this stakeholder group is not approached for closer interaction. Thus, the majority of case companies will aim at keeping consumers informed on their sustainability initiatives, some admitting this is an important part of image building (e.g. Adnams). The inform communications strategy is not entirely limited to one-way communications, as many case companies report on offering feedback mechanisms in the form of emails, phone hotlines, etc. It is, however, felt that even if there is a feedback mechanism it is rather aimed at further clarifying information where necessary, and as a control mechanism to ensure the information reaches the consumer, rather than providing a platform for consulting the consumers.

Trust building is a frequently quoted objective for the inform communications strategy (Nestlé, Rare Tea Company, Rude Health, Unilever, M&S and Ahold). It was suggested that as sustainability is very complex and difficult to understand, the aim is to build trust,

allowing the consumer to trust the company to take the best possible actions. By establishing trust the consumer will not need to actively seek for technical and lengthy details but will trust the company to take the best possible action. Thus, this strategy saves the consumers from being overloaded with information that they might not understand or be interested in.

The vice president of corporate responsibility at Ahold for example mentions that they have taken some initiatives that were not initially appreciated by the consumers, such as adding doors to fridges in stores to reduce energy consumption; while this initially put some consumers off, and in addition had a negative cost impact for Ahold, Ahold publicised the initiative to consumers with the aim of getting the consumers to trust that Ahold has a long-term commitment to sustainability.

> *"Yeah, absolutely, I mean, I think we believe in the long term that although technically if we help people to reduce the food waste that could reduce our, what people buy from us. We also hope that we will, you know, we will, we'll be a trusted retailer, a responsible retailer. They should know that we would do the best for the planet, even if in the short term it might have an impact."*
> (T8, 109-113)

Nestlé's respondent highlights the importance of building trust so that consumers will understand that Nestlé is working for the long-term benefits to the environment; thus saving the consumer from being overloaded with technical information. The respondent warns however that trust building sometimes is threatened by some retailers who tap into consumer trends, focusing on areas that the consumers believe is important, areas that don't make significant improvements and might rather delay change in more relevant areas. This issue is also raised by the head of environment at the British Retail Consortium:

> *"Packaging is not the big deal, you talk to a consumer and they say "oh we shouldn't put so much packaging on", so what have the retailers done? They've reduced the amount of packaging and they've communicated to their customers, it's the language the customer talks. If there was a social obligation to educate the customer the retailer would have said "we haven't reduced our packaging because that's not the right thing to do here, the right thing to do here is look at whatever else it is and maybe it's in products you manufacture*

> *use disposal etc. And so you're caught as a retailer half way between educating your customer and telling your customer what they want to hear."*
> (T26, L195-203)

Education of consumers through the inform communications strategy can therefore be a delicate matter; the European affairs manager at the European Retailer Roundtable raises the concern as to with whom the responsibility to educate the consumers lies:

> *"That's an interesting point that you mentioned because it's always a delicate point of discussion because, you know, we are always told, 'you should educate the consumer', you know, you have an open route to the consumer… But this is more public authority, the authorities have the responsibility as well to educate the consumer so, you know, the true awareness campaigns or we, you know, the supermarkets have a limited, there is a limit what they can do to educate the consumer."*
> *(T20, L317-322)*

The European Retail Roundtable respondent suggests that consumer education would ideally be executed by authorities/governments or NGOs, who can offer a more structured and continuous education of consumers. M&S has approached this dilemma by using external and objective spokespersons for consumer education, as is suggested in the following quote by M&S's head of climate change:

> *"OK, yes, so we used certain people to give the message to consumers, so for example Julia Hailes who sat on our Advisory Group, she's quite... communicated in a non-technical way to consumers, so we used her to explain that paper bags are not better than plastic bags and this is why we don't sell paper, we don't use paper bags. So we did... we did a little leaflet and a little video which we could put on the website, and every time we got asked the question of, "Why don't you just use paper bags?" we could point them towards that, and they actually trusted her much more than they would trust, say, a Government official, if you like."*
> *(T24, L188-195)*

One of the Unilever interviewees (former chairman of the Packaging and Environment Group) stresses that it is difficult and dangerous for a brand owner like Unilever to communicate with the consumer. It is better to educate the consumer through opinion formers such as trade bodies (e.g. FDF), Incpen (packaging research organisation), politicians or the press, and let them lead the communications to the consumers. A brand owner's sustainability claims on packaging or in advertising can hit back badly. The respondent emphasises that a company can have a website to inform customers/consumers, but should avoid making green claims. As an example for a while Unilever promoted cardboard refills for fabric conditioners and communicated how good this was. However, in the big picture this was more harmful for the organisation, as much of Unilever's packaging in other product areas is composed of plastics. Therefore telling consumers they should buy cardboard, posed a threat to many product ranges at Unilever. There is also so much unknown about sustainability that a claim today can turn into something that is negative in the future when there is more information available. Two major challenges in consumer communications are suggested by this Unilever respondent: is the message understood, and will it hit back?

The case companies don't make a lot of reference to shareholders/investors when it comes to communications. Those who do, agree that the communications strategy with this stakeholder group is primarily the inform strategy, through annual reports and meetings, allowing feedback. The rationale for the limited interaction with this supposedly important stakeholder category is limited interest in sustainability issues (Coca Cola Enterprises and Ahold) and lack of understanding of these complex issues (Eurostar). One could however argue that these are the views of the respondents, and that interviews with other functions within the case companies, like accounting and more interviews with employees on board level, would give another perspective.

It is suggested that investors/shareholders want to know that there is a solid sustainability strategy in place but they are reportedly not interested in being involved in this work. This stakeholder group is addressed both through publications and through meetings allowing stronger feedback mechanisms compared to the consumer category. It was also suggested that the financial aspects are of key interest to the shareholders/investors and they are more likely to support sustainability initiatives with a clear economic benefit (be it in increased revenue or decreased cost), as is evident in the quote below by the vice president of

corporate responsibility at Ahold:

> *"Interestingly, we have, sometimes we get sent two people from an investor, we get the financial person and the sustainability person, the financial person wants to know about the financial and the sustainability person wants to know about sustainability but the one that has the biggest influence is the financial person."*
> *(T8, L531-535)*

The local community is a popular stakeholder for organisations to mention in their sustainability/CSR reports, and especially many of the larger corporations will have evidence of community projects on their websites. Nevertheless, the interviews reveal very limited direct communications with this stakeholder category and it seems like this is more a PR effort and does not really seek consultation or involvement from the local community to the firm's sustainability strategy.

In addition to image building or PR, the founder of the Rare Tea Company reveals that their inform strategy towards media is seen as an effective method for marketing the brand, finding suppliers, raising issues, and not least to gain leverage on retailers. Others view the media as an enemy, with a tendency to pick on negative aspects. The director of communications at the Food and Drink Federation suggests that this propensity is very counterproductive, especially when businesses give honest communications. It can be detrimental as it can delay sustainability progress, especially if there is a new profit-focused leader in a company that is making investment into sustainability but gets bad press at the same time. In general, however, media is not explicitly mentioned in many interviews, but when it is, an inform strategy is suggested as the most appropriate strategy.

Some of the food and drink manufacturers report that although they would like to have two-way communications with their customers (retailers), this is often not achievable as they perceive the retailers' communications as very dictating, taking more of a one-way communications approach demanding the food and drink manufacturers to comply. As a result, these food and drink manufacturers feel their communications strategy to the retailers is limited to an inform approach.

7.4.2 Characteristics of an 'influence' communications strategy

Interestingly, on the matter of consumer interaction, another possible communications strategy is emerging, as several case companies (Adnams, Apetito, Coca Cola Enterprises, M&S, Morrisons, Suma, British Retail Consortium) suggest that on top of just keeping consumers informed on their sustainability strategies and performance, they also communicate to consumers to 'influence' them or 'encourage' them to take actions for more sustainable practices, especially on recycling. It is a communications strategy seeking to stimulate actions by the target group, however as opposed to an involve strategy, the communicating organisation is not actively pursuing collaboration with the stakeholder, but rather wants to inspire the stakeholders to take individual actions. Both brand owners and retailers often target consumers with messages trying to encourage recycling, using their websites to provide information on how to take actions. As in the inform strategy, there are some feedback mechanisms provided, primarily through helplines to find further advice on how to lead a more sustainable lifestyle.

Adnams for example tries to influence its consumers to bring used bottles to the bottle bank. This is done by labelling on bottles, putting out recycling points in their pubs and by sending the message out to the Adnams consumers. Similar activities are also conducted by Coca Cola Enterprises, Ahold, M&S, etc. In one case however (Abel & Cole), the recycling initiatives directly relate to the company's sustainability strategy, as Abel & Cole will take back used packaging from their consumers and then re-use these for future deliveries; in this case the communications strategy should not be classified as 'influence' as the actions have a direct impact on Abel & Cole's sustainability performance.

7.4.3 Characteristics of a 'consult' communications strategy

The communications strategy used for NGOs varies between the case companies. Several companies consider NGOs (including influencers and experts) as an important source for expert advice and feedback on their sustainability strategy, and as a representative voice for the consumer (M&S, European Retail Roundtable), where some of these, notably primarily large, corporations (Coca Cola Enterprises, Nestlé, Unilever, Eurostar, M&S) take some of these relationships further to create more of a partner type of communications strategy. A representative of a smaller company, the CEO of Adnams, reports however that

the communications strategy with some NGOs is primarily an inform strategy, with the objective to raise image, and to seek endorsement to operate.

Consult communications often take the form of face-to-face meetings and seminars, thus providing a very robust feedback mechanism. It appears that during these meetings the companies present their sustainability strategy and then ask for advice, thus the communications are still fairly unbalanced and completely driven by the communicating company.

Another objective of this communications strategy is to get a benchmark for sustainability in the overall industry sector (Adnams, Coca Cola Enterprises, Unilever, Ahold, European Retail Roundtable, Eurostar). Other suggested motives include gaining license to operate, raising the image of the company, and as part of risk management. As an example the general manager of energy and environment at Eurostar suggests that close interaction with NGOs is also a means to get direct feedback on initiatives to avoid provoking public criticism on their sustainability strategy at a later stage:

"Yes, which is very useful because they, you know part of their raison d'étre is to hold companies to account on what they're doing and they've got a good knowledge of what other organisations are doing so you know, we said 'what do you think if we stopped offsetting' and they said 'well actually we'd be quite pleased if you stopped offsetting because we don't really like it', so like okay fine, we won't get objections from you. And on our carbon targets as well that was very useful to say, look if we go for a, which we have done, we've committed to try and reduce our wider carbon emissions outside the journey by 25% by 2015, if we said that, came up with that target, how would that fit against what other corporates are doing, you know would it be seen, we want to be ambitious, we want to be ahead of leading the pack and that again was useful, that they said 'yes, if you said 10%, we'll probably say oh that's all, you know a bit weak and you know not very strong' so that's where the relationship is really useful."
(T17, L196-207)

7.4.4 Characteristics of an 'involve' communications strategy

The vast majority of the case companies' (14) reports on communications practices to their suppliers are characterised as using an involve strategy. The suppliers are considered as very important as they control a key position in order to assist the firm in delivering sustainable solutions. The communications strategy to this stakeholder group thus aims at involving the suppliers to take actions that will support the communicating company's sustainability strategy. Broadly, it seems there are two different approaches to this stakeholder category. Firstly there is communications taking the format of specifications, supplier codes, and scorecards for operational issues, which seems similar to an inform strategy, as the supplier will receive requirements and is expected to conform. Many of the food and drink manufacturers for example suggest that the retailers would require them to comply and be innovative and that these communications are experienced as very dictating and completely on the retailers' terms.

This experience is possibly different for smaller companies, as some of them will have chosen suppliers sharing a similar ethos and consequently the communications will be more open and balanced. Importantly, there is another strand of communications to suppliers that takes quite a different approach, and that is communications with the aim to stimulate the supplier to be innovative and find new sustainable solutions. This kind of communications often takes its form in meetings, sometimes between the supplier and the communicating company, and sometimes the company will invite several suppliers to create a form of summit where good practices can be exchanged (Coca Cola Enterprises, M&S, Unilever, Ahold). Of the 14 case companies suggesting an involve communications strategy with suppliers, nine suggest that for a selected number of suppliers there is also a higher level of communications, more towards 'partner'. The relationship with these suppliers is reportedly more open and transparent, collaborating on innovation taking a longer-term view. For example several companies report on practices of working with several suppliers together to share good practices (Rare Tea Company, Unilever, Ahold, Coca Cola Enterprises). The former company buyer for margarine packaging at Unilever, reports on a communications strategy resembling an involve strategy with suppliers, where suppliers are invited to present ideas both individually and in summits with other suppliers, and that this works best if the dialogue is balanced and not too restricted.

Coca Cola Enterprises, as another example, identify a number of suppliers for packaging, transport, equipment, and specifically sugar, as having a big impact on the overall value chain sustainability and therefore selecting those for closer collaboration. This collaboration is not just one-to-one but broader collaboration between a number of key suppliers and Coca Cola Enterprises, as expressed by the head of procurement at Coca Cola Enterprises at the panel debate:

"The point I would like to add is we mentioned we had a supplier summit earlier this year, and one of the things we've done is put our top suppliers, our key strategic suppliers together in a workshop environment so working together about some of the challenges we heard about today and we will continue that journey. So it's not just about a one-to-one relationship with our supplier but how, as a group of suppliers, a group of businesses can work together to drive towards some of the challenges you talked about, and it is a journey and we are learning through those dialogues."
(T11, L890-897)

The question is whether this is a genuine partnership, where the discussion is fully symmetric, or if the communications are still more of an involve strategy. The comment from the Coca Cola Enterprises CEO indicates that these discussions are still very much on the terms of Coca Cola Enterprises as he phrases his response stating that they want to help the suppliers to understand *what is expected from them*, rather than an approach where Coca Cola Enterprises are also fully prepared to change:

"It's really important I think for all of our suppliers first to recognize and I think most of you do, but I think it's important for you to hear from the CEO, you know, the old days of suppliers relationships was about quality, service and price and the game has changed dramatically today, sustainability is a fourth component on that set of pillars and it is equally, if not more important than the other three and as you heard from David and Joe, we want to work with you, we want to help you understand what we expect from you, and what you can do to help us just again."
(T11, L961-967)

So, while many retailers and brand owners suggest they have 'partner' relationships with

their respective key suppliers, the majority of the brand owners' experiences are that they are being dictated to and dominated by the retailers, all on the retailers' terms and that this cannot be described as 'partner' communication, as described in following quote by the former chairman of the packaging and environment group at Unilever:

"Well, retailers will lay down very rigidly what is required"
(T6, L171)

This is an issue raised as very challenging, especially by the smaller food/drink manufacturers. Equally, moving further up the value chain the packaging suppliers feel squeezed both by the retailers and food/drinks manufacturers, as expressed by the CEO of the Packaging Federation:

"*Since you're looking at the tensions in the industry, where those tensions sit, there are unbelievably difficult commercial tensions. Um, our industry is very vulnerable indeed to the purchasing power of particularly the retailers, because the retailers drive the packer/fillers. I mean even people like Coca Cola and so on clearly have their own purchasing power.*"
(T13, L316-321)

And further:

"*But they are nothing like as brutal as the retailers are and that almost overrides everything. And I think if you were looking at what tension drives our industry, it's that tension that drives our industry. It isn't the tension of issues like sustainability and so on.*"
(T13, L323-326)

Consequently, many of the food and drink manufacturers suggest that their communications strategy to retailers takes the form of inform and/or consult, and the reason why the communications strategy is not more balanced is the power of the retailers, and that effectively the food and drink manufacturers are left to respond only to the retailers' diktat.

The retailers with their own label (M&S and Morrisons) suggest that their collaboration with the own label suppliers is much closer and more interactive compared to branded food/drink suppliers, the reason being the higher level of control over the own brand suppliers. Collaboration with own label suppliers seems quite intense and goes several steps back in the supply chain, allowing for a life cycle perspective. The head of climate change at M&S admits that they can exert a high level of control over their suppliers. The communications seem to be similar to an involve strategy, involving the suppliers through both directives and specifications but also encouragements to come up with innovations. For example M&S organize supplier exchange sessions aiming at suppliers sharing experiences and stimulating greater innovation.

A similar view is expressed by the respondent at Morrisons, where own label suppliers are seen as key stakeholders with close collaboration, whereas other food and drinks brand suppliers are seen as having their own sustainability agenda and responsibilities:

> *"Not necessarily because brand owners, by and large, have their own sustainability agenda, or acting fairly responsible anyway so because of our lack of control, we largely leave them to it, I think if there was an incident where they were doing something we seriously disagree with, then I think we would begin to have those conversations, you know, they have, you know, if you look at bigger companies, they have big publicized agendas."*
> (T22, L62-67)

Just as Morrisons don't seem to consider the food and drink brand owners as key stakeholders, there appears to be limited interaction in the other direction, as the respondent suggests that Morrisons don't get many suggestions from these suppliers on improvement or actions to improve sustainability.

As regards integrated suppliers, the respondent at Morrison suggests there is a high level of collaboration, where objectives and targets are set together with the suppliers, and signed by both parties. This communications strategy thus seems to be more similar to a partner strategy:

> *"It is through working with suppliers and setting some goals and objectives and working with them in a team towards those objectives. And, you know, some of them are long term so we are working with certain suppliers several years towards the same objective because some of them are technically very challenging, you know, the objective is still there and we've both signed on to them and they are still working towards them..."*
> (T22, L228-233)

Further evidence of the partner strategy is presented in the next section.

7.4.5 Characteristics of a 'partner' communications strategy

As can be seen in Table 7.2, the interviews suggest that the communications strategy with the highest level of interaction (partner) takes place with employees, with 14 of the case companies claiming that the level of interaction with internal stakeholders could be described as partnership. The main reasons quoted for this close collaboration are the employees' important role in executing the sustainability agenda, and their interface with customers. Activities to empower employees were mentioned, including appointing internal sustainability champions, rewards for sustainability initiatives, formalised sustainability aspects in all development work, and part of managers' evaluation. It should however be noted that in some interviews (Nestlé, Abel & Cole and Adnams), it appears that it might be primarily the senior managers that are fully involved in strategy setting, whereas more junior employees should perhaps be categorized rather in the involve category. For example the tone on Nestlé's website is very focused on a compliance culture, which might indicate that the sustainability strategy is very much top-driven in the company, requiring obedience from employees:

> *"We believe in the importance of a strong compliance culture that is fully embedded in our business. The Corporate Business Principles and the supporting documents reflect this commitment and thus protect the trust of our consumers and other stakeholders in the Nestlé brand."*
> (The Nestlé Corporate Business Principles 2010, p. 3, available on www.nestle.com)

and further:

> "*As the Chairman and the Chief Executive Officer of Nestlé, we are committed to making sure that our entire Company is managed according to these principles and require adherence to them from all our employees around the world.*"
>
> (The Nestlé Corporate Business Principles 2010, p. 3, available on www.nestle.com)

At Adnams the culture is rather to stimulate innovation from employees, as is evident in the following quote by the CEO:

> "*We motivate people, I think really we've got a philosophy of trying to catch people doing things right rather than catching them doing things wrong and you now, in the western world we have a habit with catching people doing things wrong, with telling them off and crushing their self-esteem so, and my management team, one of the mantras I have to them is one of the roles is to get ordinary people to do extraordinary things and that sounds cliché but that's really what we are looking to do.*"
>
> (T14, L128-133)

In the previous section it was mentioned that retailers and food and drink manufacturers would seek a partner communications strategy with some key suppliers, because they want to stimulate collaboration for longer term innovations (Nestlé), or there are existing good relationships and strategic value (Eurostar, Ahold), or a dependence on suppliers to drive positive change along the whole value chain (Eurostar), as the supplier would be close to a sustainability issue (Coca Cola Enterprises). It was found however that in many cases, evidence rather points towards more imbalanced communications strategies.

There are nevertheless some examples of where the relationship between suppliers and manufacturers takes a more symmetric approach. The Rare Tea Company, a small company, seems to take a stance of communications on equal terms with their suppliers, more resembling a true partner strategy. This approach might be due to the small size of the focal organisation. There is similar evidence from some of the other small case companies (Rude Health, Suma), indicating that the communications strategy is primarily driven by the relative size of supplier versus focal organisation.

Thus, while the partner communications strategy is commonly suggested by the case companies when they talk about their key suppliers, it seems that the dynamics in the communications are still not fully balanced and it is questionable if it is correct to call this a partner communications strategy, or if it is rather an involve strategy. The exception might be smaller companies (like Rare Tea Company, Rude Health, Suma), where the suppliers are larger or of equal size, leading to a more balanced communications strategy.

Several of the larger case companies (Coca Cola Enterprises, Nestlé, Unilever, Ahold, M&S, Apetito), and of the trade organisations (British Retail Consortium, European Retail Roundtable, Food and Drink Federation, Packaging Federation), suggest that close interaction with industry colleagues takes place through forums and roundtables (e.g. Sustainable Packaging Coalition, Consumer Goods Forum, the European Food Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) Round Table, ECR - Efficient Consumer Response, Courtauld Commitment, etc.) and that this is a successful method to meet and collaborate on equal and non-competitive terms, which is more likely to enable positive change from a life cycle perspective. There are several types of these collaborations, spanning from collaboration within one section of the value chain, (e.g. 'Five-fold Environmental Ambition' initiated by Food and Drink Federation for food and drink brand owners, 'The Better Retailing Climate' for retailers initiated by British Retail Consortium, and 'Code for Environmentally Sustainable Business' initiated by European Retail Roundtable) to wider initiatives including several players along the food and drink value chain (e.g. the 'Courtauld Commitment' initiated by WRAP).

The director of communications at the Food and Drink Federation for example praises the Courtauld initiative driven by WRAP where food/drink manufacturers, retailers and other channel members participate:

> "*Our members find it quite a helpful environment because WRAP provided a kind of non-competitive environment by which members can discuss these issues with retailers.*"
> (T4, L198-200)

It should however be noted, that not all participants agree on the effectiveness of the 'Courtauld commitment', with the CEO of the Packaging Federation accusing this

initiative of focusing on suboptimal issues, and collaboration driven more by politics rather than in a genuine interest in driving positive sustainability change.

The communications strategy applied for these industry-wide initiative contexts are described as a two-way balanced partner strategy. It is suggested that participation in these forums is good for the image, an excellent source for learning from others, and for gaining collaborative power to lobbying with governments, with the ultimate aim of keeping the industry sector competitive, as is evident in the quote below by the director of communications at the Food and Drink Federation:

> *"So, the Guardian are running one in the next few weeks and, you know, they'll have colleagues there from NGOs, from industry, consumer groups, and that will help us do a few things. It will help us to take the temperature on particular issues, but it also gives us an opportunity to communicate on a relatively informal basis what we're doing, and sometimes to stakeholders that we wouldn't always have contact with. And they're also key places to learn. I mean, just take that Guardian one as an example. There are other sectors of industry there who have been active on sustainability issues that even we haven't thought about or they're a long way ahead of us because, you know, they were under the public spotlight much earlier, and so they're good places to learn about what's happening and to help us to keep our approach fresh as well."*
> *(T5, L520-528)*

Another example of a collaborative effort is the European Food Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) Round Table, aimed at specifically encouraging collaboration on sustainability initiatives along the whole value chain. This round table (co-chaired by the European Commission and food supply chain partners) claims to represent not only the food and drink manufacturers but the whole value chain, with participants from also retailers, consumer organisations and NGOs.

> *"The European Food SCP Round Table's unique structure, with participation of all food supply chain members at European level on an equal footing, enables it to take a harmonised, life cycle approach and facilitates an open and results-driven dialogue among all players along the food chain."*

(http://www.food-scp.eu/node/14, accessed 28.6.12)

The members of this SCP round table are listed on the website, and comprise a broad range of stakeholders in the food/drink value chain, from farmer associations, consumer cooperatives, packaging manufacturers and recovery organisations, NGOs, food manufacturers, etc. There is however no retailer or retailer organisation mentioned on the list of members, only M&S mentioned as a consulted non-member (http://www.food-scp.eu/node/29, accessed 28.6.12). This indicates some imbalance in this stakeholder initiative, and points to a possible tension between retailers on the one hand, and the rest of the food and drink value chain on the other hand. It was also mentioned by the environment policy manager at the Food and Drink Federation that WRAP has set up a similar parallel forum called the Product Research Forum, looking into similar issues, like assessment metrics and communications. There is thus evidence, through these parallel, possibly competing, initiatives and forums (which might also exclude certain value chain members), that the effectiveness of these collaborative efforts to drive change along the whole value chain can be questioned. There are also critical voices from further up the value chain, where the CEO of the Packaging Federation complains on the power imbalance in the chain leading to initiatives like the Courtauld commitment taking an inappropriate focus based on the retailers' perspectives.

So while the trade organisations agree that these types of industry sector forums are very efficient for finding solutions to common issues, and to convey a more unified voice to external stakeholders, there are also critical voices, as presented above. In addition there are concerns on how to balance collaboration with competition, as expressed at the Coca Cola Enterprise panel debate by Catherine Cameron, senior associate of the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership:

"How very interesting, I was at a meeting yesterday with someone working in another sector and his observation was 'when did leading edge become bleeding edge?' and both John and Mike have mentioned this need to kind of blend, where is the crossover between competition, Mark's question, and collaboration and when I was in South Africa earlier this year, they were talking about that in a very animated way as the group of FMCG companies and they were saying 'we need to come up with a new word that reflects what

> *we are doing now and it's something like* collabation *cause it's partly one and partly the other'; and companies right now are really feeling that way in this space about what that means between 'you need to collaborate in some areas' and then actually towards the end, you are going back down into competition, so how to really work this and it's something that is a journey to work all way through."*
> (T11, L609-619)

The respondent at Nestlé however stresses that transparent communications on sustainability initiatives to stakeholders are not seen as risky in terms of revealing company practices, as Nestlé see sustainability strategies as something that should ideally be harmonized between companies and that it should not be the base for competition. It is through the products or services that competition should take place. He admits that Nestlé is using a responsibility ethos as a competitive means but that it is on a different level. As an example he said that methods to assess sustainability impact should be harmonized and should not be a means for differentiation.

There is generally very limited evidence of close direct interaction with governments and regulators, with only the head of the Food and Drink Programme at WRAP considering the government as possibly their most important stakeholder, which is not surprising since the government is also the funder of WRAP. The respondent mentions that in any communications by WRAP, the government is consulted beforehand to ensure that the views of the government are not challenged. Sometimes therefore communications messages need to be adapted to harmonize with the opinion of the government.

Some larger corporations (Coca Cola Enterprises, Nestlé, Unilever, Eurostar, M&S) also take some of their NGO relationships further to create more of a partner type of communications strategy, with the NGOs being invited to advisory boards, and where collaboration is based on more of a mutual balanced communication. The head of climate change at M&S, for example, mentions that M&S conducted research to identify the most influential opinion formers on sustainability before launching Plan A, and found that about 100 people had significant influence on what was said about sustainability and retailers. These top 100 would be academics, NGOs, governments, independent consultants etc. Names like WRAP, INCPEN (research organisation for packaging), WWF, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, DEFRA, Technology Strategy Board, the Sustainability Consortium,

Julia Hailes, etc. belong to this group of stakeholders. The interview reveals that the strategy in communicating with these key opinion formers is to ensure they are clearly informed not only on progress but also about challenges. The respondent suggests that M&S is searching a two-way dialogue with these stakeholders, as they want to have an open dialogue to get guidance and feedback. They therefore invite some opinion formers to their advisory board. The interaction with some of these opinion formers is reportedly very close, and it is further suggested that advisory boards and annual opinion-former events are seen as particularly effective:

> *"We've found, two things that we've found work really well for opinion-formers, both from an output point of view and also from just being efficient, because you can spend your whole life communicating and actually not do anything as well. So what we've found works really well is this concept of advisory panels, advisory groups, so calling people together for a specific purpose where you've got, you know, 'Here's something we really want to do to engage with this', go on and solve the problem, or give us feedback on a particular thing, or meet with us every quarter and just share a perspective on how things are going. So advisory groups and panels, and that works really well, and then the second thing is we do an annual opinion-former event. Every year we kind of say, 'We will... we'll gather you all together in the one place, it will be a very efficient use of time, we'll give you a quick download on progress to date, some of the highlights, you know, what has worked well, what hasn't, and then any questions answered'. You know, so, and all the key people from across the business are available, and people can ask any questions they want, any challenges they want. So that works really, that probably covers 80% of our comms with opinion-formers."*
> (T24, L274-289)

Further examples of M&S's ongoing partnership with NGOs and charities, driven by mutual benefits, are presented on their website:

> *"For example, WWF is helping us to address environmental issues associated with sourcing cotton, wood and fish and we are helping them to fund vital orang-utan conservation in the heart of Borneo; Oxfam has helped us encourage clothing recycling whilst also raising money for their vital work. We have also worked with a range of*

partners for over three years to run our Marks & Start work experience programme for disadvantaged groups, which has helped over 800 people get back into work in the UK.''
(http://plana.marksandspencer.com/about/partnerships, accessed on 17.9.12)

7.5 Summary

This chapter has introduced the stakeholder categorisation attributes as suggested by the case companies. Further five strategies for CS communications were presented: *inform*, *influence*, *consult*, *involve*, and *partner*. Each of these five strategies was reviewed in detail giving evidence from the case companies on the nature of communications and the primary communications objectives. The next level to investigate according to the conceptual framework is the function of strategic ambiguity in these communications strategies. As the notion of applying strategic ambiguity to CS communications is rather novel and thus requires a high level of evidence, this will be presented in a separate chapter, which now follows.

8 EVIDENCE OF STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY IN CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS

8.1 Introduction

As was discussed previously (6.7.7), strategic ambiguity is sometimes perceived as a negative word, and therefore during the interviews the question whether a company uses strategic ambiguity was left towards the end of the conversation. This chapter will provide evidence of strategic ambiguity, reviewing motives behind the application of this concept and in what format it is employed by the case companies. It will specifically depict how strategic ambiguity is presented for each of the communications strategies.

8.2 The motives for using strategic ambiguity in communications

During the interviews, the respondents were asked to discuss under what circumstances precise or specific wordings would be avoided in CS communications, with the results presented in Table 8.1 below:

Table 8.1: Empirical evidence of motives behind the application of strategic ambiguity

Motives for strategic ambiguity	Number of case companies indicating this motive
Complex sustainability objective	7
Targets that are not measurable	5
Stimulate innovation/initiatives/interest	5
Complex audience (including conflicting)	5
Strategic level/long term strategy	5
Level of interaction/trust in the existing relationship	3
Capability of focal organisation	2
Capability of stakeholder	2
Time	2
Less resources needed	1
Image	1

The most frequent rationale given for non-specific (ambiguous) communications is the

complexity of the topic itself (Adnams, Coca Cola Enterprises, Nestlé, Unilever, Ahold, Eurostar, WRAP). Sustainability is claimed to have many definitions, may be difficult and confusing to understand, and consequently also sustainability objectives can be quite complex. As an example, the former chairman of the Packaging and Environment Group at Unilever explains that sustainability communications have evolved from being purely technical to being much more complex over the years, both in terms of the boundary of responsibility and the sheer number of issues or factors to communicate. Simplification is therefore important to enable effective communications. Or, as the M&S respondent suggests on the complexity of sustainability:

> *"Well, you don't know what the solutions are. You might know what the issue is, but there's no point, you don't want to constrain people's thinking around what the solution is by being too specific too soon."*
> *(T24, L381-383)*

As the effort has progressed from a fairly technical approach focusing on individual companies with relatively easily measurable issues, to a more holistic strategic approach considering the broader value chain and a life cycle perspective of products, the measurability of sustainability's impact along the whole life cycle has become very challenging and many of the issues under debate are not easily measurable. It is therefore suggested that where there are no coherent and widely accepted assessment methods, specific communications are not possible and ambiguous wordings can add value (Adnams, Nestlé, Ahold, M&S, Packaging Federation). Ahold for example use numerical communications on issues that are quantifiable, but if that is lacking the message must take a more general approach:

> *"Yes, I think the key is we want to make sure when we do numbers, we want to, ideally, we want to qualify as much as we can but if there isn't a common understanding of what that quantification is and what a sensible target is, then we'll probably put a one year, we'll put a target that says "you have to work out what the measurable target is" so we've done several of these in stages" (T8, L404-408)*

Another rationale quoted for strategic ambiguity is to stimulate innovation and initiatives (Coca Cola Enterprise, M&S, European Retail Roundtable, Food industry consultant), and the Coca Cola Enterprise focus group suggests that this could also stimulate interest in a topic. It is implied that by leaving a message less specific, there is more room for flexibility, which is expressed by the head of climate change at M&S in the quote below:

> *"So, if you look at our commitments in Plan A version 2, they are, some of them are really quite specific. There's 180 things we said we'd do, so we have to do that, and you know, some people will have a very, very specific objective because their area of work aligns with one of those particular areas. So, you know, for example, our stores will improve energy efficiency by 25% per square foot. Well, if you're the energy manager in our store business, that's your objective. That's the kind of, it's very clear. Some of the others are more like, more directional, like we will... I'm trying to think of one, but we'll get this campaigned for customers, so again, that's something that lots of people in the business could be working towards, and we're not, we don't prescribe exactly how it will be done. I think what we've... we've made progress in the last year in coming up with sort of very high-level, generic commitments which drive a lot of change. So our Exec directives for both business units have their objectives to increase the number of products that are Plan A attributes. Now that's specifically up to them to make progress and measurable, but it's also general enough to allow a lot of innovation in the different categories to decide what is the right attribute for their category. So that's kind of the way we try and drive it."*
> (T24, L362-377)

Another example is the European Retail Roundtable, who communicate in very general terms on targets/objectives as the aim is to stimulate initiatives but not dictating what to do and how. The European Affairs manager at the European Retail Roundtable believes more companies might take initiatives when specific targets are not communicated, as it prevents the exclusion of less capable companies. Instead the communications are based on giving positive examples on what can be done.

The focus group at Coca Cola Enterprises mentions the Kingfisher Group as an example of a sustainability plan that seems to practise strategic ambiguity. The plan, called Kingfisher Net Positive, has stimulated a lot of interest even if it is not clear what it means.

> *"It commits us to a new challenge: to go beyond neutrality, to no longer strive to 'do less' but to seek to make a positive contribution to the world's future"*
> *(http://www.kingfisher.com/netpositive/index.asp?pageid=1, accessed on 20.7.12)*

So, the Coca Cola Enterprises focus group agrees that an ambiguous message can be very powerful to stimulate interest.

Diverse or complex or conflicting target audiences for communications is another driver given for the use of strategic ambiguity (Adnams, Coca Cola Enterprises, Eurostar, Suma, WRAP). The focus group at Coca Cola Enterprises, for example, suggests that the higher the complexity of objectives and stakeholders, the more ambiguous a message is preferred. However, it is also argued that sometimes the more resisting are the stakeholders, the more specific communications are advisable, so the complexity of stakeholder groups might have some exceptions when specific communications will work better than ambiguous communications. It is for example suggested that some stakeholder groups ask for specific messages, especially media.

The general manager of environment and energy at Eurostar suggests that suppliers are examples of heterogeneous groups. At present, many of the existing targets by Eurostar are very specific and numerical, however it has been recognised that for example when it comes to supplier requirements setting specific targets might not work as these will be different for different businesses, and this is where strategic ambiguity can add value.

The project manager at Suma highlights the benefits of using general, ambiguous messages in internal communications as it gives better scope to manoeuvre things when the audience is diverse or has conflicting opinions, and especially in the context of Suma being a co-operative where all employees are involved in decision making:

> *"But it is, it's very difficult to try and fight when there's 120 people all with a very strong opinion about what we're doing. Things have to be left a little bit loose, if you have a very strict, very definite plan then you know it's not going to be right somewhere along the line, so you kind of have to leave things quite broad and quite loose so you've got room to manoeuvre within... you know, have your founding principles and move within those*

> *principles as much as you need to is sort of the way that we work."*
> *(T21, L402-408)*

The head of the food and drinks programme at WRAP gives a rather ambiguous reply to the value of strategic ambiguity, but there is an interesting note of 'sensitivity' in the quote below, highlighting that strategic ambiguity could prevent conflicts with stakeholders:

> *"I would have thought the direct communication is usually better, you know, we tend... a lot of the time we're dealing in facts, yeah, the cost savings which could be generated, the progress which has been achieved to date so we're dealing in facts. We also nevertheless do consider ourselves to be thought leaders, and we would write opinion pieces in key trade journals, and you know, we... and coming back to the ambiguity bit we do need to be sensitive in terms of what and how we communicate because we recognise and fully understand the sensitivities that there are within for example the packaging industry, if we were to shout about the great achievements made when a particular retailer moved from glass packaging for its peanut butter or olive oil to plastic packaging, yeah, you know, and we are very careful not to encourage such change in any direct way. Nor to imply that we have been doing that in the media or in any of the things that we publish. So you know, I think it's generally speaking specific messages which we're putting out rather than ambiguous ones but, you know, we're also ensuring that the sensitivity which we're aware of are recognised in that communication."*
> *(T23, L278-290)*

An interpretation of this quote is that fact-based communications, on financial aspects and performance are specific, whereas on sensitive topics, where not all stakeholders agree or where a stakeholder might even be disadvantaged, communications tend to be more ambiguous.

Another driver for strategic ambiguity that is mentioned is strategic versus operational level (Adnams, Apetito, Coca Cola Enterprises, M&S and Suma). The focus group at Coca Cola Enterprises suggests that strategic ambiguity might work well on a strategic level and for longer-term strategies, however on a more operational level more specific information is required. For example someone working in the factory will want to know exactly what

to do.

Apetito's first sustainability plan, launched in 2007, had many specific targets to be reached by 2012. The respondent at Apetito reveals that now they are reviewing its progress and trying to set new targets for the future. This poses new challenges and as it is now seen that the focus is shifting from a more operational level to a business wide strategy, the communications are likely to become more ambiguous, as expressed by the respondent:

> *"Should we just do another five year plan or should we do it longer and less specific because a lot of the progress that has now to be made is very strategic. It actually involves a lot of investment, and redirection of the business. The first five years is straightforward efficiency, group business practice, good housekeeping in energy and water. Now is much more balanced investment by changing plans, that has to be strategic business decisions, so just a little bit of a pause while we think what the next set of aims/targets and vision is."*
> (T2, L15-22)

The respondent at Suma also stresses the value of ambiguous communications for longer-term strategies as opposed to day-to-day operations where specific communications are required:

> *"....but I think on some things we're very good and very specific, like we have a very tight and rigorous project management system, for the more micro managing of the business on a daily basis and even on a day-to-day basis we're very good and we've got very strict processes and systems in place to help us manage all of those kinds of things. The bits that we need to keep loose are the long-term vision and the long-term aims and the long-term strategy because we're changing as a business all the time because we're changing as members all the time and the business is the members, so we need to give us room to manoeuvre as much as we possibly can."*
> *(T21, L418-426)*

The level of interaction with a stakeholder and/or the trust in the relationship with the stakeholder can also determine how to best frame the message (Coca Cola Enterprises,

Eurostar, food industry consultant). The general manager of energy and environment at Eurostar mentions that with a new supplier they would be more specific, but as the relationship progresses the communications become more generic. The Coca Cola Enterprises focus group agrees that level of interaction is important as a rationale for strategic ambiguity but they were not sure quite how it should be applied. On the one hand close collaboration might mean that there is high level of transparency and that it is possible to be very specific, but other times ambiguous messages might stimulate innovation in such a context.

The capability of the focal organisation and of the stakeholders is also suggested as a rationale for using strategic ambiguity (Coca Cola Enterprises, M&S, European Retail Roundtable). The Coca Cola Enterprises focus group is however not clear how capability drives ambiguity. A higher capability of a stakeholder might mean that an ambiguous message is more effective as it can stimulate innovation. At the same time however it is mentioned that a higher capability of the communicating organisation requires more specific communications.

This view is further supported by the Coca Cola Enterprises chairman and CEO, John Brock, who describes in his speech at the sustainability panel debate that they view the plan as a journey, and that they are evolving from originally having set aspirational goals to now establishing quantitative measurable goals:

> *"We've become consistently, over the last five or six years, more ambitious with our goals and we are really proud with the fact that each year we get even more aggressive, we've evolved from a setting what I would call aspirational goals to really establishing very aggressive measurable goals with metrics, quantitative metrics and targets behind them."* (T11, L59-63)

The respondent at the European Retail Roundtable believes that more companies might take initiatives when specific targets are not communicated, as it prevents excluding less capable companies. It was also mentioned that specific targets are not possible because of differences between European countries on capability and procedures.

The head of climate change at M&S highlights the importance of developing the communications strategy so it matches the stage and maturity of sustainability development in the organisation:

> "*I think it's useful to frame it in the stages of evolution and maturity, and I think you have... it is important that the communication style is allowed to, you know, if you jump too quickly to one particular style, it might not be appropriate for the stage you're at. So if I think back to 2007, Year 1, our communications to customers were very much about, 'Here's what we've committed to do, and by the way, here's some examples of how we're making good progress'.*"
> (T24, L387-392)

At that point some, but not all, of the suppliers would start to take action even if it was not yet formally required by M&S. So the first step was to present the 'vision of the manifesto' and it was quite generic as:

> "*...we did that deliberately because we didn't want to impose our view of, you know, we don't know all the answers so we couldn't, we didn't know enough to say, 'Here's a 100 point plan that you need to do by next year'.*"
> (T24, L400-402)

Thus, the head of climate change at M&S suggests that as capability increases with the focal organisation the communications can be more specific.

Time is further suggested as an important factor in formulating a communications strategy (Coca Cola Enterprises and Eurostar), with the Coca Cola Enterprises focus group suggesting that ambiguous messages will only work for a certain time.

> "*You can't be ambiguous for too long or you will lose credibility*"
> (T12, L135)

And further:

> *"It can work effectively for a certain time but needs to be combined after a while with specific information. Thus 'Timing' could be another important criteria. Ambiguity will only work for so long*
>
> *(T12, L137-139)*

One could also possibly view this time factor as linked to capability, as the focus group at Coca Cola Enterprises suggests that as time passes and capability increases, stakeholders will expect more specific communications:

> *"For us being ambiguous would have made sense five years ago however now that we have progressed we are expected to be more specific"*
>
> *(T12, L151-152)*

The general manager of energy and environment at Eurostar mentions that a sustainability communications strategies need to evolve as attitudes and people change and also to keep the momentum going within the company. It is therefore important to have a two-way dialogue with staff to monitor what they understand and what they want to hear about.

Finally there are suggestions that ambiguous communications require less resources and could therefore be useful for smaller organisations (by the respondent at European Retail Roundtable), and that ambiguous communications are useful when the rationale for the communications is to build image (CEO of Adnams).

With these notions, it seems like despite the controversy of strategic ambiguity, there is evidence of the concept being a useful tool in CS communications, but what about negative aspects of using ambiguous communications? The next section will present findings of some of the risk elements, with suggested actions to ensure successful use of strategic ambiguity.

8.3   Avoiding the pitfalls of strategic ambiguity

While, the quotes presented in the previous section support the use of strategic ambiguity in different situations, some respondents categorically rejected strategic ambiguity, like the interview with the Eurostar chairman:

> *"Well, you see, I'm afraid I'm a bit cynical about these things. I think if people have got general and ambiguous targets it tells me they're not serious about doing very much. It's, I think it's more to make their life easier and try and present an image of being responsible. I mean, you know, you need to set measurable, numerical targets if you're really serious about things. You can't measure everything but, you know, those things that you can measure you should set numerical targets. And that's why, I mean, I insisted we're going to have a target for our carbon reduction because, you know, everything else is just words."*
>
> *(T16, L370-376)*

Interestingly however, the general manager of energy and environment has a slightly different perspective and suggests that to for example suppliers they communicate specific targets on well-defined areas, but when the aim is to stimulate innovation from these suppliers more vaguely phrased communications could be beneficial:

> "*But we are going to have to start engaging more closely with those suppliers to, um, in probably a less specific way to get them to help us meet those because it will be impossible for us to say 'no, we can't say, right you as a supplier, you must reduce your emissions by 25%'...*" (T17, L421-424)

Thus we have some contradiction here between the two Eurostar respondents. This could be due to inconsistency in how the interviewer explained what strategic ambiguity means. It is also interesting to note that while the chairman clearly opposed strategic ambiguity, Eurostar's branded sustainability programme 'Tread Lightly' is perhaps a good example of the use of an ambiguous theme allowing flexibility in interpretation.

It is suggested that ambiguous communications can work in organisations where there is a genuine sustainability motive behind the communications (food industry consultant, Julia Hailes). In addition the head of climate change at M&S advises that communications can benefit from being less specific, but that consistency is essential, with sufficient information, and a target that is challenging to obtain best possible collaboration on initiatives:

> *"So we have found we don't need to be very specific in... What, I guess, the learning we've found is we need to set some slightly more ambitious targets initially to get the level of thinking and step-change that you want, and we need to be consistent in continuing to, you know, what you'll find is that ten people will tell you it's impossible, and we keep going out to the market saying, 'This is what we want, this is what we want, we must find a way to get this solution'. And at some point, eventually, you find the solution. So I guess that has been our learning on Plan A in general, and it's worked in packaging as well too that, you know, when, I think when the initial targets were saying, 'We'll reduce waste packaging by 25% in 5 years', when that first came out there was a sense that that was crazy, insane, unrealistic, there was no way it was achievable. But we didn't, you know, we didn't moderate the target, it stayed as that was what we're looking for, that's what we must do, and now we're able, we are, they've actually achieved it a year early. So I guess being clear about the requirements, having a big enough step-change, sufficient levels of information and being consistent in what you're asking for."*
> *(T24, L125-140)*

It is further explained in the Plan A report (2012, p. 10) that ambitious targets drive innovation and sharpen people's engagement.

While we have seen examples where strategic ambiguity might add value, it is also linked with some risks. In internal communications for example, as suggested previously, strategic ambiguity might not work so well on an operational level, as expressed by Julia Hailes:

> *"Yeah, but of course the only interpretation of that can be, effectively, that they're not really meaning it because it's far too vague to opt on and it's not in your job brief, it's just a sort of vague application that, you know, that's what you want, the direction you want to go in, and it's clearly not a priority."*
> (T25, L163 – 166)

She therefore suggests that it is imperative that sustainability objectives are an integral part of job descriptions:

"You know, if you're busy and you're got 10 million things to do and you've got this sort of vague thing that someone wants you to be a bit more sustainable, greener and you don't really know what that means anyway because most of them don't, they're no better informed than many of the public, then it's never going to go anywhere. You know, if management are truly there, they've really got be much more specific as to what they want and when they want it and how they want it to be done."
(T25, L176-182)

It is further noted by Hailes that there needs to be genuine managerial commitment to sustainability as the credibility of any communications is otherwise at risk, and that the intentional use of misleading words is an example of where ambiguity causes damage:

"Well, I definitely have, because I think there are very different approaches to communication, ranging from the companies who are essentially just trying to tell the customer that what they're doing is green and actually, at this end of the spectrum, many of them don't really care whether what they're doing is green or not, but they're doing what the customer thinks is the best green option. So, they're playing on often a sort of misunderstanding from the public about the greenest option is. So, for example, the public generally assume that all packaging on sort of fruit and vegetables, that the less you can have, the better, which is, as you well know, not going to be the case, and equally, you know, that biodegradable plastic is always a good idea and the whole range of different sort of perceptions that the public will have. Oh, another sort of a big area, that is when companies sort of say something is natural and, you know, completely natural ingredients. You know, that sounds like a really good thing from a customer's point of view, but actually none of those things necessarily stack up."
(T25, L24-37)

According to Hailes, businesses have two communications options on sustainability, either to present detailed scientific facts to prove the case or to build trust with the consumers:

"So, in some ways, you know, it may be that there's a slightly different challenge. Instead of getting into the nitty-gritty of the issues, if M&S manages to sufficiently convince

opinion formers and people who know a bit and the opinion formers then rely that M&S is leading the way then, effectively, they don't necessarily need to go into every detail of all the different issues that they're addressing. So, it is actually sort of two slightly contrasting approaches."
(T25, L61-67)

Hailes concludes the interview by suggesting that the key features of an effective communications strategy, to get stakeholder on board, includes firstly to build trust, which can only be done if there is a genuine commitment from the company to drive change, and that the sustainability strategy fits the organisation's brand values. In addition it is essential this is driven from the top of the company with a visible senior 'figurehead' behind the programme. Lastly but not least, it is crucial that the economic aspect is integrated in the sustainability agenda to make it work long term.

So, in conclusion Hailes recommends that companies with a genuine sustainability agenda, have open, honest, transparent communications across their stakeholders, and they will engage with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, not just the value chain stakeholder, to drive change. The concept of branded sustainability programmes can be a very useful tool provided it is fully integrated across a corporation.

Other important aspects of successful communications raised in the interviews are to explain clearly the motives behind the sustainability strategy as suggested by the Eurostar chairman:

"And, I suppose, the other thing is just being, you know, open and, about your objectives, being clear what you want to achieve, why you want to achieve it, why it's important, why it could be useful, rather than assuming the other party understands all that."
(T16, L584-587)

Further the respondent commented that honestly communicating challenges increases the overall credibility.

"No, I know, yeah. I think that adds a touch of humility and realism. Yeah. And we've

always sought not to try to boast about stuff beyond what we actually think we're doing and, personally, I've always had a philosophy, 'It's better to tell people what you've done, not to tell people what you're going to do'. Because it carries rather more credibility if you've actually done it. And a lot of companies are telling their customers what they're <u>going</u> to do and, but nobody's ever really checking up whether they've done it or not. There's quite a lot of, sort of, green-wash communications are about intentions rather than achievements."
(T16, L606-612)

This section has highlighted risks with strategic ambiguity and suggested actions to overcome these potential issues. While the previous section (8.2) discussed the overall motives behind the application of strategic ambiguity, the question remains on the motives for strategic ambiguity for each of the five proposed CS communications strategies, and further how strategic ambiguity can be applied for each of these strategies. The following sections will therefore discuss the five CS communications strategies in detail, presenting the underlying motives and formats for the possible use for strategic ambiguity.

8.4   Combining strategic ambiguity with the communications strategies of inform, influence, consult, involve and partner

This section will bring together the review from the stakeholder communications strategies with those on strategic ambiguity motives, revisiting the findings on how communications take place to the various stakeholder categories with the strategies of inform, influence, consult, involve and partner, looking for evidence and motives for strategic ambiguity for each of these communications strategies.

8.4.1   Strategic ambiguity in the 'inform' communications strategy

With consumers, the inform technique involves using symbolic and non-technical communications. The M&S respondent for example highlights the importance of not preaching, but using positive, upbeat messages. Messages need to be simplistic and appeal to a very heterogenic group of consumers. M&S also utilise more objective communicators, to give consumers an easy to understand message delivered by someone

who is not directly an M&S employee to increase credibility. The head of stakeholder engagement and corporate responsibility at Coca Cola Enterprises also highlights the importance of simplistic and positive messages, and as an example mentions how Coca Cola Enterprises developed their message on carbon footprint, which originally was phrased as:

> "*Reduce the overall carbon footprint of our business operations by an absolute 15 percent by 2020 as compared to our 2007 baseline.*"
> (CRS Report 2010/11, p. 15)

It was found that consumers did not easily understand this message, and as a response it was simplified into a message easier to visualise:

> "*Reduce the carbon footprint of the drink in your hand by a third.*"
> (The Sustainability Plan, 2011, p. 19)

Smaller companies, such as the Rare Tea Company, rely on storytelling to get the message across, or, like Rude Health, 'rant' to raise issues. Overall these communications are rather non-specific, relying on symbolic and simple messages that are likely to be interpreted in different ways by the very heterogeneous stakeholder group of consumers. The word 'ambiguity' however, carries some undesirable notions, and several respondents categorically reject strategic ambiguity in sustainability communications, as in the quote below by the founder of the Rare Tea Company:

> "*With my customers, specific, they don't want any bullshit. The kind of people who buy my tea, they really cut straight to the chase, they know exactly what they're asking for, they're not mass market customers. That's why it sells in Waitrose, because it's an expensive product. The kind of person who buys good wine, good cheese, good olive oil. So they say 'What does that mean, wild? What does it mean, rare tea? Why is the company called Rare Tea?'*"
> (T18, L582-587)

Interestingly however, while the idea of ambiguity is rejected there is still evidence of its

presence at the Rare Tea Company in their storytelling:

"The whole mountain range is full of wild, there's no machinery, nothing, they harvest this on horseback. So it's not organic, it's wild, it's lovely, natural, and because the Finbos wild mountain plants all grow together in a symbiotic relationship their roots are very well protected, it flowers in the winter… sorry, in the height of summer its 40 degrees, crazily hot, but it doesn't need any irrigation, it needs nothing, and the flavour is much richer and better. So this is incredible, sustainable farming practice, and I can say 'wild', which is great, so it works on both levels, it's a lovely story, and you need stories to sell products. Not good enough to have a good product, that was the mistake I made at the beginning; I had a beautiful tea, but if I can't tell you a story about it…"
(T18, L66-74)

The word 'wild' is here similar to what Julia Hailes mentions about 'natural' (in Section 8.3), a vague word that can have multiple meanings. The Rare Tea Company respondent stresses however that her communications strategy is built around sincerity, enthusiasm and storytelling, and these are the key features suggested for successful marketing communications. There is another campaign with evidence of ambiguity, i.e. the recent campaign on 'de-bagging' Britain. The objective with this campaign is to change people's habits when it comes to tea drinking, and to move away from tea bags to using loose tea, which delivers tastier and healthier tea with less environmental impact. So, the idea is to educate the consumer, to raise the awareness of how high quality tea looks and tastes. The Rare Tea Company has done this using film clips on their website and humour as the word 'debagging' in the military means to take one's trousers down.

Another aspect revealed is that due to consumer misconception or poor knowledge of sustainability issues, certain areas will not be communicated until the time is right. As an example, the respondent at Abel & Cole highlights misconceptions around packaging, and that their strategy is to wait to discuss this until the consumers are ready to hear the message.

Consumers, who more actively seek information about organisations' sustainability work, are also targeted through web communications and sustainability/CSR reports. These channels provide a mix of generic and specific communications. Issues that are measurable

are often communicated specifically, with for example emissions and water consumption typically reported using numeric formats. There are also communications on future targets and here the communications are specific on measurable issues and ambiguous on areas where for example the optimum target is not known, or on issues that are not measurable.

Shareholders/investors are kept informed through meetings where the sustainability strategy is communicated, and through the annual reports and sustainability reports. The reports as discussed above will provide a mix of specific and ambiguous communications, which is also suggested to be the case in the shareholder meetings. The researcher did not however participate in any shareholder meetings and have thus has not had the chance to verify if this is the case.

When studying Unilever's website, it is interesting to note that sustainability is framed differently on different pages of the website and annual report. Stakeholders who specifically focus on, and search for, information on sustainability will most likely read the webpages talking about the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan where their sustainability strategy is projected as focussing on improving health, well-being and livelihoods while reducing negative environmental impact. At the same time, stakeholders who have an interest in the financial side of Unilever will read about the company's mission and vision (the compass) on the website and in the annual report, and will be informed on how sustainability makes sense from a business perspective, thus highlighting the economic pillar of sustainability.

Another interesting example worth highlighting is how Unilever's 'Sustainable Living Plan' is explained in the annual report. Here it takes a slightly different angle compared to the description on the website's presentation on Sustainable living:

> *"A further element of our business model is **SUSTAINABLE LIVING**. External factors will move it from being the choice of a concerned few to a new norm for billions in this decade. Companies who move quickly to enable it can seize major competitive advantage by doing so. Our aim is to help people move to a more sustainable way of using our products and reduce the current rate of consumption of scarce resources."*
> (Unilever Annual Report and Accounts 2011, p. 9)

In this example it is highlighted that having a sustainability strategy can benefit the company in terms of raising the competitive advantage, thus using financial incentives to gain approval from stakeholders with a financial interest.

Several of the case companies have special branded programmes for sustainability, which are the centre of communications on sustainability. A catchy brand name or slogan, which allows flexibility in interpretation, will simplify a complex message and make it more memorable. An example is M&S's 'Plan A', which is widely promoted in the stores, on the website and in other forms of communications, similarly Coca Cola Enterprises communicate their programme 'Deliver for Today, Inspire for Tomorrow' through all communications channels. Another example is Nestlé's 'Creating Shared Value', which serves as a platform for communications to consumers as well as other stakeholders.

8.4.2 Strategic ambiguity in the 'influence' communications strategy

The influence communications strategy is of very similar format as the inform strategy to consumers, based on positive, symbolic and fairly non-specific language, often combined with rewards to reinforce positive behaviour. A difference however is that the objective is to stimulate interest <u>and</u> initiatives.

M&S encourages their consumers to take actions in the following way:

> "*We want to involve you in Plan A. We've created a series of pledges that you can take to make your lifestyle more sustainable. Some are quick and easy, and some need a bit more commitment, but all of them will help you to make a difference.*
>
> *Once you have taken a pledge and registered, we'll plant your very own tree on this site where you can display your pledges and monitor your progress. So why not take a pledge today? Together we can make a difference.*"
> (http://plana.marksandspencer.com/you-can-do, accessed on 18.9.12)

The quote also highlights that these consumer-targeted communications are carried out through the branded programme 'Plan A'. Providing convenient opportunities to improve

behaviour is another important aspect of this communication. For example Ahold is launching bike pick-up points for shopping to encourage the use of cycles instead of cars. It is suggested by the Recycling Manager UK at Coca Cola Enterprises that specific communications are not always possible or effective:

"I don't have a number on the amount of recycling we want to achieve. There was a number before that we wanted to recover the equivalent to everything we put out in the market and more, but I don't think these numbers are very helpful because I think what we need to concentrate on is the overall carbon footprint of that company, not just recycling and educating the consumer and working in a general fashion that is in keeping the CRS objectives overall so having a specific figure of how much you want, how do you measure it? How do you measure that? The number of bottles you collect, I don't think. I'm not sure we can do that. We can measure the collected just within an hour, um, activations that we've done but they are not going to be really big, they are big numbers but they are not the numbers that we are after or how do we measure them, the effectiveness of all these recycling boxes that we've given out, and how many people now recycle as a result and therefore, all the recycling rates, all the local governments, local, our council across the whole country, it's not something we can do with any, um, surety, is it?" (T10, L464-477)

Instead simplistic and positive communications are more likely to lead to engagement from consumers, focussed around 'open happiness':

"I think you have to, there are a couple of things, we know from our research that consumers do not respond well to an end-of-the-world-is-now-type of messaging, it turns them off because they feel the problem is so huge that anything they do is not going to make any difference. So the messages you give need to be small, positive messages, a bit like Tesco's "every little helps" kind of messages and you need to make it easy for them to do that. So, um, definitely positive messaging which is in keeping with Coca Cola's image anyway. We are all about open happiness. We are all about feeling good about small treats, that you can allow yourself to feel good. But the recycling message needs to be in that way, it needs to be, all you need to do is put that in the right bin, and do you realize by recycling just one plastic bottle, you've saved enough energy to power a 60 watt light bulb for six hours or that if you recycle a single can, that gives you half an hour on your X-box,

that's what you learn, well done you." (T10, L388-399)

Thus brief symbolic messages are suggested to get a positive response from consumers.

8.4.3   Strategic ambiguity in the 'consult' communications strategy

The vice president of corporate responsibility at Ahold mentions that they present their strategy and targets to their 'consult' stakeholders, inviting questions from the participants of these meetings. As the researcher only observed one 'consult' meeting (Coca Cola Enterprise), there is limited confirmation on how the communications are applied and regarding the presence of strategic ambiguity. As was reported in general terms however, measurable topics are presented with specific communications, whereas longer-term strategy and vision are typically presented using ambiguous communications. This communication can be based on a branded sustainability programme, or company values, if available, using a combination of specific and non-specific communications.

Adnams presents policies and results to this stakeholder group, where the policies typically are more broadly formulated and the results more specific. As an example, their policy on social and environmental impact uses very general terms, and talks about being a good neighbour:

"Our social and environmental policies are derived from the commitments expressed in our Values. There are explicit statements in those Values about the community and the environment, but we also refer to sustainable success, fulfilled customers and employees, total quality, integrity and pride – all of which have relevance to our impact on society and the environment. 'Doing Things Right' in this context essentially means being a good neighbour, in the widest meaning of that phrase."
(Adnams Social and Environmental Impact Policy, p. 1, www.adnams.co.uk, accessed on 30.7.13)

Consultations are not always carried out specifically to one single stakeholder category, as can be seen at the Coca Cola Enterprises panel debate, where several types of stakeholders were invited to comment on the sustainability strategy. Thus, consultations can sometimes target very wide audiences and communications need to be framed in order to appeal to diverse audiences. The quote below from the panel debate, by the head of corporate responsibility and sustainability at Coca Cola Enterprises, highlights the vague language used to present the sustainability strategy:

> *"Let me focus on the commitment we are making, we are making a commitment to specifically lead the industry, we are making a commitment to set the standards for sustainable packaging to achieve zero waste in our operations and to recycle more packaging than we use, so what we mean by that? What we mean by set the standard? We will ensure that our packaging has as low carbon and as sustainable as possible; that means reducing the amount of material we use across all of our packaging formats, it means using materials from both recycled and renewable materials, materials like our plant bottles, our PET from plants based resources and also by ensuring that all of our bottles and all of our cans are fully recyclable; and on PET in particular, we will continue to innovate, applying our knowledge and our experience to find what we are referring to as the optimal combination of recycled PET and plant PT and that means we have to balance a number of things, we have to balance technology, we have to balance carbon, resource availability and quality to deliver to most sustainable PET bottle possible."* (T11, L183-195)

It should be noted that the Coca Cola Enterprises sustainability strategy does have several metric targets as well, on areas where there is clearer knowledge and assessment methods available.

Several of the case companies indicated that they take collaboration further with some selected NGOs/influencers/experts to create more of a partnership, which will be discussed further below in section 8.4.5.

8.4.4 Strategic ambiguity in the 'involve' communications strategy

Communications to this stakeholder group, as reported previously (7.4.4), can take two different approaches: aiming for compliance; and stimulating innovation. For the former approach, communications take the form of specifications, scorecards, audits etc., and much of this communication can be very specific and dictatorial, but there are also elements of vague wordings, especially in supplier codes. At Nestlé for example, suppliers are addressed through the publication 'The Nestlé Supplier Code'. The publication requests that suppliers adhere to Nestlé's sustainability principles, using general wordings:

> *"Nestlé supports and encourages operating practices, farming practices and agricultural production systems that are sustainable. This is an integral part of Nestlé's supply strategy and supplier development. Nestlé expects the supplier to continuously strive towards improving the efficiency and sustainability of its operations, which will include water conservation programs."*
> (The Nestlé Supplier Code, 2010, p. 1, available on www.nestle.com)

Similar principles are communicated regarding workplace environment and labour conditions. Suppliers will have to sign this code and the acceptance requires adherence to this code by the supplier and its subcontractors in all future transactions with Nestlé. Suma also use more generic communications with suppliers, to allow greater flexibility in balancing cost requirements from customers with price and quality offerings from suppliers, as expressed by the respondent:

> *"We basically rely on the buyer's knowledge and judgement and discretion with dealing with these things. Obviously we are in a business so pricing is very important also, so it's very difficult to go for the most ethical, pristine option you can find when your customers then turn round and tell you that it's too expensive and they don't want to buy it. So there's always a balance and we use general terms so we have the flexibility within those terms to make the right decision, the right decision for us and the customers, but we will always try and choose the most ethical option that we can."*
> (T21, L130-137)

Some of the smaller case companies (Rude Health, The Rare Team Company, Abel & Cole, Adnams), suggest that as they tend to select suppliers with a similar sustainability ethos, they will only broadly specify to the suppliers what they want to achieve and leave the initiative to the suppliers to come up with new practices or product development. For example, the CEO of Adnams mentions that the combination of selecting suppliers sharing a similar ethos, with repeated communications on the values of Adnams to the suppliers, have resulted in a situation where specific communications are not necessary:

"No, I think one of the things, and this goes back to the strategic communication where we started this conversation, is our suppliers know what will be important to us, so often they'll be ready to have that sort of conversations and indeed what we are attracting now are suppliers who come to us and say, I saw one this morning, ok, it's important but a very small manufacturer, who wants to sell into our pubs and our shops and hotels, so you know, their play was all around the local sourcing and products, it was all around lower carbon emissions, so they are working out their pitch before they come to us because of the distribution team's communication that has been undertaken for some time now."
(T14, L208-216)

At the same time, it is admitted that in certain cases there has been slightly more specific communications to suppliers, such as Adnams challenging one of their bottle suppliers to develop the lightest beer bottle in the market.

When the aim of the communications strategy is to stimulate innovation, a collaborative, and less specific format is taken. At Nestlé for example, there are some strategic collaborations with materials manufacturers striving for long-term innovation goals where environmental performance is improved. At Unilever, the supplier communications on sustainability are linked with resource efficiency as part of TQM (total quality management) and JPM (Japanese production methodology), as reported by the former company buyer of margarine packaging. Unilever extend these philosophies to suppliers, encouraging them to reduce waste and to be more efficient. One method of facilitating for and encouraging suppliers was to invite them to Japan to study JPM in action with its benefits. The respondent suggests that the communications strategy was less specific and aimed at leaving room for the suppliers to take initiatives, and to rather facilitate and

encourage. The use of more ambiguous or vague messages thus allows flexibility, and stimulates initiatives from the suppliers.

The head of climate change at M&S reports that they set clear objectives but also offer encouragement for their suppliers to come up with own ideas. For coherency purposes, they broadly use the same targets as publicly announced in Plan A, thus a mix of specific measurable targets, and some more ambiguous targets. M&S is arguably different from many other retailers as it is predominantly own label and thus has a higher level of control over its suppliers.

Just like M&S is using its Plan A as a base for supplier communications, the general manager for energy and environment at Eurostar also reports that Eurostar uses its 'Tread Lightly' sustainability programme as a platform for communications to suppliers.

8.4.5   Strategic ambiguity in the 'partner' communications strategy

Communications to internal stakeholders seems to take two approaches, starting with communications applying strategic ambiguity on a strategic, senior management level. These ambiguous directions are subsequently translated into more specific targets, where possible, by middle management, to target employees on an operational level. Some case companies (Eurostar, M&S) employ 'sustainability champions' among the employees, whose task is to stimulate and encourage initiatives and innovation, and it is suggested that the messages from these champions are non-specific and based on the branded sustainability programmes. Eurostar launched its branded sustainability programme 'Tread Lightly' in 2007, primarily to use for communications to internal stakeholders. The general manager for energy and environment at Eurostar reports that the 'Tread Lightly' programme provides a simplified platform for a complex subject, facilitating employees to engage and discuss the concept with customers. Internal communications will thus apply a mix of specific and ambiguous communications, with specific communications on targets that are measurable, and ambiguous communications on strategic level and when the aim is to stimulate innovation and initiatives. Eurostar (general manager energy and environment) and also Food and Drink Federation (director of communications) report on the challenge to keep the internal momentum going after the initial round of sustainability initiatives.

Subsequent improvements, once the easy targets have been approached, are often much more demanding. On this note, the Eurostar chairman mentions the value of Eurostar's branded programme as the basis for all communications, allowing flexibility to stimulate new perspectives and initiatives from internal stakeholders.

The CEO of Adnams mentions that he is aiming at achieving an innovative environment with his employees, using specific communications on measurable targets and more generic communications on innovation. In addition it is suggested that an encouraging and non-threatening management style is important to allow engagement from employees. Ahold also use a combination of specific and general communications to internal employees, as depicted below in a quote by the vice president of corporate responsibility on their 'Healthy Living' strategy, which is part of the broader branded sustainability programme of 'ReshapingRetail@Ahold':

> *"We decided in strategy a year ago that healthy living should be about sales, we need to get sales of healthy products. It's only when we are selling the product and people are buying the product, that we have an impact. So we set the target that 25% of the sale should be healthy so now there's all 20 companies going to achieve it, however they like. What we do is we organize a session in May where we brought the 'Healthy Living' responsible from each company together in the US and had a sort of workshop so we can share ideas but it's up to the operating companies how they do it but they should have a clear logo system, they should have information in the store, they should have information online and they should educate children in our market. So those are the things they should do but actually how they fill that in, is up to them and we measure them in two things, one is did you get 25% of sales, and the other one is how are you perceived by your customers in your market, are you perceived to be a healthy retailer and those two figures go to the management team in the board every quarter."*
> (T8, L313-326)

As can be seen, the communications from the strategic corporate level is specific when it comes to the numerical target, however the strategy to achieve this is not specified and is left for the operating companies to decide. Likewise there is the target of '25% of the sale should be healthy', where 'healthy' is a word that can have many definitions.

In sections 7.4.4 and 7.4.5 it was highlighted that while many case companies suggest that they apply a partner communications strategy with key suppliers, the engagement is not symmetrical enough and the communications strategy should rather be considered as an involve category. An exception to this, are the smaller case companies where communications can be more balanced. For example the Rare Tea Company will see its suppliers as partners, and will not apply strict specifications:

> *"I pick farmers that I respect and trust and admire, and I think that admiration has to be a double sided thing; I'm proud to work with them, they're proud to work with me. I give them The Fat Duck and Waitrose, and they give me incredible passion. They're trying to do something different from everyone else, they're not trying to exploit the people who live and work on their land, trying to help them. So I wouldn't tell them to do things in a certain way, but we discuss, for instance, how we can group ship stuff with other people so that we can cut down shipping costs for them, and how they will bulk pack their stuff, because we never want to get into the situation where we're air freighting."*
> (T18, L255-262)

The other category of stakeholders targeted with a partner communications strategy is industry colleagues through the participation in industry-wide forums and round tables. Unilever, for example, communicates about its industry-wide initiatives and collaboration on its website:

> *"Effective solutions require a partnership approach. Unilever is a founding member of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition, which has more than 160 members, including packaging producers, users and retailers. We are also members of EUROPEN (the European Organization for Packaging and the Environment).*
>
> *We work in partnership with retailers and NGOs to explore ways of improving recycling infrastructure. Since 1992, for example, we have supported the CEMPRE waste management and recycling initiative in Brazil, which works with the 'waste picking' community."*
> (http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/wasteandpackaging/wastepartnerships/, accessed on 6.7.12)

As another example of industry wide partnerships, WRAP's 'Courtauld Commitment' was first launched in 2005 with the aim of finding solutions to reducing food and packaging waste. The agreement was signed by 40 retailers and brand owners, and has subsequently been further developed. The targets for the 'Courtauld Commitment 2' are:

*"**Packaging** – to reduce the weight, increase recycling rates and increase the recycled content of all grocery packaging, as appropriate. Through these measures the aim is to reduce the carbon impact of this grocery packaging by 10%.*

***Household food and drink waste** – to reduce UK household food and drink waste by 4%.*

***Supply chain product and packaging waste** – to reduce traditional grocery product and packaging waste in the grocery supply chain by 5% - including both solid and liquid wastes*."

(http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/courtauld-commitment-2-targets-progress-and-benefits, accessed on 13.9.12)

While there are some numeric targets in this communication, it is still fairly vague how these should be measured. Case studies are used to communicate the benefits of participating in these initiatives, highlighting the economic benefits as experienced by their member companies. The WRAP respondent claims that communications on such economic benefits and on targets are quite specific, however on topics that are sensitive communications tend to be ambiguous. It is further reported that the collaboration can be described as an iterative process with their signatories, more often on a one-to-one basis rather than approaching all members collectively. They ask the signatories to give feedback on how WRAP can best support the members and consequently the communications evolve.

Another example of this type of collaboration is given by European Retail Roundtable, who initiated in 2010 their 'Code for Environmentally Sustainable Business', setting the following targets for the participating retailers:

> *"Signatories commit to the setting up and implementation of measures in order to reduce the environmental footprint of their operations in:*
>
> *1. Sourcing - by promoting more environmentally sustainable sourcing and production of products.*
>
> *2. Resource efficiency - by improving the environmental performance of the retailers' premises.*
>
> *3. Transport and distribution - by improving the environmental performance of distribution and where the retailer does not operate its own fleet, working with transport providers, as well as by supporting the sustainable mobility of customers and workers."*
> (http://www.errt.org/uploads/Retail%20Environmental%20Sustainability%20Code%20-%20June%202010.pdf, accessed on 5.9.12)

As can be seen, these targets are very general; it was explained that specific communications are not possible as the capability and procedures differ widely between European countries. In addition, the respondent at the European Retail Roundtable admits that they also lack resources to set more specific targets.

The Food and Drink Federation launched its sustainability initiative, branded 'Five-fold Environmental Ambition' in 2007. The targets of this initiative were derived from DEFRA's 2006 'Food Industry Sustainability Strategy (FISS), but these objectives were discussed and modified together with the collaborating food and drink manufacturers, and whereas the DEFRA objectives use more suggestive targets, the targets of the 'Five-fold Environmental Ambition' are more precise:

- *"Achieve a 35% absolute reduction in CO_2 emissions by 2020 compared to 1990.*
- *Seek to send zero food and packaging waste to landfill at the latest by 2015 and make a significant contribution to WRAP's Courtauld Commitment 2 target to reduce product and packaging waste in the supply chain by 5% by end of 2012 against a 2009 baseline.*
- *Make a significant contribution to WRAP's work to reducing the carbon impact of packaging by 10% by 2012 against a 2009 baseline.*
- *Achieve significant reductions in water use to help reduce stress on the nation's water supplies and contribute to an industry-wide absolute target to reduce water*

use by 20% by 2020 compared to 2007.

- *Embed environmental standards in <u>transport practices</u>, including contracts with hauliers as they fall for renewal, to achieve fewer and friendlier food transport miles and make a contribution to IGD's Efficient Consumer Response UK Sustainable Distribution Initiative to save 80 million HGV miles over the period 2010-12 in the grocery sector."*

(http://www.fdf.org.uk/priorities_sus_comp.aspx, accessed 28.06.12)

As opposed to the European Retail Roundtable, where member companies are from across Europe, Food and Drink Federation members are much more homogeneous, with primarily large UK-based member organisations. This might explain the possibility of more specific communications. One could also question how challenging these targets really are, and whether it was possible to gain agreement to specific numbers, as this was seen as reasonably achievable by the member companies. One might also question if it has been a successful strategy, and if so whether the member companies have reached these targets. The Food and Drink Federation website is still, seven months into 2013, listing the same targets (even though some of the targets were supposed to be achieved by 2012), and there is no indication on actual performance against these targets, nor any evidence on renewed targets (http://www.fdf.org.uk/environment_progress_report-2012-Ambitions.aspx, accessed 1.8.2013).

The British Retail Consortium also has its version of a retailing forum, branded 'A Better Retailing Climate' launched in 2008 with a number of retailers participating, for example Tesco, M&S, Sainsbury's and ASDA, but also some non-grocery retailers. The respondent claims that communications are clear and specific and that strategic ambiguity is not practised:

"I would like to think that on this we're all striving to be clear and specific so there's lots of individual bits of communication that make up the whole. So I mean, just for example on carrier bags, you know we're very specific about exactly the number of bags, exactly what timescales, exactly which retailers, it's all quite specific stuff. On the packaging and through Courtaulds it's all very specific on exactly what we're trying to achieve and exactly what our timescales are. I would like to think that we're not deliberately putting

> *out ambiguous communication. This report we've just put out, the Better Retailing*
> *Climate, really broad on saying about exactly what we're talking about and tries to be*
> *specific on a whole range of issues so it's complicated and it's a big picture and there's*
> *lots of different things to talk about so your five minute summary is going to be quite broad*
> *but I hope that, I mean those issues that sit beneath it were then developing the level of*
> *detail that you need.*"
> (T26, L374-385)

Evidence from the British Retail Consortium website, confirms this view, with the targets agreed in general using numerical values, with clear communications on how much to reduce, compared to base year, and the date when this should be achieved. There are reports on performance, also giving numbers.

The Packaging Federation also facilitates discussions between packaging manufacturers. There is no evidence of a branded sustainability programme setting industry targets, but the communications are more focused on raising the image of the packaging industry by educating external stakeholders on the role of packaging in preventing waste, and lobbying for better support.

This section has reviewed in detail how communications are framed to the various stakeholder categories: inform, influence, consult, involve, and partner. An emerging theme is the use of branded sustainability programmes as a platform for stakeholder communications on sustainability. Could these programmes possibly be seen as a form of strategic ambiguity? The following section will look into this issue more in depth, searching for further evidence.

8.5   Branded sustainability programme – emerging evidence of strategic ambiguity

As was discussed in previous sections (8.3, 8.4), there is some emerging evidence that branded sustainability programmes might be a form of strategic ambiguity. This section will review some of these programmes and look for further support for this claim.

Several of the larger case companies in this study have implemented branded sustainability programmes as part of their sustainability strategies, for example food and drink brands such as Coca Cola Enterprises – 'Deliver for Today, Inspire for Tomorrow', Nestlé – 'Creating Shared Value', Unilever – 'Sustainable Living Plan', and Apetito – 'Pentagon Strategy'. Branded sustainability programmes are also widely used by large retailers such as Ahold – 'ReshapingRetail@Ahold', Eurostar – 'Tread Lightly', and M&S – 'Plan A'. Finally we also saw evidence of a number of branded programmes for industry collaboration, such as the 'Courtauld Commitment (by WRAP), 'The Better Retailing Climate' (by the British Retail Consortium), 'Code for Environmentally Sustainable Business' (by European Retailer Roundtable), and 'Five-fold Environmental Ambition' (by the Food and Drink Federation).

The notion of these branded programmes emerged as the data collection progressed, and therefore was not specifically discussed until in the later interviews. The concept of branded sustainability programmes was particularly discussed in the two Eurostar interviews. Eurostar launched its branded sustainability programme, called 'Tread Lightly', in 2007. The Tread Lightly programme focuses predominantly on the environmental aspect of sustainability, evident in Eurostar's presentation of 'Tread Lightly':

"*Tread Lightly is our programme to reduce our impact on the environment and encourage people to think differently about travel. We started in 2007 and since then it's become central to everything we do.*"
(http://www.eurostar.com/UK/uk/leisure/tread_lightly.jsp?rfrr=UK%3AUK%3AexpressBook_body_treadlightly, accessed on 13.8.12)

The programme is based on three themes: *engage*, *switch* and *deliver*. 'Engage' refers to Eurostar's collaboration with various partners, and call for engagement from various stakeholders with the aim to create a collaborative approach to generate ideas for sustainable travel initiatives. For example Eurostar has set up the 'Eurostar Ashden Award for Sustainable Travel' in collaboration with Ashden (a charity within the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts focusing on energy and climate change). 'Switch' refers to encouraging rail travel for European travel to reduce carbon footprint, which coincides well with promoting Eurostar's services. 'Deliver', finally, refers to Eurostar's targets for

reduced consumption, responsible sourcing and recycling. In 2007, the first commitments were set as a ten-point plan including, e.g. to reduce CO_2 emissions per traveller journey by 25 per cent by 2012 (which was increased to 35 per cent in 2009), and to recycling 80 per cent of Eurostar's waste and have zero waste to landfill by 2012. This original ten-point plan, which is now no longer accessible online, has been updated with new targets, e.g. to reduce Eurostar's CO2 emissions by 25 per cent by 2015, based on a 2010 baseline (www.eurostar.com, accessed 13.8.12). Within 'Tread Lightly' there is thus a mix of simplistic and symbolic communications through the key words 'engage', 'switch' and 'deliver', and within this communication there is also some more specific information through the ten-point plan. 'Tread Lightly' was initially introduced to engage with the internal stakeholders, with suppliers, and also to some extent as a tool for PR, but as it is seen a successful tool in engaging these stakeholders, there are now plans to extend this in communications to other external stakeholders as well.

Coca Cola Enterprises launched its sustainability programme, called 'Deliver for Today, Inspire for Tomorrow' in 2011. The programme contains seven environmental and social commitments, taking a value chain approach. In order to fulfil the commitments of the sustainability plan they have set three strategic priorities (www.ccesustainabilityplan.com, accessed on 3.10.12):

- Deliver for today: meet the set targets and adjust to more challenging targets;
- Lead the industry: specifically in energy and climate change and in sustainable packaging and recycling;
- Innovate for the future: through collaboration with various stakeholders.

The Coca-Cola Enterprises' chairman and CEO further express this in the panel debate:

"So, that's what it's all about, with strengthened commitments and three strategic priorities that will guide everything we do; you could sum those up as deliver, lead and innovate. Deliver, deliver is to really deliver today, we have 37 very clear targets, which are outlined in our booklet and it's absolutely, we think important for us to be held accountable to deliver in those 37 key metrics. Lead, we've determined that it's important to lead the industry in two particular areas: one of those is energy conservation in climate change and then the second one of those is sustainable packaging and recycling, those two

> *key areas. Those are the areas that we believe we can truly make the biggest difference and then thirdly is innovation. One of the things that we really realize is that even though we have some clear goals as to how we plan to be by 2020, we don't completely know how we are going to get there we think it's important to recognize that our innovation and frankly, your innovation and helping us get there is, in fact, the way we will achieve. We need your help; we don't have all the answers."*
> (T11, L91-112)

This further supports that the branded programme consists of both specific and ambiguous elements, where the brand name together with slogans or keywords such as in this case 'deliver', 'lead' and 'innovate' give a simplistic and symbolic illustration of Coca Cola Enterprises' sustainability commitment, with detailed and specific information available for stakeholders seeking a deeper insight in what Coca Cola Enterprises want to achieve. It thus contains all aspects for allowing the same message to be targeted to broad, and possibly complex stakeholders.

The message of needing help to accomplish goals, calling for collaboration across the value chain is repeated throughout the Coca Cola Enterprise panel debate, as in the quote below by the head of corporate responsibility and sustainability, at Coca-Cola Enterprises:

> *"Let me repeat what I said at the very beginning, I said that certainly we don't have all the answers, yes, we think we built some strong plans and yes, we know we can go a long way to meeting our goals but we don't know how we are going to meet all of our targets and that really is the theme for today's discussion because innovation, collaboration and partnership will be critical as we work collectively on this journey towards a low carbon future."*
> (T11, L212-217)

The feedback that Coca Cola Enterprises received at the panel debate, also suggested that the simplicity delivered through the sustainability programme will facilitate best possible progress and collaboration. Mike Barry (head of sustainable business at M&S) specifically stresses that technical specific communications are not sufficient to drive this change:

> *"We talked about trade-offs, how complex it would be to work out how we trade things off, the important serious stakeholders, working with the very best people, sit down and say 'there's no black box solution to this, we need views, we need human views to find the right answers', and the final, final point, this is a training programme, just like Plan A from Marks and Spencer. This is about human change, engaging every consumer, every employee and everyone in the supply chain in the benefits of change, never ever turn this into a technical plan, this is a human change plan."*
> (T11, L933-939)

Smaller organisations might not have a branded programme on sustainability but may use their organisational values as a platform for sustainability communications, as in the case of Adnams, as reported by the CEO:

> *"Yes, there's also a golden thread that runs through it and that golden thread is around our value based approach. So, we talk both on our website but whenever we communicate it we talk about ourselves as an organisation that has a set of values at its heart and, um, that sound like a good old apple pie, but we try to bring it to life in sort of real and tangible ways whether that investment is in a new plant and equipment or whether it's the way we deal with our employees, our shareholders, our suppliers. We have this additional dimension to our business decision-making, which reflects well what we stand for, e.g. our values. So that sort of values, you know, human values, is running through golden threads in all our communications. So we will be talking about many things but there will be this sense of values running through it."*
> (T14, L39-48)

The general manager for energy and environment at Eurostar raises the issue that attitudes, and even language, evolve with time and thus communications on sustainability need to take that into consideration:

> *"Yeah I think, I'm not sure whether it would work for all companies but I think for, certainly for us it's been um, well I mean [sighs] I'm sure you've found this as part of your research, is people, the language around sustainability changes, kind of evolves over time. And for those who kind of work in the business, you know I mean I've gone from being an*

> *environment manager to kind of, well it went from environment to everyone talking about CSR, corporate social responsibility, then everyone started dropping the social bit and then it went to sustainability and now you're hearing more and more people saying 'oh, I don't know, you know, I'm not sure sustainability is the right word'. So I don't know what."*
>
> (T17, L527-534)

This evolution or shift of vocabulary was another reason behind the introduction of the branded programme - 'Tread Lightly' – with the purpose of more easily indicating what Eurostar wants to achieve, independent of what current term is being used in society. Eurostar is thus protecting **its** sustainability strategy from possible negative impact of the word 'sustainability' going out of fashion or being misused by other organisations.

These branded sustainability programmes thus deliver a name that offers flexibility in interpretation, allowing diverse stakeholders to apply their own understanding, and are thus very good examples of strategic ambiguity. The programmes offer an overarching ambiguous communications, backed up with more specific communications on measurable targets and past performance.

8.6   Summary

This chapter has presented findings related to the application of strategic ambiguity in CS communications. Despite some mixed feelings of the respondents regarding the term 'strategic ambiguity', the interviews reveal that strategic ambiguity, or using more general (non-specific) communications is a chosen strategy for certain circumstances within sustainability communications, where complex objectives that might also not be easily measurable would benefit from less specific communications. Another frequently quoted rationale for strategic ambiguity is when the target audience is complex. It is also suggested that strategic ambiguity is used to stimulate innovation, interest and interaction. Importantly it is suggested that strategic ambiguity only works if there are genuine motives behind the sustainability strategy, and it is also suggested that there is a time limit for the use of strategic ambiguity, and that to be credible strategic ambiguity must be mixed with specific facts when presenting results. This seems to be practised as the case companies

use a combination of specific and ambiguous communications for most stakeholder categories (inform, influence, consult, involve and partner). An emerging theme is the use of branded sustainability programmes, which could possibly be seen as a form of strategic ambiguity. Several of the larger case companies have branded sustainability programmes, allowing them to be more flexible with their sustainability strategy, to stimulate innovation, and importantly to detach themselves from the current public terminology in use (be it CSR, sustainability, life cycle thinking, etc.) that might go out of fashion or become tainted by other organisations' greenwash.

The next chapter will further analyse the findings presented in this chapter and compare them to the propositions presented in Chapter 5, to evaluate the validity of the conceptual framework.

9   ANALYSIS OF PROPOSITIONS AND THEORY BUILDING

9.1   Introduction

This chapter will review the findings presented in Chapters 7 and 8 and compare them to the conceptual framework proposed in Chapter 5. As a base for this discussion, the starting point is an attempt to answer the first research question on the definition of sustainability and its relationship with CSR. Thereafter, each of the propositions put forward in Chapter 5 will be addressed and an assessment concerning their validity will be made. Taking into consideration the insights from this analysis, the framework will be revised and compared to existing academic knowledge in this area.

9.2   The concept of sustainability

The case companies view sustainability as a rather complex subject that has evolved from being originally more environmentally focussed to now include aspects of social and economic responsibilities. Many of the companies use descriptions similar to the Brundtland definition, or the triple bottom line, suggesting responsibilities for people, planet and profit. There are some notions of 'quality' as being included in sustainability, and this could possibly be seen as an economic responsibility as good product quality safeguards the value of the brand (on a product and corporate level). It is also interesting to note that 'health' and 'nutrition' are also mentioned as aspects of sustainability by some food and drink producers. In this context these words refer to the health and nutrition of the consumers and it makes perhaps sense for the food and drink industry to integrate this aspect into sustainability as it further implies that sustainability is embedded into the business model. However, this interpretation of social sustainability is slightly different from the academic perspective, which is rather promoting social responsibility as primarily combatting social injustice in health, education, social and political participation, to ensure better equality between rich and poor, and also between men and women (Crane and Matten 2010).

While many of the case companies view sustainability as a holistic concept including environmental, social and economic responsibilities, there are also exceptions to the

definition of sustainability, where, for example, Nestlé's corporate communications highlight the company's responsibilities for sustainability <u>and</u> social aspects <u>and</u> for the environment. This suggests that the term sustainability for Nestlé primarily takes an economic perspective.

Statements from the case companies further reveal a tendency of smaller businesses to use simple definitions on sustainability; some might not even use the word 'sustainability' in their web communications but will rather talk about their values and responsibilities. Larger corporations, on the other hand, often offer elaborate definitions covering the aspects of social, environmental and economic responsibilities. There also seems to be a tendency by food and drink manufacturers for discussing the broader definition of sustainability, whereas other value chain respondents like retailers (with Ahold and M&S being notable exceptions) and the packaging industry seem to prioritise the environmental aspects of sustainability in their communications. Especially in the case of the packaging industry, this focus on the environmental pillar could possibly be explained by the criticism from stakeholders on environmental impact of packaging, which supports previous research findings suggesting that the communications topic is driven by key issues for the industry sector in question (Sweeney and Coughlan 2008) .

As noted above, the term sustainability is used widely with different meanings. Some of this complexity could be an effect of the tendency of business leaders to pick up and widely communicate some concepts, as Giroux (2007) argues that when a management model becomes fashionable, the definition of the management model becomes increasingly ambiguous.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not formally practised by any of the smaller case companies, and Eurostar further claims that CSR is a large company phenomenon important for image building, and has less relevance for smaller organisations. This is supporting previous qualitative research into SMEs, which highlights that the term 'corporate' feels alien to SMEs. SMEs are rather defining these philosophies informally often into their values, and are following practices that could be labelled as CSR (Jenkins 2006).

There are different opinions on how sustainability is related to CSR, with Morrison seeing sustainability as a component of CSR, while M&S and Ahold take an opposite view, considering CSR as an antecedent to sustainability, a view shared with a number of scholars (Steurer et al. 2005; Van Marrewijk 2003; Wai 2011).

As an example of the intertwining use of CSR and sustainability, Ahold has historically altered the names of their annual publication for reporting on social, environmental and economic aspects between 'CSR Report' and 'Sustainability Report'. Since 2008 however Ahold has used the term 'Responsibility Report' and tends to rather use the term 'corporate responsibility' instead of CSR or sustainability these days.

While we know from the academic literature that CSR and sustainability are different constructs (Van Marrewijk 2003; Steurer et al. 2005; Belz and Peattie 2012), the findings support the assumption to treat 'sustainability' and 'CSR' as synonyms for the purpose of this research, a notion already followed in a number of previous research papers (Lourenco et al. 2012; Perez-Batres et al. 2010; Porter and Kramer 2006; Jose and Lee 2007; Sotorrio et al. 2008; Moon 2007). Having established this starting point, the propositions related to the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 5 will be assessed in the following sections.

9.3   Stakeholder categorisation attributes

In chapter 5 following proposition was presented:

Proposition 1: Stakeholders should be classified into categories based on power, legitimacy, urgency, proximity, interest, and business strategy relevance, where those stakeholders possessing a higher degree of the six attributes, should have the highest level of interaction with the focal organisation.

Overall, across all stakeholder types, the key stakeholder categorisation and prioritisation attributes as suggested by the case companies (in order of quoted frequency) are: business strategy relevance, interest, capability, knowledge/expertise, image, proximity, risk management, power, sustainability impact, knowledge, shared sustainability ethos, and

finally sequence.

Business strategy relevance as an attribute is thus confirmed, and while being rather instrumental from a stakeholder theory perspective, it is one of the most quoted attributes by the case companies. Thus, even when seeking engagement on sustainability initiatives, stakeholders that are also most relevant from a business strategy perspective are most likely to be selected, as was also suggested by Harrison and St John (1996) and Aspara and Tikkanen (2008). The other most quoted attribute, interest, suggests that stakeholders who actively seek to collaborate with the firm are more likely to enjoy a higher degree of interaction. Interest in this sense is thus proactive as it denotes stakeholders who are not just interested to receive information about the firm's performance or strategy, but stakeholders who actively want to collaborate and co-create with the business. This makes the attribute of interest different from legitimacy, as it is not just that the stakeholder is affected by the actions of the company but that there is an interest from the stakeholder to collaborate to drive change.

Capability is another frequently mentioned attribute, and is described by one case company (Coca Cola Enterprises) as having the people, and/or time, and/or resources, where the view on resources resembles Mitchell et al.'s (1997) notion of utilitarian power. This description raises the question whether capability is a synonym of power in this context? Some of the case companies suggested both 'power' and 'capability' as attributes (Coca Cola Enterprises, Ahold, Adnams). Does this indicate that they make a distinction between these, or that they are just using different terms carrying the same meaning? In Adnams' case, both power and capability were mentioned (without any prompting or leading questions), with the distinction that one supplier was selected as partner because of their 'capability' to innovate, here taking the meaning of knowledge and possibly also possessing sufficient resources (utilitarian power) to materialise a conceptual idea. Adnams' reference to 'power' on the other hand was in relation to the local community as a powerful stakeholder, possibly taking more of what Mitchell et al. (1997) calls normative power. Coca Cola Enterprises consider power as wider spanning, including not only utilitarian power based on resources but also normative power. So while power and capability seem similar there are some distinct differences. In addition, when discussing about power and capability, Coca Cola Enterprises suggest knowledge/expertise as another criteria. One could however question how knowledge/expertise sits within power and

capability, as knowledge or expertise could be seen as a resource. Other scholars have categorised knowledge or expertise as a form of power (Johnson and Scholes 2002), however this is not apparent in the definition of power according to Mitchell et al. As both capability and knowledge/expertise are suggested as distinct categorisation attributes by several case companies, these findings indicate that in CS communications the Mitchell et al saliency framework needs to be extended to also include those. The findings also suggest that for the categorisation of stakeholders such as NGOs, influencers, experts and media, the 'knowledge/expertise' of those stakeholders is a specifically important criterion.

Image is another frequently quoted attribute, and like 'business strategy relevance', it has a strong instrumental aspect, as the companies see close stakeholder collaboration on sustainability issues as a tool to raise their image. This is one of the most frequent rationales for close engagement with NGOs. One would hope that image is not the sole reason for collaboration with NGOs, as that would not be a suitable strategy for an ethical company, however Eurostar expressed that collaboration with NGOs brings them treble benefits: expertise input, risk management, and raising the image, and in return they (Eurostar) can provide support to the NGOs. Image is important for a business to receive legitimacy to continue to operate (Palazzo and Scherer 2006; Suchman 1995), which can be achieved if the business practices "*socially acceptable goals in a socially acceptable manner*" (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990, p. 177). This can be done in several ways, from merely a symbolic instrumental approach where the business wants to portray a responsible image, to a moral approach to legitimacy as suggested by Palazzo and Scherer (2006, p. 73):

"Rather than manipulating and persuading opponents the challenge is to convince others by reasonable arguments."

The attribute of image therefore, provided it has a moral foundation, could belong to the legitimacy category, where an ethical company would seek legitimacy to operate through a genuine dialogue with its stakeholders.

Proximity is the next attribute, and it is described as stakeholders where there is already a close connection through contractual agreements or networks (Driscoll and Starik 2004; Rivera-Camino 2007), or through historical relationship (Winn and Keller 2001; Gibson

2000 and Savage et al. 1991). The findings here thus confirm the suggestions of proximity as an additional stakeholder categorisation attribute, however there is limited support for geographical proximity such as the local community as an attribute.

Risk management is suggested by five of the case companies as an attribute for closer engagement. It is felt that close collaboration with, for example, NGOs will give the organisation input on their strategy enabling them to take action and therefore preventing being attacked at a later stage by media and/or NGOs. On this note it is suggested that companies choose to work with NGOs that are supportive and non-threatening, which is in line with observations by Harvey and Schaefer (2001). This attribute can be seen as belonging to what is described as 'coercive power' aiming at protecting the business from stakeholders that have influence to threaten its existence (Mitchell et al 1997), and is thus considered here under the power category.

Sustainability impact is suggested by five of the case companies as an attribute for closer collaboration. Sustainability impact carries the meaning of a stakeholder being close to a point in the value chain where there is a relatively high negative impact on social or environmental aspects, and by collaborating with this stakeholder, the organisation will have a better possibility to improve sustainability performance in the value chain. While the attribute of sustainability impact is not explicitly suggested by Mitchell et al. (1997), one could question whether this attribute is included in their attribute of legitimacy, or if it is indeed a separate attribute applicable in this specific research context of CS communications strategies? Drawing on previous academic insights to answer this question, the discussion by Driscoll and Starik (2004) on the natural environment as a stakeholder could help to shed some light on this issue. They suggest that the natural environment can be ascribed as both possessing power (as it can be seen as possessing resources like water, air etc.) and legitimacy (as it is a stakeholder that is affected by a firm's actions). With regards to the power perspective, one could however argue that the lack of contractual agreement limits the perceived power, and it is rather other stakeholders that can apply power on the behalf of the natural environment, for example in the form of legislation or issues raised by the media, the public, or NGOs. The legitimacy aspect is however not dissimilar from what the attribute of 'sustainability impact' implies. If there is an environmental or social issue in a value chain, all firms participating in the chain have a responsibility as their actions directly or indirectly are causing this issue. A company that

is reviewing the value chain, searching for areas where its actions might have a negative impact is thus acknowledging the legitimacy of this 'issue' and is selecting a stakeholder who closest 'represents' the issue to collaborate with, in order to improve the outcome. Therefore, this attribute can be seen to belong to the legitimacy attribute, and in this case it is the category phrased as 'moral legitimacy', which fits very well with a normative stakeholder theory (Palazzo and Scherer 2006). However, it is perhaps not so much the legitimacy of the matter itself that is attracting the firm's attention, but rather the possibility for the firm to gain increased legitimacy by attending to sustainability issues in the value chain. As such sustainability impact as a categorisation attribute is not dissimilar from business strategy relevance, since a sustainability strategy calls for addressing impact along the value chain. Thus the two factors seem interconnected. Sustainability impact is however explicitly suggested as a categorisation attribute by several of the case companies and is therefore added as a stand-alone criterion to the CS communications framework.

Four companies suggest a 'shared sustainability ethos' as an attribute for closer engagement. In these cases a strong sustainability ethos was important when selecting collaborative partners as these case companies portray strong sustainability values and thus consider this attribute as prominent. Thus it can be seen as a part of business strategy relevance, and 'shared sustainability ethos' will therefore be included under that attribute.

Surprisingly the attribute of urgency is not directly mentioned in any interview. Unilever talk about 'hot topics', and their constant monitoring to detect issues that have high priority at any given point in time, and that they subsequently would identify the most relevant stakeholders related to the hot topic issue, which possibly shares some aspects of urgency. As mentioned previously, the attribute of urgency is not given any detailed descriptions by Mitchell et al. (1997), other than that they suggest this attribute to make the saliency framework more dynamic. Roloff (2008) and Rowley (1997) critique Mitchell et al.'s saliency framework as being too static and instead offer an alternative view with their 'issue related networks of stakeholders', claiming that stakeholders will be categorised based on the issue in question, and also adding the notion that the view of a focal organisation with dyadic relationships with each stakeholder can be too simplistic and that reality is rather a network of stakeholders all with a multitude of interaction on several levels. While Unilever seem to view their firm as the centre of their stakeholder model, their perspective on a 'hot topic' seems very similar to the views of issue based stakeholder

categorisation (Roloff 2008; Rowley1997). Coca Cola Enterprises' view of sequence is slightly different as they rather suggest that the relationships with stakeholders evolve with time, and ideally relationships will grow stronger over time. Based on the findings in this study, it can thus be questioned if the notion of 'urgency' might not fully fit in the model as an attribute, but that there seems to be a need for some sort of 'time aspect' as a moderator to ensure a dynamic model. The support for urgency as an attribute is however very low in this research.

Following this discussion, as summarised in Table 9.1 below, there is strong support for business strategy relevance (with shared sustainability ethos included) as an attribute. Secondly, interest is well supported, followed by power (including risk management), capability and legitimacy.

One could possibly question whether business strategy relevance can be considered as linked to the power attribute, in the form of utilitarian and normative power. Likewise business strategy relevance can also partly be viewed as related to proximity as it shares the notions of existing relationships. The research findings don't give sufficient information however to the exact interpretation to business strategy relevance and therefore, following the suggestion by Harrison and St John (1996) and Aspara and Tikkanen (2008) of business strategy relevance as an important attribute for stakeholder categorisation, this attribute will be considered as an attribute on its own rights in this thesis.

There is also moderate support for the attributes of proximity, knowledge/expertise and sustainability impact. There is however not sufficient evidence for urgency as being used as a categorisation attribute by the case companies.

Conclusion to Proposition 1: Thus, it can be empirically concluded that there are eight strong attributes for stakeholder categorisation: business strategy relevance, interest, power, capability, legitimacy, proximity, knowledge/expertise, and sustainability impact.

Table 9.1 Final stakeholder categorisation attributes

Categorisation attribute	Case company
Business strategy relevance (including shared sustainability ethos) (11)	CCE, Unilever, Ahold, food industry consultant, WRAP, Apetito, Eurostar, Rude Health, M&S, Adnams, RTC
Interest (9)	CCE, Unilever, Ahold, ERRT, food industry consultant, Adnams, Apetito, Eurostar, FDF
Power (including risk management) (8)	CCE, Ahold, FDF, Adnams, Eurostar, Apetito, food industry consultant, RTC
Capability (8)	CCE (Coca Cola Enterprises), Nestlé, Unilever, Ahold, FDF (Food and Drink Federation), WRAP, Adnams, Packaging Federation
Legitimacy (including image) (8)	Ahold, FDF, food industry consultant, Packaging Federation, WRAP, Adnams, Eurostar, RTC (media)
Proximity (7)	CCE, Rude Health, Unilever, Ahold, Eurostar, Apetito, SUMA
Knowledge/expertise (6)	CCE, Eurostar, M&S, FDF, Unilever, Ahold
Sustainability impact (5)	CCE, Unilever, FDF, Eurostar, Adnams
Sequence (2)	CCE, Unilever

9.4 Corporate sustainability communications strategies for effective stakeholder management

In Chapter 5 a number of propositions were made regarding the four communications strategies of inform, consult, involve, and partner. In this section these propositions will be tested against the findings. Starting with the inform strategy, the proposition to assess is:

Proposition 2: The primary communications objective with the *inform* communications strategy is to receive legitimacy to operate, to raise the image of the company, create public debate about issues, and to influence consumer behaviour.

The findings reveal that the primary communications strategy to consumers is an inform strategy, where information is disseminated to the consumer with the aim of primarily building trust, and to some extent to educate the consumer. On the note of trust building the rationale is that when trust is built, the consumers feel that they don't need to actively

search for information about the company's sustainability strategy, but rather rely on the company to take the best possible decisions, and so it is possible to avoid overloading the consumer with technical information,. The objective of educating the consumer suggests that ideally this should be performed by a third (objective) party or by the government or NGOs. It should be noted that the inform strategy includes feedback mechanisms for the consumer, but that this feedback is primarily available to ensure the message reaches the consumer and is understood by the consumer. Shareholders and investors are also communicated to through an inform strategy, with the aim to reassure these actors that there is a solid sustainability strategy in place, to ensure their continued support. There is a stronger mechanism for feedback compared to that for consumers as information can be dispersed through meetings, but the general lack of interest from this stakeholder category suggests that the communications strategy is more one of inform than consult.

An inform communications strategy is also typically used for local communities and with the media, with the objective of image building, or as suggested by the Rare Tea Company as a form of risk management. Previous research claims that there is a connection between image building and trust; for example Flavian et al. (2005) empirically show that building a strong corporate image is a significant contributor to achieving consumer trust, whereas Omar et al. (2009) rather see trust as the antecedent for image, suggesting that trust must be managed and communicated to ensure positive corporate image and reputation. As there is some evidence that the concepts of image and trust are linked, for the purpose of this thesis image will be included in the trust element.

There is however limited support for the inform strategy applied with the motive of initiating public debate. Instead that is rather an objective for the partner communications strategy (as discussed at the end of this section), whereby industry colleagues come together to raise issues.

The notion of using an inform strategy with the objective to influence consumers, is not entirely supported, as whilst a predominantly one-way communications strategy might be applied to influence consumer behaviour (especially in a purchasing context), the findings indicate that several case companies apply a specific communications strategy to influence consumers' sustainability behaviour. This is different from the motives behind the inform strategy and therefore it suggests the need for developing an additional communications

strategy, here named influence communications strategy, which is discussed below.

Finally, it is evident that some smaller companies (Adnams and Apetito) chose an inform communications strategy for NGOs, with the objective of seeking endorsement and license to operate, in line with the suggestions of previous research (Morsing and Schultz 2006).

<u>Conclusion to Proposition 2</u>: These findings therefore suggest that the primary communications objective with the inform communications strategy is to build trust. Another important communications objective is to seek legitimacy to operate.

Interestingly, during the data collection, a possible additional CS communications strategy emerged, suggested here as an 'influence' communications strategy, with the aim of influencing the target audience. Several of the case companies report on communicating with consumers, not just to inform them but to stimulate them to take actions that might not primarily benefit the focal organisation but may benefit the whole value chain. It was particularly on the issue of recycling that this was discussed. This communications strategy is targeted to consumers, it still takes a rather one-way approach with feedback and support mechanisms, however it is different from the inform strategy as it aims at stimulating action with its target audience. The influence strategy tries to involve consumers, but the involve communications strategy is not appropriate to describe this interaction, as firstly the influence communications strategy is more of a one-way communications strategy, and secondly the focal organisation does not seek active collaboration on its own sustainability agenda from the target audience.

The primary communications objective with this influence strategy is to change the behaviour of the stakeholders, to encourage them to take actions that may not directly have an impact on the focal organisation's sustainability strategy, but rather on society as a whole. It is however likely that the businesses performing this strategy, use this as an image building exercise, as it presents the company in a positive light to try to educate and or encourage consumers to act responsibly, so even if the actions by the consumers don't add directly to the company's sustainability performance, it has a strong image building function. The findings thus lead to the following conclusion:

Communications strategy influence: The communications objective with this category is to influence stakeholders to take sustainability initiatives that are not directly linked with the firm's sustainability agenda.

The next level of interaction is the consult communications strategy, with the following proposition to test:

Proposition 3: The primary communications objective with a consult communications strategy is to gain legitimacy and to raise the image, but also to draw upon the knowledge of this stakeholder group.

A consult strategy predominantly targets NGOs, with the primary objective of seeking feedback, benchmarking, and expert advice. A couple of case companies suggest that a consult strategy is also used with consumers (CCE and Ahold) and with customers. As an example, Eurostar claims to use a consult strategy with its corporate clients as these stakeholders show a high level of interest in Eurostar's sustainability strategy. Other motives include seeking licence to operate, raising the image, and risk management, however these objectives are only mentioned in relation with NGOs when using the inform communications strategy. Therefore the conclusion is:

<u>Conclusion to Proposition 3:</u> The primary communications objective for the consult strategy is to seek expertise and feedback, and to benchmark with the wider industry.

Following the consult communications strategy the next level of interaction is the involve communications strategy, with the following proposition to test:

Proposition 4: The primary communications objective with an involve communications strategy is to encourage stakeholders to collaborate with the firm to support the firm's sustainability agenda.

The involve communications strategy is widely used for suppliers, with the objective to get the suppliers to comply with the focal organisation's sustainability strategy. The retailers suggest communications can be characterised as two-way, but comments from the food and drink brand owners rather suggest fairly unbalanced communications, with notions of

the retailers dictating to the suppliers. The food and drink manufacturers on the other hand will use an inform, or possibly consult, communications strategy back to the retailers, and view this as a form of 'response' strategy, as they claim that the retailers are powerful and in charge of the communications. The involve communications strategy is therefore apparently not as balanced as it is seen from the focal organisation's perspective. One might therefore argue that the involve strategy when targeted to suppliers can be quite asymmetric and not very different from an inform strategy. There are of course variations between and within the case companies, where smaller companies seem to apply less dictating communications to their suppliers, and where the larger corporations create a more balanced communications model when the objective for the communications is to encourage the supplier to innovate for the benefit of the focal organisation. The findings therefore confirm the proposition, and thus the conclusion is:

Conclusion to Proposition 4: Communications strategy involve: The primary communications objective with this category is to encourage stakeholders to collaborate with the firm to support the firm's sustainability agenda.

The final communications strategy – partner – is to be assessed next, with the following proposition:

Proposition 5: The primary communications objective with the partner communications strategy is to drive change in the value chain through a collaborative effort with stakeholders.

The partner communications strategy is commonly applied for internal communications as the employees are seen as key players in order to execute the sustainability strategy. It is, however, evident that a true partner strategy with balanced two-way communications is primarily applied for senior managers, whereas more junior employees are expected to comply with the sustainability strategy as put forward by senior staff. Some case companies suggest that they use a partner communications strategy with some of their suppliers, especially those where a close relationship already exists. The primary communications objective for this group is to stimulate innovation and to enable a value chain approach to the sustainability strategy. It should be noted however; that even if the interviews suggest a partner strategy, it is questionable how balanced the communications

are as sometimes the interview comments suggest that the communications are not fully symmetric. For example some of the retailers suggest that they use a partner communications strategy to their own label suppliers, however at the same time they talk about this relationship being close due to the high level of control they can exert on these suppliers, indicating that the communications are not on equal terms. Communications strategies to NGOs (including experts and influencers) vary widely between the case companies, and as some of these relationships develop the communications strategy takes a more balanced two-way approach, as for example M&S with their collaboration with Oxfam, aiming at driving change also beyond the focal company. It is also suggested that a partner communications strategy is deployed in industry wide initiatives (or sometimes even value chain-wide initiatives) through roundtables and similar forums. A number of businesses come together (both value chain members and competitors) in a context aiming for equal terms between participants. The objectives for this communications strategy are to gain collaborative power to influence governments or regulators, or to drive change in the value chain, or to ensure the industry sector remains competitive. It is also acknowledged that these forums are good sources for learning about best practices, and to raise the image of the company. There are, however, critical voices that some of these forums are not as effective or balanced as suggested, but that there are participants (retailers) that have too much dominance in these contexts.

It can be concluded that while many companies like to use the word 'partner' when discussing their relationships and communications strategies with stakeholders, there is limited evidence of fully balanced two-way communications strategies, a view also shared with previous academic findings (Gregory 2007).

The objectives for an 'attempted' partner communications strategy are thus manifold, and while there are some notions about driving change in the whole value chain, it seems like the primary objectives with this communications strategy is to execute the organisation's own sustainability strategy through stimulating innovation with employees and suppliers, and importantly through the industry-wide collaboration to gain collaborative power with stakeholders to be able to exert pressure on governments/regulators to keep the industry sector competitive, improve knowledge and raise the image of the company. Therefore the findings suggest:

Conclusion to Proposition 5: **The primary communications objective of the partner communications strategy is to execute the firm's own sustainability strategy, and to gain collaborative power to ensure the industry sector remains competitive.**

9.5 Strategic ambiguity in corporate sustainability communications

The notion of using strategic ambiguity in CS communications seems to be a sensitive topic, where some respondents categorically deny the application of such a strategy, while others acknowledge its value. The findings suggest that the motives for exercising strategic ambiguity in CS communications include firstly the complexity of the topic of sustainability making it difficult to set specific objectives, and that some of the objectives and targets are not measurable, which may be the case in innovation. While these are the most quoted reasons for the use of strategic ambiguity one can argue that if a goal is unclear or difficult to measure, there are no alternatives than using less specific communications, which raises the question if this can be called a strategy? The respondent at M&S mentions, however, that they sometimes set very ambitious targets, which are by many considered as unreachable, which illustrates that sometimes organisations take the decision to set targets in areas that are not well known. These targets might have a specific numerical element, but will not specify how to reach the target. Likewise Adnams challenged their bottle supplier to develop the lightest beer bottle in the market, which is a specific target, but leaving other aspects related to this innovation objective non-specific. The motives of complex targets that may or may not be measurable also fits within the notion of unclear goals and the organisation 'buying itself time' while undergoing organisational change of strategies (Leitch and Davenport 2002; Davenport and Leitch 2005; Wexler 2009).

Additionally a complex target audience, with or without conflicting objectives, calls for strategic ambiguity. These notions are similar to Eisenberg's (1984) idea on strategic ambiguity with the objective of 'promoting unified diversity'. Another suggested motive is that when communicating on a more strategic level, and with a longer-term perspective, strategic ambiguity can add value as it allows more flexibility. Eisenberg (1984) postulates that strategic ambiguity has a role in facilitating organisational change, as it stimulates the development of relationships between organisational members. Miller et al. (2000) share

this view and verify that strategic ambiguity allows flexibility in the interpretation of role descriptions, and thus promoting change. Thus, the findings in this thesis on the value of strategic ambiguity on a strategic level can possibly be seen as a part of Eisenberg's notions on facilitate organisational change. One can however argue that applying strategic ambiguity on a strategic level rather than on an operational level is not a motive but rather describes a context where this concept is most suitable.

The case companies also add that strategic ambiguity not only allows flexibility but also acts as a catalyst to stimulate interest and/or initiatives and/or innovation. While these notions might be classified under the 'facilitate change' motivation for strategic ambiguity, they should be highlighted as an active approach to change. It should here be highlighted that while Eisenberg's (1984) suggestion on facilitating change is from an internal perspective, within an organisation, this study illustrates that this is easily applicable for also external stakeholders.

Interestingly it is suggested that the level of interaction and trust with the stakeholder might decide whether strategic ambiguity is suitable. However while Eurostar recommend strategic ambiguity for mature relationships, this is contradicted by the Coca Cola Enterprises focus group suggesting that a close relationship calls for transparent and more specific communications. This view resembles Eisenberg's (1984) suggestion of using strategic ambiguity to preserve privileged positions, as a close transparent relationship on equal terms calls for clear communications; however in the early phase of a relationship when trust is not established, the firm might use ambiguous communications to portray itself in a positive light and to avoid exposure on areas where its capability is less developed. It should be noted here, however, that when the aim is to stimulate innovation, ambiguous communications are preferred even in a relationship that is close and transparent.

The capability of the communicating organisation, as well as of the audience, is another rationale given. Capability here means knowledge and/or experience of sustainability. It is suggested, by Coca Cola Enterprises and M&S, that as the capability of the communicating organisation increases, the communications can be less ambiguous, thus suggesting that strategic ambiguity is most suitable when the capability is lower, which is in line with previous research suggesting that ambiguous communications will buy the organisation

time until it is more capable of specific communications (Leitch and Davenport 2002). This is further supported by the European Retail Roundtable, suggesting that if communications are too specific, less capable stakeholders might feel excluded. It is stressed, however, that when innovation is the objective, strategic ambiguity is preferred. Thus, innovation seems to be a strong incentive for using strategic ambiguity.

It is also suggested that strategic ambiguity only works for a certain time, and needs to be complemented with specific communications as well. The indicated time factor is maybe not a motivator, but rather a suggestion on how to use strategic ambiguity.

Finally, one case company suggests that strategic ambiguity requires fewer resources and that could be a rationale for smaller businesses.

The findings indicate that there are two main categories of strategic ambiguity. Firstly there is the classical application of ambiguous words with the aim to create consensus with stakeholders as per definition by Eisenberg (1984). Secondly, however, this research highlights the use of strategic ambiguity when the objective is not clear and/or not possible to quantify as also noted by previous research (Leitch and Davenport 2002; Davenport and Leitch 2005; Wexler 2009). In fact, the research presents notably more examples of the application of strategic ambiguity for the latter category. One should here question whether the fewer examples of the application of strategic ambiguity for objectives that are clear and measurable, are due to possible sensitivities in admitting a communication strategy based on equivocality.

The findings thus support previous research into the area of strategic ambiguity, but with a notion of the role of strategic ambiguity not only to facilitate change from a relationship perspective but also through stimulating innovation, interest and initiatives. Also it is found that strategic ambiguity works best on a strategic level, and needs to be complemented with specific communications.

The next step is to link these motives for strategic ambiguity to the different communications strategies, and test the propositions from Chapter 5:

Proposition 6: For the inform communications strategy, the rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to: 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', for the organisation to 'buy itself time', and to 'promote unified diversity'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations.

The overall communications objective with this stakeholder group is to build trust and gain legitimacy to operate as discussed in proposition 2 above. The findings reveal that this objective is challenging as for example consumers is a very heterogeneous group and furthermore in general lacks capability or knowledge on sustainability. For this reason communications targeted specifically to consumers is framed in a very simplistic, symbolic manner, and in one case it is also admitted that for controversial areas the topic will be avoided if possible. One example of this is the suggestion of Abel & Cole that the topic of packaging has with the public a very unscientific angle, and while waiting for the consumers to become educated on this matter Abel & Cole will not communicate on the subject. The format in Abel & Cole's case is to completely avoid the topic until the time is right, which is in line with Denis et al.'s (2011) observations of practices of strategic ambiguity, and similar to the notion of downplaying certain aspects as suggested by Dickinson-Delaporte et al (2010). It is also supporting the notion of the firm to buy itself time (Leitch and Davenport 2002) where in this case it is not so much about the firm to undergo internal changes (as in an organisational change context), but for the public debate to become 'mature' for a certain topic, or for the audience or company to gain more knowledge on the issue.

The usage of vague words with multiple meaning can also be a way of stimulating interest in the firm and its sustainability strategy, as indicated by the Rare Tea Company.

Investors/shareholders form another stakeholder group targeted with this communications strategy. This stakeholder group was earlier described as not having a strong interest in collaboration on sustainability initiatives, but rather wants to be reassured there is a solid strategy to avoid future issues. The interest of this group is, rather, very focussed on financial performance; it is also evident from the case companies that communications through annual reports to this stakeholder group will have a strong financial aspect, as is illustrated from Unilever's annual report highlighting the company's sustainability strategy

as a source for competitive advantage.

Several of the case companies use a branded sustainability programme as a platform for all communications, as is evident in Unilever's case, where in communications to shareholders/investors there are referrals to the branded programme 'Sustainable Living', a notion allowing diverse interpretations as to what sustainable living encompasses. Communications to shareholders/investors and to other stakeholders in the inform category (the general public, media, some NGOs etc.) will thus be based on the branded programme, which in itself contains a mix of specific communications (on measurable targets or performance) and less specific messages (on future objectives or more complex topics within sustainability). The companies thus craft communications with the objective to appeal to a very broad audience, which resembles the notion from the academic literature of 'promoting unified diversity'. One can, however, argue that in the case of this communications strategy the term 'appeal to a broad audience' might be more appropriate as there are no real attempts to unify the different stakeholders, other than perhaps to ensure endorsement to the sustainability strategy from them all, which arguably is better described as 'appeal to a diverse audience'.

There is though no suggestion that strategic ambiguity is practised to this stakeholder group in order to enable deniability or to preserve privileged positions. While these motives might exist, they were not admitted. We can thus conclude that:

Conclusion to Proposition 6: For an inform communications strategy, the rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to: 'appeal to a diverse audience' and for the organisation to 'buy itself time', and to stimulate interest in the organisation and its sustainability strategy. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific communications on the organisation's sustainability objectives that are complex, sensitive and/or not measurable. Certain information might also be omitted. Communications are in many cases based on a branded sustainability programme.

There is also evidence for the application of strategic ambiguity in the emerging influence communications strategy. In this strategy strategic ambiguity is used to stimulate not only interest, but also initiatives, as the overall communications objective is to encourage consumers to take action, to for example recycle. Following the view discussed above, of

consumers being a very heterogenic group, another motive for using strategic ambiguity for the influence strategy is to appeal to a diverse audience. The format of communications is very similar to the inform category, with the use of symbolic and fairly non-specific language, based on a branded sustainability programme if available. This leads to the following conclusion:

For an influence strategy, the rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to: 'appeal to a diverse audience', and to 'stimulate interest and initiatives'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific symbolic communications, in many cases based on a branded sustainability programme.

For the consult strategy following proposition was made:

Proposition 7: For the consult communications strategy, the motivations for the use of strategic ambiguity are to 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', for the organisation to 'buy itself time', and to 'promote unified diversity'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations.

The communications objective with this stakeholder category is to get feedback on the firm's sustainability strategy and as a part of risk management strategy to ensure that NGOs would not attack the company publicly. The findings reveal that this strategy resembles the inform strategy, with the key difference being a much more robust feedback mechanism. Strategic ambiguity takes the same format as in the inform strategy, being based on a branded sustainability programme, if available, and being composed on a mix of specific and non-specific communications, while non-specific communications are used where the objective is vague or not measurable. As in the case of the inform strategy the rationale for using strategic ambiguity is primarily to appeal to a diverse audience. One could question whether strategic ambiguity could also be practised in this context in order to avoid being seen as less capable than peer companies. By presenting a less specific strategy on sustainability, the organisation will thus allow both deniability once feedback is received, and also to preserve privileged positions not disclosing weak areas. While it is

likely these reasons for strategic ambiguity are present, this was however not admitted in the interviews. Thus the conclusion will be limited to the notion that:

Conclusion to Proposition 7<u>:</u> **For a consult communications strategy, the rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to 'appeal to a diverse audience'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific communications on the organisation's sustainability objectives that are complex and/or not measurable. Communications are in many cases based on a branded sustainability programme.**

Next is the involve communications strategy, with the following proposition:

Proposition 8: For the involve communications strategy the motivators for using strategic ambiguity are primarily to 'promote unified diversity' and 'facilitate change', but also to some extent to 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', and for the organisation to 'buy itself time'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations, but to use specific communications in certain relationships where there is a clear, specific objective that needs compliance.

This strategy is typically applied to suppliers, and it is found that also in this strategy the communications consist of a mix of specific and non-specific communications. If there is a specific and measurable target required by the supplier to adhere to, this will be communicated very clearly. There is however strong agreement that strategic ambiguity has a facilitating role when the communications objective is to stimulate innovation and initiatives.

Interestingly, the element of trust is raised as a motive for Strategic Ambiguity, where several case companies suggest they trust the supplier to ensure good sustainability practices, and therefore in these cases the communications are not very specific. Smaller producers, like Rude Health and the Rare Tea Company, will leave conditions on sustainability unspecified with their suppliers, as they already have chosen suppliers sharing their ethos and therefore the trust element is strong enough to avoid clear specifications. Another perspective of this is seen in Morrisons, who assume that the

food/drink brand owners already have robust sustainability strategies implemented and that they therefore don't need to specify that. From a risk management perspective it is also seen as less risky if there are issues with a brand owner's products, as any negative press will primarily hit the brand owner. Morrisons therefore primarily work with its private label suppliers to ensure good sustainability practices. In this case of Morrisons' communications to brand owners, it is thus not the trust between the firm and its supplier that leads to vague sustainability specifications, but a combination of the firm trusting the supplier to have a solid sustainability strategy and the knowledge that if not, the firm is still fairly protected from criticism as the supplier brand is at higher stake. Trust as a rationale for ambiguous communications is however contradicted by Coca Cola Enterprises, who rather suggest that the maturity of the relationship will determine level of ambiguous communications, where long established relationships will lead to more specific communications, unless the aim is innovation in which case ambiguous communications will be employed. Thus one could view this motive as to preserve privileged positions where the relationship is still not well established. Eurostar however suggest that strategic ambiguity is most suitable in a mature relationship. With these contradictions it is therefore not possible to draw a clear conclusion on how the trust element will drive the creation of ambiguous communications.

Strategic ambiguity is also suggested as a method to provide flexibility (part of the notion of facilitating change as discussed above); an example of which is Suma trying to balance the cost of sourcing with products that are as ethical as possible. Several of the case companies also have a supplier code or principles, stating that the supplier is expected to fulfil responsibilities in respect to social and environmental aspects; these are in general vaguely presented, possibly not to limit the choice of suppliers too much. One of the Unilever respondents indicates for example that sometimes raising the bar for sustainability will limit the number of suppliers available, and one might therefore suspect that vaguely formulated supplier codes allow the company to be more flexible on choosing suppliers. The notion of flexibility is interesting as it also supports the findings by Miller et al. (2000) in job descriptions.

Even though the majority of case companies claim a partner communications strategy with employees, there are signs that the partner strategy might primarily be applicable for senior managers, whereas for the other employees communications take more of an involve

approach. In this case the rationale for practising strategic ambiguity is to create unified diversity, as the aim is to get the employees to agree on a certain direction of actions and to execute the strategy. Another aim of strategic ambiguity for the internal stakeholders is to stimulate interest, innovation and initiatives, which resembles the notion of facilitating change (Eisenberg 1984; Leitch and Davenport 2002; Davenport and Leitch 2005; Miller et al. 2000; Contractor and Ehrlich 1993; Denis et al. 2011). As in the case of the consult strategy there is, however, no confirmation of the motive of to 'ensure deniability', even though this might exist. The findings thus suggest that:

Conclusion to Proposition 8: For an involve communications strategy the prime motivators for using strategic ambiguity are for internal communications to 'promote unified diversity' and to stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation. For communications to suppliers the motive for applying strategic ambiguity is to stimulate innovation, initiatives and to create flexibility. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of vaguely phrased supplier codes/principles and targets for innovation. Branded sustainability programmes are used for both internal and external communications, allowing for different interpretations.

With these motives, strategic ambiguity will facilitate for the firm to achieve its overall communications objective of involving stakeholders to support the firm's sustainability strategy.

Finally, the partner communications strategy is tested with following proposition:

Proposition 9: For the partner communications strategy the motivators for using strategic ambiguity are primarily to 'promote unified diversity' and to 'facilitate change'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the suggested sustainability objectives for the value chain. For certain very close relationships a more tailored communications strategy might be required.

This strategy primarily targets senior employees, some key suppliers and NGOs, and industry and value chain colleagues on forums and round tables. It is questionable if the communications strategy to employees is really a fully balanced two-way communications method, as there is evidence of the focal organisation, and senior directors/managers,

setting the tone for communications in these contexts. Internal communications on a strategic level is often ambiguous, as the communications typically take a long-term view where targets might not be clear, and as the aim is to stimulate employees to take interest, initiatives and be innovative to ensure that the firm's sustainability strategy is executed. The suggested partnerships with suppliers are also questionable. Possibly, when the focal organisation is small and is targeting a larger organisation, true symmetrical communications take place, as was suggested by some of the smaller case companies. The best example of partner communications strategies is seen in industry- and value chain-wide collaboration through forums and roundtables. A challenge here is that there are diverse participants, and even competition between some of the actors, and with different levels of capability of sustainability. This diverse audience is thus a key motivator for ambiguous communications, aiming at creating unified diversity. It is also suggested that strategic ambiguity is useful for sensitive topics, as previously verified by Dickinson-Delaporte et al. (2010).

Communications are thus fairly general, often based on a branded programme initiated by trade organisations or by the participants. The more complex the audience the more ambiguous communications are seen.

<u>Conclusion to Proposition 9</u>: Thus it can be concluded that for a partner communications strategy, the motivator for using strategic ambiguity in external communications is primarily to 'promote unified diversity' in complex audiences and on sensitive topics. For internal communications the key motivators are to stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the suggested sustainability objectives for the value chain, often based on a branded programme.

The conceptual framework as presented in Chapter 5, has been updated taking these findings into consideration, and the resulting framework is presented in Table 9.2 below:

Table 9.2: Framework for corporate sustainability communications

Categorization drivers	Business Strategy Relevance, Interest, Power, Capability, Legitimacy, Proximity, Knowledge/expertise, Sustainability impact ---------------------→ (The higher degree of these the closer interaction)				
Stakeholder categories	**Inform**	**Influence**	**Consult**	**Involve**	**Partner**
Communication model	Source -> Rec. Provide feedback mechanism	Source -> Rec. Provide robust feedback mechanism	Source < = > Rec. Provide robust Feedback mechanism	Source ⇔ Rec. Building relationships and dialogue	Group ⇔ Group Collaboration is mutually desired and required
Primary Communication Objective	Build trust, Legitimacy	Encourage consumers to change to more sustainable practices	Expertise, feedback, benchmark	Encourage stakeholders to collaborate with the firm to support the firm's Sustainability agenda	Execute the firm's sustainability strategy, gain collaborative power
Strategic Ambiguity objective	Appeal to a diverse audience, Buy time, Stimulate interest	Appeal to a diverse audience, Stimulate interest and initiatives	Appeal to a diverse audience	For internal communications: Promote unified diversity, Stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation. For communications to suppliers: to stimulate innovation and allow flexibility.	Internal communications: Stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation. External communications: Promote unified diversity
Strategic Ambiguity format	Non-specific communication sustainability on objectives that are complex, sensitive and/or not measurable. Branded Sustainability Programme.	Non-specific symbolic communication, Branded Sustainability Programme.	Non-specific communication sustainability objectives that are complex and/or not measurable. Branded Sustainability Programme	Vaguely phrased supplier codes / principles, and targets for innovation. Branded Sustainability Programme.	Non-specific communication. Branded Sustainability Programme.

The conceptual framework as presented in Chapter 5 has consequently been modified, taking into consideration the findings as discussed above. Two key amendments to highlight include the additional communications strategy of *influence*, and the application of branded sustainability programmes as a form of strategic ambiguity.

It should be emphasised that this framework should be dynamic in the sense that stakeholders might possess several identities, as perhaps both partners and competitors, (Balmer and Greyser 2003) and might thus be targeted with different communications strategy depending on which identity they represent at the time, and also that a stakeholder might move between strategies depending on issues and circumstances.

This framework thus extends the previously discussed communications models. Compared to the original PR model (Grunig and Hunt 1984) and the subsequently developed CSR communications model (Morsing and Schultz 2006), both with one asymmetric two-way communications strategy, this framework identifies three communications strategies ranging from a high degree of asymmetry to a less imbalanced approach: influence, consult

and involve. These three strategies are deployed with different objectives and often to very different stakeholder groups and the previous models are not sufficiently recognising these differentiations. Importantly, the findings reveal that in practice the two-way symmetric communications strategy, named involvement strategy by Morsing and Schultz (2006) and partner strategy by Gregory (2007), has obvious elements of asymmetry which is often not recognised (or admitted) by the communicating organisations. This observation is important as businesses should be aware that in contemporary communications it might be issues rather than the organisation that takes the central point of communications (Rowley 1997, Roloff 2008, Nevill and Menguc 2006, Luoma-aho and Vos 2010) and in such settings the firm is expected to be prepared to change as well as other stakeholders and thus a fully balanced communication strategy is called for. An interesting perspective one could take here is the notion of issue arenas (Luoma-aho and Vos 2010), suggesting that interactions between firms and its stakeholders are increasingly becoming more open and dynamic through new channels such as social media. It is suggested that firms are likely to participate in a variety of issue centred contexts, named as issue arenas, and therefore need to build multiple communications strategies for these different stakeholder settings. These issue arenas are characterised by a high degree of negotiations as stakeholders are diverse and have their own agendas, and symmetric communications are vital in order to find ways to collaborate and co-create (Luoma-aho and Vos 2010).

However, while issue arenas are important aspects for contemporary communications, it is important to consider that "*An issue arena is a place where the public debate about an issue is conducted*" (Luoma-aho and Vos 2010, pg 324), and based on this definition all communications will not be issue driven as corporations also have their own sustainability strategy that needs to be communicated and negotiated with certain stakeholders.

Therefore the CS communications framework presented here is valid both for firm driven communication as well as for issue arena communications. For example the initiatives like the Courtauld commitment can be seen as illustrations of an issue arena, where the two-way symmetric communication strategy is recommended.

Whether the communication strategy is driven by public debate (as suggested for issue arenas) or by the firm's own sustainability agenda, consistent communication is essential. The notion of a branded sustainability program can therefore be useful as a platform to apply both for when participating in issue arenas, as well as for corporate driven communications.

In addition a branded sustainability program adds value in the light of the multiple identities that stakeholders can posses especially in a business-to-business context where for example businesses can be both partners, competitors, suppliers and customers. A branded program will thus support consistency in communications, allowing the stakeholders to recognise the overall communications theme irrespectively of which stakeholder category they currently portray.

One should note the warnings that too much sustainability communications can be counteractive and result in decreased legitimacy for the organisation (Crane and Livesey 2003, Morsing and Schultz 2006, Schultz and Wehmeier 2010), and it is thus important to establish the underlying motive behind communications to each stakeholder category. As diverse stakeholders will make diverse interpretations of ambiguous communications, firms also need to rigorously analyse its use of strategic ambiguity to prevent possible misinterpretation, and to ensure that targeted stakeholders possess (1) resources and capability, (2) incentive to engage, and (3) goodwill and trust towards the firm (Davenport and Leitch 2002) in order to be able to take the intended actions.

The findings regarding branded sustainability programmes are novel and interesting and will be further discussed in Section 9.7 below.

In addition to the propositions that have been assessed above, this research project set out to answer some research questions, of which remain the questions as to whether the size of the company and/or the value chain position have any impact on a business's CS communications strategy. These questions will therefore be addressed in the next section.

9.6 Corporate sustainability communications and its relationship to the size and the value chain position of the company

The findings suggest some differences to the CS communications strategy depending on the size of the focal organisation. For example it is found in relation to stakeholder categorisation attributes that the notion of 'shared sustainability ethos' is only quoted by smaller companies, and this in the context of value chain stakeholders. The value chain position of the respondents doesn't seem to have any significant differences in suggested attributes.

Smaller companies seem to primarily consider the value chain stakeholders as the most important stakeholders to have a dialogue with, with the Rare Tea Company being an exception in also including media as a key stakeholder. Larger corporations in general tend to include more stakeholder groups as key stakeholders (also non-value chain stakeholders). One explanation of this difference between large and small companies is offered by the SME food industry consultant, who suggests that in general smaller firms don't have the resources to engage with a large number of stakeholders, and in addition they don't risk as high a degree of brand image erosion as a large very public corporation. This is similar to the findings by Grinstein and Goldman (2011) indicating that the number of stakeholders approached is directly linked to the level of resources within the focal firm. Company websites normally include more stakeholders as key, as compared to what the respondents revealed in the interviews. There are two possible reasons for this: firstly the interviews don't allow as much preparation as adding information to the website, secondly the website is also more official, and as part of the company's public relations it needs to portray a good image.

The notion of which stakeholders are considered most important might also depend on who is being interviewed, as previous research has shown different stakeholders being identified at different levels in a corporation (Parent and Deephouse 2007). Both the brand owners and retailers engage with similar types of stakeholders, so from a value chain perspective there do not seem to be any significant differences.

Drivers for strategic ambiguity are predominantly provided in the interviews with the larger corporations. This doesn't necessarily indicate that smaller organisations do not practise strategic ambiguity, but is possibly a signal that there might be fewer analyses behind a sustainability communications strategy from the smallest organisations. Strategic ambiguity is defined as purposefully using words with multiple meanings when targeting complex stakeholder groups; therefore if there is no real purpose behind non-specific or ambiguous communications from the smaller organisations, the issue is not a strategic one and shouldn't be called strategic ambiguity. The comment by the respondent at the European Retail Roundtable on the resource saving notion of strategic ambiguity compared to designing a communications strategy based on detailed and specific information, could possibly appeal to small organisations.

Large retailers are viewed by the other value chain members as the most powerful players in the chain, and while the retailers suggest they use an involve communications strategy to their suppliers, the perception from the suppliers is that the communications are characterised by a dictating one-way approach.

9.7   Branded sustainability programme as a form of strategic ambiguity

The practice of branded sustainability programmes emerged as an interesting aspect during the course of the data collection. The findings suggest that branded sustainability programmes offer an interesting platform for communications on sustainability to a variety of stakeholders. The branding literature is rich in research on corporate and product/service brands and how they impact consumer loyalty, corporate image and identity, but there is very little knowledge of the complexities of branding to a broader stakeholder context (Virgo and Chernatony 2006), such as a sustainability programme with the aim of not just achieving customer loyalty and corporate image but also to stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation. The emerging concept of place marketing, or city marketing offers some valuable insights to the challenges of communicating a brand to diverse stakeholders. For example, Merrilees et al. (2012) recognise the limited empirical research in the link between multiple stakeholders and branding. Their paper builds on the notion of Morsing and Kristensen (2001), who argue that different interpretations about a brand can be a strength rather than a problem, as they allow diverse stakeholders to engage with the organisation. Merrilees et al. (2012) conduct their research in the context of a city brand and conclude that the city brand offers stakeholders different 'filters' or 'lenses' for interpretation of the brand:

"*Importantly, the filter concept paves the way for multiple stakeholder groups to have multiple meanings of a city brand. Each stakeholder group applies its own filter to interpret the meaning of the city brand.*"
(Merrilees et al. 2012, p. 1042-1043).

A similar opinion is presented by Fiedler and Kirchgeorg (2007), who conclude their empirical study on four stakeholder groups (customers, employees, shareholders and

journalists) that while each of the groups has different needs and consequently should be approached with different strategies, the resulting perception of the corporation is very similar between the stakeholders.

While a branded sustainability programme is different from a city brand, the notion of a multitude of stakeholders with different needs, and where there is need for collaboration with some stakeholders, presents a very similar context, where stakeholders will apply different meanings to the brand, be it a city or a sustainability programme. Another study in city branding also suggests that in contexts with diverse stakeholders, it might be preferable to address stakeholders with different strategies and different levels of engagement (Stokes 2008), thus supporting the notion of stakeholder categorisation into different communications strategies as suggested in this thesis.

Another, although fairly dated, study looks into food endorsement programmes (Graham et al. 1994), reviewing how these programmes (aimed at improving heart patients' eating habits) are designed and managed in order to ensure improved brand equity. While this study is focussed on consumer perceptions only, it adds some interesting insights to branded programmes. It is concluded that these social food endorsement programmes, despite being different from product/service and corporate brands, develop into brands and thus need brand management in order to reap the benefits. While the marketing literature has been primarily focussed on the consumer as a target, there is also some knowledge to be gained from the human resource literature, offering insights also on branded programmes as an effective tool to engage employees and ignite cultural change (Pollitt 2009), a context very similar to a branded sustainability programme.

9.8   Responsible application of strategic ambiguity

As was discussed in section 4.4.7, there is a risk for unethical application of strategic ambiguity and it is thus vital that corporations employ this strategy with care. Elving and van Vuuren (2011) warn that the application of vague words, suggestive pictures or symbols, and absence of proof are examples of green washing. Vague words and symbolic communications, which in this thesis are given as examples of strategic ambiguity would then according to these notions be green-washing? Well, the response to this warning lies

within the third proposition 'absence of proof'. CS communications should not be entirely built on vague statements and symbolism but needs to be backed up also with specific communications, which was suggested as an important element by several of the case companies. In this respect some valuable advice from Elving and van Vuuren (2011) should be addressed when building CS communications. They suggest firstly that the sustainability motives need to be well integrated in the organisation and driven by senior management, which was also suggested by several of the case companies. Secondly there needs to be a visible fit between the firm's business objectives and its sustainability objectives. The reported illustrations of the integration of strategies for nutrition and health in food manufacturer's sustainability agenda could be an example of this. Thirdly Elving and van Vuuren suggest that a sustainability strategy needs to be taking an inside out approach, ensuring that the sustainability culture is fully embedded with the employees before communicating to external stakeholders. Eurostar as one example is following this advice through their internal sustainability champions. Lastly, it is advised that communication needs to be backed up by clear evidence. Again, Eurostar can be given as an example here as the chairman stressed the importance of communicating firstly what has been achieved to build credibility.

9.9   Summary

This chapter has compared and contrasted the findings from Chapters 7 and 8 with the propositions and conceptual framework in Chapter 5. The findings largely support the propositions and conceptual framework, with some amendments leading up to a revised framework for CS communications. Importantly, some evidence has emerged pointing to an additional communications strategy – here named as an 'influence' communications strategy, primarily targeting consumers. In addition it becomes evident that strategic ambiguity can present itself as a branded sustainability programme, allowing multiple interpretations while ensuring a consistent overall image.

The following chapter, Conclusions, will further reflect on the findings and contributions to new theory as presented in this chapter, and will suggest recommendations for future research and highlight managerial implications.

10 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter will begin with a brief review of the preceding chapters, followed by a reflection on the research process to assess whether the presented framework for CS communications fulfils the research aim and questions set out at the beginning of this PhD thesis. Contributions to theory and practice will be discussed, and recommendations will be made for how future research can further enhance and develop the framework, and how managers can benefit from the findings.

Chapter 1 sets the scene for the research, explaining why the research topic is challenging and important, and highlights gaps in existing academic knowledge. The discussion leads up to the presentation of the overall research aim, and specifically a number of related research questions are listed.

Chapters 2 to 4 provide a theoretical background to the research aim, starting with an overview of the concept of sustainability in Chapter 2, stakeholder theory in Chapter 3 and stakeholder management through corporate communications in Chapter 4. These chapters highlight current knowledge within these strands of research, including a critique of previous research.

Chapter 5 expands the notions raised in Chapters 2 to 4, crafting these research strands together and developing a conceptual framework for CS communications, merging the previous separate theories of stakeholder management, corporate communications and strategic ambiguity.

Chapter 6 explains methodological choices to test the conceptual framework, through an overview of the researcher's stance to the whole research process from a choice of research philosophy through approach and strategy to data collection and analysis. A justification of the choice of a qualitative multiple case study methodology is provided together with an overview of its limitations and notions of precautions taken to strengthen the validity and reliability of the research.

Chapters 7 and 8 depict the research findings, presented following the structure of the conceptual framework to facilitate an overview, drawing on insights across the case companies. Chapter 7 focuses on stakeholder categorization attributes and corporate communications strategies, and Chapter 8 adds findings on strategic ambiguity to these communications strategies.

Chapter 9 analyses the findings presented in Chapters 7 and 8, comparing and contrasting them to the conceptual model. The propositions are assessed looking for alternative explanations, ensuring a high level of validity and reliability and a minimum of bias, and as a result a revised framework for CS communications emerges.

10.2 Thesis aims and findings

The aim of this research is to increase the knowledge on how to effectively build CS communications strategies to a diverse stakeholder audience. From this general aim, a number of research questions and related propositions were developed. The sections below will address each of these research questions with a brief overview of the key findings.

10.2.1 RQ1: The concept of sustainability

The word sustainability is used widely by businesses, media and by society in general. In order to carry out research on corporate communications on sustainability it is important to first establish what businesses include in the concept of sustainability. The findings are in agreement with previous academic research on the complexity of the concept of sustainability, and it sometimes being interwoven with the concept of CSR. There is some evidence however that CSR is seen as an antecedent to sustainability, which is in line with previous academic suggestions (Van Marrewijk 2003; Steurer et al. 2005). In addition to the pillars of environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability, notions of product quality and consumer health and nutrition are included in the sustainability concept in the context of the food and drink industry.

10.2.2 RQ2: The attributes used by businesses to categorise their stakeholders

Because of time and resource constraints businesses struggle to keep active dialogues with all their stakeholders. In addition there are stakeholders that might not want to have an on-going interaction with the firm. It is therefore important for businesses to effectively categorise their stakeholders in order to tailor the most appropriate communications strategy for each category. This research looked into which attributes businesses use for this segmentation process and found strong evidence for the existence of eight attributes for stakeholder categorisation: business strategy relevance, interest, power, capability, legitimacy, proximity, knowledge/expertise, and sustainability impact. There are indications that a time element should be an important part of these attributes, but it is however not clear how and further research is needed on this aspect.

10.2.3 RQ3: The communications strategies suitable for different stakeholder groups

Following the five attributes for stakeholder categorisation as depicted above, a business can categorise its stakeholders into different groups in order to select and tailor the most appropriate communications strategy for each category. Previous research indicated four key strategies for corporate communications: inform, consult, involve and partner. This research supports these findings, but also found some evidence of a fifth strategy, here named *influence*. The influence communications strategy is similar to an inform strategy, as it is predominantly one-way communications with some feedback mechanism available. The main difference however is the requested action from the target audience, where the inform strategy expects a rather passive response, the influence strategy expects initiatives from the receivers. The influence strategy is also different from an involve strategy as it is predominantly one-way communications, and the initiatives do not directly contribute towards the firm's sustainability agenda. It is interesting to note that although many case companies suggest a partner communications strategy to certain stakeholders, there is limited evidence of truly balanced two-way communications.

10.2.4 RQ4: The practice of strategic ambiguity in corporate sustainability communications

Even after the categorisation of stakeholders into the five CS communications strategies, the challenge on how to tailor each communications strategy remains, as the topic of sustainability is complex and the stakeholders (even within a stakeholder category) can be

quite heterogeneous. Strategic ambiguity has been suggested by a number of scholars as an effective tool to create common sense among diverse stakeholders in the context of organisational change (Eisenberg 1984; Eisenberg and Witten 1987; Leitch and Davenport 2002, 2007; Davenport and Leitch 2005) and in social enterprise marketing (Dickinson-Delaporte et al. 2010). These ideas were thus investigated in the context of CS communications to see if such communications add value. While the suggestion of applying strategic ambiguity in CS communications was met with scepticism by several case companies, there is clear evidence of this concept being practised. The key motives for employing strategic ambiguity are the complexity of the concept of sustainability, with several features not being measurable, diverse stakeholders, and to stimulate interest and/or innovation and/or initiatives. Strategic ambiguity works best at a strategic level and it was stressed that in order to preserve credibility, ambiguous communications need to be complemented with specific communications. It was found that a specific example of strategic ambiguity is through 'branded sustainability programmes'. Several of the larger case companies have implemented branded sustainability programmes, applying a generic slogan and/or brand name, which allows them to be more flexible with their sustainability strategy, to stimulate innovation, and importantly to detach themselves from the current public terminology in use (be it CSR, sustainability, life cycle thinking, etc.) that might go out of fashion or become tainted by other organisations' greenwash.

10.2.5 RQ5: The rationale and format of strategic ambiguity in corporate sustainability communications

While the previous section illustrated some of the general motives for the application of strategic ambiguity, the research specifically reviewed the rationale and format of strategic ambiguity for each of the five corporate communications strategies:

Inform communications strategy: The rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to: 'appeal to a diverse audience', for the organisation to 'buy itself time', and to stimulate interest in the organisation and its sustainability strategy. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific communications on the organisation's sustainability objectives that are complex, sensitive and/or not measurable. Certain information might also be omitted. Communications is in many cases based on a branded sustainability programme.

Influence communications strategy: The rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to: 'appeal to a diverse audience', and to 'stimulate interest and initiatives'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific symbolic communications, in many cases based on a branded sustainability programme.

Consult communications strategy: The rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to 'appeal to a diverse audience'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific communications on the organisation's sustainability objectives that are complex and/or not measurable. Communications are in many cases based on a branded sustainability programme.

Involve communications strategy: The prime motivators for using strategic ambiguity are for internal communications to 'promote unified diversity', and to 'stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation'. For communications to suppliers the motive for applying Strategic ambiguity is to 'stimulate innovation' and 'create flexibility'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of vaguely phrased supplier codes/principles and targets for innovation. Branded sustainability programmes are used for both internal and external communications, allowing for different interpretations.

Partner communications strategy: The motivator for using strategic ambiguity in external communications is primarily to 'promote unified diversity' in complex audiences and on sensitive topics. For internal communications the key motivators are to stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of non-specific wordings on the suggested sustainability objectives for the value chain, often based on a branded programme.

10.2.6 RQ6: The corporate sustainability communications strategies and its link to company size, and a company's position in the value chain

The proposed framework for CS communications seems equally applicable for both food and drink manufacturers as for retailers, as there are no indications that the value chain position will significantly change the framework. There are some differences noted when

comparing companies of different size however, where for example larger corporations tend to include more stakeholders in what they call their key stakeholders, whereas smaller organisations primarily consider the value chain participants as the most important stakeholders. When it comes to attributes for stakeholder categorisation, the notion of 'shared sustainability ethos' was only suggested by smaller companies. While there was evidence of ambiguous communications both from small and large businesses, the strategic presentation of this concept is primarily performed by larger corporations.

10.2.7 The fulfilment of the research aim and questions

As it is evident from the previous sections (10.2.1–10.2.6), this study has provided answers to each of the six research questions, and with the development of the framework for CS communications (as presented in table 9.2), the overall research aim of increasing knowledge of how to effectively build corporate sustainability communications strategies to a diverse stakeholder audience has successfully been fulfilled. The following sections will further highlight how the findings contribute to knowledge and practice, and will give recommendations for managers, and for further academic research.

10.3 Theoretical contributions

The CS communications framework as presented in Chapter 9 builds on three important strands of the academic literature. Firstly it is the notion of stakeholder theory, where the saliency framework by Mitchell et al. (1997) forms a foundation for this work. In addition however, this research also takes into consideration subsequent research on stakeholder categorisation, notably the suggestions on 'proximity' (Driscoll and Starik 2004; Winn and Keller 2001; Gibson 2000), and 'business strategy relevance' (Harrison and St John 1996) as stakeholder segmentation attributes. In addition, from the more instrumental approach of stakeholder theory, 'interest' was added as suggested by Gregory (2007). This study's empirical research confirms the attributes of power and legitimacy from the saliency framework as highly relevant for stakeholder prioritisation, however the third attribute of urgency does not find support in this thesis. However, as an extension to Mitchell's prominent framework on stakeholder prioritisation, it is found that proximity, business strategy relevance, and interest (as suggested by previous academic research) are also

supported in this study. In addition, three other attributes were discovered which are relevant in the context of CS communications, i.e. capability, knowledge/expertise, and sustainability impact. Thus, this research confirms two of the attributes of the saliency framework, and further extends it to include additional attributes, seen as highly relevant from business practitioners. While business strategy relevance can be seen as a very instrumental attribute for stakeholder categorisation, it is still a highly relevant attribute according to the research findings. The notion of sustainability impact as a categorisation attribute, with the meaning that stakeholders in the value chain that are close to a sustainability issue should gain priority from the business, is highly interesting and makes sense from a normative stakeholder perspective.

The second strand of academic literature to which this research contributes is on corporate communications strategies. The research builds primarily on the communications strategy framework by Gregory (2007), which is based on the seminal work by Grunig and Hunt (1984), with some notions from research by Morsing and Schultz (2006). While these previous research papers provide useful communications frameworks, empirical testing is very limited. This research not only provides empirical evidence for different communications strategies from basic one-way communications to a balanced two-way communications strategy, but suggests a fifth communications strategy - *influence*, and it brings communications strategies into the context of sustainability. The previous work by Morsing and Schultz (2006) admittedly takes a CSR perspective on communications, however the model has very limited verification regarding the different communications strategies. This research also adds to the knowledge gap in communications to a multitude of stakeholders, as previous research especially in the marketing field is very focussed on consumers, and to a limited extent also internal stakeholders such as employees and managers (Merrilees et al 2012).

Importantly, bringing in the third strand of academic literature – strategic ambiguity – adds a new dimension to both stakeholder segmentation and corporate communications strategies. The challenges of corporate communications on sustainability were highlighted, with the notions of a complex topic to a complex and sometimes diverse stakeholder audience. At the same time, the corporate communications literature stresses the importance of consistent communications to deliver a coherent corporate identity (Balmer and Greyser 2002). This research illustrates how these seemingly contradictory notions can

be achieved through the application of strategic ambiguity. It is found that employing a branded sustainability programme, allows a multitude of stakeholders to identify with and collaborate on sustainability initiatives. The branded programme offers a consistent approach to communications, still allows for flexibility through the built-in possibility to multiple interpretations, with the added benefit of stimulating innovation and initiatives. While the value of strategic ambiguity has been empirically tested in a number of contexts within organisational theory, there is limited knowledge regarding how it can be applied in other contexts (Wexler 2009).

To summarise, the CS communications framework thus contributes to the academic literature in following ways:

1) Provides a contemporary review and verification of stakeholder categorisation attributes. While stakeholder categorisation attributes have been widely discussed in the literature before, the discussion has been divided into a normative approach by the stakeholder theory literature, and an instrumental approach by the stakeholder management literature. This research connects these two views and suggests stakeholder categorisation attributes that are not only important for the business to reach its overall business objectives, but that also take an ethical approach, i.e. consideration of responsibilities beyond financial performance.

2) Extends existing corporate communications models (Gregory 2007; Grunig and Hunt 1984; Morsing and Schultz 2006) and provides empirical testing that previously has been very limited, and further adds deeper knowledge around the connection between criteria for stakeholder categorisation and the resulting communications strategy.

3) Extends knowledge into strategic ambiguity and provides further empirical testing, and importantly takes strategic ambiguity beyond the contexts of organisational change and crisis communications, and introduces strategic ambiguity into CS communications.

4) With points 2 and 3 above, the research provides a comprehensive CS communications framework, bringing together stakeholder categorisation, communications strategies, with the idea of strategic ambiguity.

5) Contributes to the understanding of how the value chain position and business size might impact on communications strategies, where previous empirical studies on

sustainability-related topics have predominantly been conducted in the contexts of large corporations (Fassin et al 2011).

10.4 Methodological contributions

The research methodology of a multiple case study design applied in this thesis contributes to methodological theories for research into both strategic ambiguity and corporate communications as previous studies in these fields primarily focus on single case studies. Further, the inclusion of two points within one value chain, the food and drink manufacturers <u>and</u> the retailers, is a rather unique approach, where most research would focus on either of these two contexts. By conducting interviews with both the food and drink manufacturers and the retailers regarding their respective communications strategies to each other, an element of cross checking and thus strengthening of the methodology is provided.

This research has a number of further strengths, including the involvement of a high number of case companies, where many of the case companies are market leading and respected organisations. Further the researcher had access to the CEO, chairman or other senior directors in many of these organisations, thus allowing data collection on a very strategic level with the decision makers. Triangulation was applied through additional data collection methods: a focus group, an observation of a panel debate and through secondary research.

10.5 Limitations to the research

While the research has a number of strengths as highlighted above, there are of course possible limitations to the research process, as listed below:

1) Semi-structured interviews as a data collection method can introduce issues with reliability due to their flexible nature. While it was important to allow flexibility to detect emerging concepts that would not have been discovered if a strict interview protocol had been followed, precautions had to be taken to avoid loss of objectivity and comparability between the case companies. For this reason an interview protocol guided each interview, ensuring that the same standard questions were covered at each interview, and that the vast majority of the interviews were

recorded and transcribed to allow maximum of objectivity. In the cases where the respondent did not agree to the recording of the conversation careful notes were taken and completed as soon as possible after the interview.

2) The influence communications strategy and the concept of branded programmes, were discovered during the course of the data collection, and consequently questions related to gain more insights into these concepts were not included on the original interview protocol. Thus, these concepts have not been subject to as rigorous testing and comparison as the concepts identified in the conceptual framework and propositions.

3) Internal validity is generally seen as less of a problem with qualitative research as the interviewer can ensure that the respondent has understood the question correctly. One could however argue that due to the negative perception of strategic ambiguity as suggested by several respondents, that also the internal validity could be challenged. The word 'ambiguity' is viewed as negative by many respondents and consequently the respondent would reject the application of this concept as they were eager that their companies were portrayed as responsible companies. As the researcher is not a native English speaker, this reaction had not been predicted, and it was after the first three interviews that it became clear that another approach had to be taken. Therefore, once this challenge was detected, in order to combat this weakness, the researcher avoided using the word ambiguous in the interviews, and rather tried to probe for evidence by asking for vague, less specific or general wording in communications, which was much better received (as was discussed in 6.7.7).

4) External validity or generalizability is often considered as a weak point in qualitative research, especially if there is only one case company. In this study a high number of case companies were included, and while this design did not allow as deep research as for a single case company study, it allowed a broad approach searching for evidence across a number of food and drink manufacturers and retailers in Western Europe, thus allowing some generalizability within the Western European food and drink value chain, however not beyond this industry sector and not beyond Europe.

5) Bias is another challenge in interpretive research, in both data collection and analysis. It was noted for example that sometimes the respondents considered the researcher as a stakeholder and would communicate messages intended for the

specific stakeholder group the researcher was thought to belong to, rather than answering questions. This experience would however highlight how the company communicates about sustainability, so it would still provide useful insights. In order to reduce bias the researcher took a number of pre-cautions, e.g. following protocols on introductions of researcher, topic, and interview questions. In addition a conscious effort was made to take a neutral and objective stance during interviews and analysis. The interviews were also recorded and transcribed and during analysis the researcher was mindful to ensure equal weighting for all respondents when analysing the data.

6) Time constraints did not allow further case companies to be included in the study, nor for deeper analysis of each case company, or for a more robust content analysis of the case companies' websites and sustainability reports. As these are easily available a thorough analysis of these communication channels could have offered further insights to support findings from the interviews. It is also acknowledged that further case companies and additional interviews in each case company would have added extra robustness to the empirical findings.

7) The research primarily takes the standpoint from one focal organisation, and thus takes a simplistic perspective, as opposed to taking a network approach to stakeholders (Rowley 1997; Menguc 2006; Roloff 2008). There are however some elements of a network perspective in the form of the partner communications strategy, specifically where businesses collaborate on equal terms with industry colleagues. The findings contribute to an improved understanding on the messages organisation's send but are not exploring received communications. As the focus of the study is on two-way communications, it would have added further value to explore this from both angles.

8) Another limitation is that strategic ambiguity was observed primarily from the focal organisation's perspective, and not also exploring how this issue is perceived from the perspective of the stakeholder audiences. The research would also have benefitted from more insights into how the suggested partner communications strategies were perceived by those stakeholders identified as partners. As sustainability communications can be viewed as a social process it is important to research also the reception of sustainability communications (Schultz and Wehmeier 2010).

9) All respondents were selected to ensure as similar seniority and expertise as

possible in the field of sustainability communications to further strengthen the comparability of cases, however as an interesting side note it was found that there are inconsistencies in where the responsibility for CS communications sits between the case companies. In some cases it was the sustainability director who would have the responsibility, and in others it was the corporate communications director, or even the CEO. This was however not part of the research objectives, but could be explored in future research as suggested below in section 10.6.

Some of the limitations listed here offer an interesting departure point for future research, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

10.6 Recommendations for future research

Based on the listed contributions to theory and methodology, and the limitations of the research process, the findings here open an avenue for future research projects:

1) The research findings indicate a need for a time element to the five stakeholder categorisation attributes. Mitchell et al. (1997) suggest 'urgency' as one attribute to make their model more dynamic, but still their framework is criticised as being too static (Roloff 2008; Rowley 1997; Jawahar and McLaughlin 2001) and it is further not clear if the time aspect should be an attribute or a moderator. While this research offers some evidence of 'sequence' carrying the meaning of hot topics and/or stakeholder relationships evolving over time, it is not conclusive and further research into this time aspect would add value to stakeholder theory.

2) Another aspect of the categorisation attributes to further investigate is the attribute of 'business strategy relevance'. The discussion raises the question whether this attribute is an attribute in its own right or possibly could be considered as part of either the power attribute, or of the proximity attribute. In addition, deeper research on how the categorisation attributes of capability versus knowledge/expertise versus power are related would further strengthen the framework.

3) While the findings here propose an additional communications strategy for the context of sustainability, *influence*, more research would be beneficial to further verify this and to gain a deeper understanding of this strategy. Understanding an influence communications strategy would not only add academic knowledge into

the context of sustainability communications, but is also important from a practical perspective, as a successful strategy to initiate actions from the public or consumers can facilitate a broader uptake of sustainability initiatives in society.

4) This study provides some insights into the consult communications strategy, however due to time constraints it was not possible to dig further into the motives behind the application of strategic ambiguity for this specific strategy. Future research could specifically observe consultations with NGOs and conduct interviews with strategic communicators to get further understanding on the reasons for applying strategic ambiguity to this communications strategy.

5) This research looked into the motives behind, and the format of, the application of strategic ambiguity, however it doesn't consider the resulting interpretation of employing this strategy. Further research aimed at assessing how effectively strategic ambiguity can fulfil such motives would greatly validate the framework. The research could be conducted for example as an experiment, or as a longitudinal study reviewing an ambiguous communications strategy and its effect.

6) The emerging concept of branded sustainability programmes as a form of strategic ambiguity would benefit from further knowledge and validation. There is very limited research in this area, as the vast majority of research into brands are concerned with consumers, with the aim of increasing consumer loyalty. A branded sustainability programme has different objectives as it is to some extent a promotional tool towards customers, but primarily it is, as admitted by Eurostar, an important tool for internal communications, and to value chain members. Future research could, for example, look into the relationship between a branded sustainability programme and the corporate brand, and how to best align a branded programme to the corporate brand to ensure a consistent corporate identity following recommendations by Balmer and Greyser (2002).

7) This research was limited to the food and drink value chain in Western Europe. Previous research on CSR communications reveals that stakeholder selection and engagement are culturally specific (Habisch et al 2011), and one could question whether this applies also for strategic ambiguity. It would therefore be interesting to study the applicability of the framework across different countries. Likewise it would be beneficial to validate the framework also in other industrial contexts.

8) Industry wide forums and roundtables were identified as interesting settings for studying communications to diverse stakeholders, and additional research specific for such contexts could add further depth to the CS communications framework.

9) The respondent selection process highlighted that there appears to be inconsistencies between companies on where the responsibility for building CS communications sits. It might therefore be interesting to further study this from an organisational theory angle.

10.7 Managerial contributions and recommendations

"*Nothing is as practical as a good theory*" (Lewin 1945, p. 129).

This quote has still validity and it is suggested that in order to achieve this, academic research needs to consider the practical challenges that practitioners are faced with (Van de Ven 1989). The researcher's background from industry meant that this research had already from the outset a clear view to not only contribute to academic knowledge but also to find tools to facilitate managers to implement sustainability strategies. The framework for CS communications provides an easy-to-use strategic tool for business managers wishing to create efficient communications strategies on sustainability to their multitude of stakeholders. The framework offers guidance on how managers can categorise the business's stakeholders, and subsequently select the appropriate communications strategy. It is important to recognise that stakeholder categorisation is a dynamic process, and that stakeholders who might fit into one communications strategy at one point in time, might need a different communications strategy at a later stage. It is therefore essential to continuously monitor stakeholders according to the categorisation attributes to ensure the most appropriate communications strategy is applied according to circumstances and issues. It might also be strategically favourable to develop stakeholder relationships by increasing the level of interactive communications, thereby moving a certain stakeholder from one communications strategy to another.

Where stakeholders are diverse, or when the communications on sustainability focus on areas still not fully known or measurable, or when the aim of the communications is to stimulate innovation, interest or initiatives, strategic ambiguity could be applied.

This could take the format of equivocal words or phrases that allow diverse stakeholders to attach different meanings to the communications, thus permitting multiple interpretations

to co-exist. Strategic ambiguity seems to be particularly effective as a tool to stimulate innovation. Setting innovation objectives that are not too specific, possibly combined with certain specifications for example on budget, can allow for improved engagement and freedom to develop new ideas.

The importance of consistency in an organisation's total communications (including also actions and behaviour) also applies to CS communications, and one solution to this dilemma could be the application of a branded sustainability programme as a platform for all sustainability communications. Another similar approach is to tie the company values to sustainability communications.

A major challenge in sustainability communications is to balance the intensity and transparency of communications with trust building. Stakeholder scepticism stemming from corporate greenwashing is a major hurdle to overcome to ensure credible communications. It is therefore vital firstly to address CS communications from and inside-out approach, ensuring that the rationale is fully understood by employees. A clear fit between the corporate objectives and social/environmental benefits is essential to create credibility and trust.

The findings in this study suggest the importance of sustainability programmes to be fully integrated across the organisation, being based on genuine commitment and supported from senior management in order to deliver well. On this note it is also important to re-emphasise the importance of ensuring a fully ethical application of strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity must not involve untruthful, inconsistent or contradictory communications, but should use wordings that allow diverse stakeholders to find common ground, and thus enable collaboration. Further, as suggested by Ulmer and Sellnow (2000): the firm needs to consider all the relevant stakeholders and not just prioritise shareholders; the intention of the communications should be ethical and not misleading in any sense; and strategic ambiguity should not be applied in order to escape blame.

avoid too simplistic or too intense as that can create scepticism

co-construction not suitable for all

The findings also demonstrate that ambiguous communications ideally should be mixed with specific communications. Both too simplistic communications as well as too intense communications can lead to stakeholder scepticism, and likewise a co-construction approach might not be suitable for all types of stakeholders. Thus as has been advised

previously (Leitch and Davenport 2002), strategic ambiguity might not work for all stakeholders, and is more likely to be efficient if the targeted stakeholders have the capability and incentive to engage, and that the organisation has established trust with the stakeholders.

The study further reveals an imbalance in the food and drink value chain, with retailers being criticised by other value chain members as being too dictating in their communications. Retailers should address this issue in order to create a better environment for collaboration in the value chain. Industry-wide, or better value chain-wide forums and roundtables could offer useful platforms for non-competitive collaboration on sustainability issues. All companies in the value chain, not just retailers, should however be aware that while most of the case companies interviewed in this study suggest that they apply two-way communications, the stakeholders' perceive much of these communications as quite imbalanced. A partner communications strategy is close to normative stakeholder theory, but is presently not applied in a fully balanced manner. Organisations like WRAP, FDF, and also businesses should make better use of this strategy, using normative objectives and not instrumental as suggested by the findings.

On the note of imbalance, also the asymmetric communications strategies, e.g. the inform and influence communications strategies, could benefit from more robust feedback mechanisms. This could be achieved through an increased application of social media, allowing for more open and dynamic engagement.

One of the identified stakeholder categorisation attributes – 'sustainability impact' -should be specifically emphasised as it can have an important role in driving positive sustainability progress in the value chain. In order to allow a holistic life cycle approach to sustainability it is imperative for businesses to actively look for issues also beyond the boundaries of their own organisation.

10.8 Summary

This chapter has summarised the key findings, indicated the contributions to knowledge and practice and suggested avenues for future research and recommendations to managers. The chapter thereby concludes the long PhD 'journey'. The researcher hopes that this

piece of work will contribute to and inspire more scholars to further academic knowledge into the very important topic of sustainability, and that the CS communications framework will facilitate for businesses to improve their sustainability practices. The thesis will here conclude with some worthwhile thoughts by the early environmentalist Henry David Thoreau (1995, p. 205):

"We need the tonic of wildness...At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature."

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T1 - Packaging Federation: Director

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T3 - Rude Health: Founder/Marketing Director

T4 - Food and Drink Federation: Environment Policy Manager

T5 - Food and Drink Federation: Director of Communications

T6 - Unilever: former Chairman Packaging and Environment Group

T7 - Unilever: former Company Buyer Margarine Packaging

T8 - Ahold: Vice President Corporate Responsibility

T9 - Coca Cola Enterprises: Head Stakeholder and CR

T10 - Coca Cola Enterprises: Recycling Manager UK

T11 - Coca Cola Enterprises: Panel Debate

T12 - Coca Cola Enterprises: Focus Group

T13 - Packaging Federation: CEO

T14 - Adnams - CEO

T16 - Eurostar: Chairman

T17 - Eurostar: Head Environment and Energy

T18 - Rare Tea Company: Founder

T19 - Abel & Cole: Project Manager

T20 - European Retail Roundtable: European Affairs Manager

T21 - Suma Wholefoods – Project Manager

T22 - Morrisons: Packaging Development Manager

T23 -WRAP: Head of Food and Drinks Programme

T24 - M&S: Head of Climate Change

T25 - Hailes: Opinion former

T26 - British Retail Consortium: Head of Environment and Chair of Communications Working Group at Product Sustainability Forum

T27 - Nestle: Packaging Environmental Sustainability Expert

T28 - Food Industry Consultant

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Appendix 1: Explanation on how the propositions are linked to the research questions.

Research Question	Proposition
RQ1: What is the definition of sustainability and how does it relate to CSR?	This research question provides a foundation for the overall research.
RQ2: What are the attributes that businesses use to categorise their stakeholders?	**Proposition 1:** Stakeholders should be classified into categories based on power, legitimacy, urgency, proximity, interest, and business strategy relevance, where those stakeholders possessing a higher degree of the four attributes, should have the highest level of interaction with the focal organisation.
RQ3: What communications strategies are used for the different stakeholder categories, and what are the main objectives behind these?	**Proposition 2:** The primary communications objective with the *inform* communications strategy is to receive legitimacy to operate and to raise the image of the company. **Proposition 3:** The primary communications objective with a *consult* communications strategy is to gain legitimacy and to raise the image, but also to draw upon the knowledge of this stakeholder group. **Proposition 4:** The communications objective with an *involve* communications strategy is to encourage stakeholders to collaborate with the firm to support the firm's Sustainability agenda. **Proposition 5:** The primary communications objective with the *partner* communications strategy is to drive change in the value chain through a collaborative effort with stakeholders.
RQ4: Is strategic ambiguity being practiced in corporate sustainability communications?	This research question provides a background for RQ5.

RQ5: What is the rationale and format of strategic ambiguity in corporate sustainability communications for the different stakeholder categories?	**Proposition 6:** For the inform communications strategy, the rationale for using strategic ambiguity is to: 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', for the organisation to 'buy itself time', and to 'promote unified diversity'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of more general non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations.
	Proposition 7: For the consult communications strategy, the motivations for the use of strategic ambiguity are to 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', for the organisation to 'buy itself time', and to 'promote unified diversity'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of more general non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations.
	Proposition 8: For the involve communications strategy the motivators for using strategic ambiguity are primarily to 'promote unified diversity' and 'facilitate change', but also to some extent to 'preserve privileged positions', ensure 'deniability', and for the organisation to 'buy itself time'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of more general non-specific wordings on the organisation's sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords allowing for different interpretations, but to use specific communications in certain relationships where there is a clear, specific objective that needs compliance.
	Proposition 9: For the partner communications strategy the motivators for using strategic ambiguity are primarily to 'promote unified diversity' and to 'facilitate change'. Strategic ambiguity will here take the format of more general non-specific wordings on the suggested sustainability

	objectives for the value chain. For certain very close relationships a more tailored communication strategy might be required.
RQ6: How are the attributes for stakeholder prioritisation and the subsequent corporate sustainability communications strategies linked to: (1) the size of a company, and (2) a company's position in the value chain?	

Appendix 2: Explanation on how the research questions and propositions are linked to the conceptual framework (left column)

RQ2 and Proposition 1	Categorisation attributes	Power, Legitimacy, Urgency, Proximity, Interest, Business Strategy Relevance ------------------→ (The higher degree of these the closer interaction)			
RQ3	Communication strategies	**Inform**	**Consult**	**Involve**	**Partner**
From Grunig and Hunt (1984) and Gregory (2007)	Communication model	Dissemination of information. Source -> Rec.	Seeking input and feedback. Source < = > Rec	Seeking collaboration to drive sustainability agenda. Source ⇔ Rec	Mutual two-way balanced collaboration. Group ⇔ Group
RQ3 and Propositions: 2-5	Primary Communication Objective	Legitimacy/Image, Initiate public debate, Influence consumer behaviour	Advice / Legitimacy / Image	Stakeholders to collaborate with the firm to support the firm's Sustainability agenda.	Drive change in the entire value chain. Collaboration and co-creation
RQ4-5 and Propositions: 6-9	Strategic Ambiguity rationale	Preserve privileged positions, Deniability, Buy time, Promote unified diversity	Preserve privileged positions, Deniability, Buy time, Promote unified diversity	Promote unified diversity, Facilitate change, Preserve privileged positions, Deniability, Buy time	Promote unified diversity, Facilitate change
RQ4-5 and Propositions: 6-9	Strategic Ambiguity format	Non-specific communication on the organisation's Sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords..	Non-specific communication on the organisation's Sustainability objectives, possibly through the use of keywords.	Non-specific communication on Sustainability objectives. Specific communication in certain relationships where there is a clear, specific objective that needs compliance.	Non-specific communication on Sustainability objectives. For certain very close relationships a more tailored communication strategy might be required.

Appendix 3: Protocol for introduction of researcher and research topic, used when contacting possible interview candidates.

London X.X.2011

Dear Sir/Madam,

For contacts referred to by respondents: I have been recommended to contact you by Mr/Ms X.

For new contacts start here:
I'm a former business consultant, currently conducting PhD research at Brunel Business School, researching how businesses are designing corporate communications strategies on sustainability to various stakeholders in the food and drink value chain. I especially focus on businesses that have made good progress towards sustainable business practices to explore how communications strategies can contribute to progress.

I have already had extensive discussions with executives across the food and drink value chain and organisations I have interviewed so far include XXXXX, and a few small and medium sized businesses as well.

Based on research to date, I have had papers accepted for a Springer book, and for presenting at various conferences, for example at the Life Cycle Management Conference (LCM 2011) in Berlin in August 2011 and the Eighth International Conference on Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability in Vancouver in January 2012, conferences with participants from various industries, research institutes, NGOs and authorities. I am furthermore a member of UNEP's task force group developing a framework on how to build capabilities for SME:s to adopt life cycle thinking to their business practices.

For contacts referred to by respondents: Mr/Ms X has recommended you as very experienced in this area, and therefore I would be very interested in conducting an interview with yourself.

For new contacts:
Now, I'm looking for additional case companies for my research and would be very interested to conduct an interview with yourself and/or other people in your organisation.

The interview would last about 1 hour and I would like to stress that any interviewees will be kept anonymous.

I am looking forward to hear from you, and hope to get an opportunity to meet with you for further discussions on this topic.

Kind regards
Christina Scandelius

Appendix 4: Interview themes sent to respondents before interviews to provide them with a general idea of the topic for the discussion

What does sustainability mean to your company?

What is your sustainability strategy? What are the boundaries of the responsibility of sustainability of your organisation? What are the main challenges to achieve your sustainability objectives?

Who are your key sustainability stakeholders? Why?

What is the nature of interaction with each of these stakeholders?

How do you use communication to engage with these stakeholders? Why?

How specific are the messages? What is the rationale behind this?

How do the stakeholders respond to your communications? What are their messages to you?

What is your experience on how to best use communications to get the best possible response and collaboration from your stakeholders?

Who is driving sustainability in the food and drinks value chain?

Who is responsible for coordinating sustainability communications in your organisation?

Appendix 5: Interview protocol

General questions to set the scene and verify that the respondent is responsible for the sustainability communications strategy in the case company?

- What is the relationship between sustainability communications and corporate communications?
- How is sustainability integrated into the strategic planning?
- Who is driving sustainability in your organisation?
- Who is driving sustainability initiatives in your supply chain? Why?
- Is sustainability considered as a strategic issue in your organisation?

How do you define sustainability? (RQ1)

- What is your sustainability strategy?
- What are the boundaries of the responsibility of sustainability of your organisation?
- How is sustainability part of your brand?

Who are the sustainability stakeholders? (RQ2; Proposition 1)

- Who do you consider to be your sustainability stakeholders (internal and external)? Why? How do you identify them?
- Does your sustainability strategy need collaboration from stakeholders? Which stakeholders?
- Are there any of these stakeholders that you interact with more than others on sustainability issues? Why?
- Are there stakeholders that approach you for sustainability initiatives? Who?
- Are all stakeholders equally important to your organisation? Why/why not?

How are formal strategic communications used to manage the internal and external sustainability stakeholders (RQ3; Propositions 2 – 5)

- How do people in your organisation try to accomplish interactional goals through communication?
- Which stakeholders do you wish/need to engage with more than others and how does that impact the communications strategy?
- What is your sustainability communications strategy for different stakeholder categories? Do you want to inform, consult, or involve your stakeholders, or build partnership with them?
- What are the objectives behind sustainability communications with the different stakeholder categories?
- What actions do you want the stakeholders to take when they receive the message?
- How are you approached by your stakeholders?
- What messages do you get from your stakeholders on sustainability?
- What actions do you think they want you to take?

Evidence of Strategic Ambiguity (RQ4-5; Propositions 6 – 9)

- What are the main challenges to achieve your sustainability objectives?
- How are the communications objectives translated into messages (describe the rationale behind the choice of words/language/symbols/framing) for communication with stakeholders?
- Is the choice of words and framing different for different stakeholders? How and why/why not?
- Do you use specific or more vague words and instructions, leaving it up to the stakeholders to make the interpretation? Why/why not?
- Do you have a clear strategy on what each stakeholder category should do or do you leave this to them to reach the goal?
- Do the stakeholders take the expected actions? Why/why not?

Appendix 6: Participant information sheet handed to all respondents prior to the interview.

Brunel
UNIVERSITY
WEST LONDON

Brunel Business School
Research Ethics
Participant Information Sheet

1. Title of Research: Sustainability stakeholder management through communications – A study in the food and drink value chain

2. **Researcher**: Christina Scandelius, PhD programme, Brunel Business School, Brunel University

3. **Contact Email**: E-mail: Christina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk

4. **Purpose of the research**: The purpose of this research is to explore communication strategies to encourage sustainability stakeholder collaboration.

5. **What is involved**: Participants in the semi-structured interview will be asked questions relating to sustainability communications strategies.

6. **Voluntary nature of participation and confidentiality**. Participation in the interview is voluntary. Any personal information given will be kept confidential and names will not be disclosed unless the researcher has been given prior consent. Interviews will only be recorded for reference purposes. All research files will be security password protected. All involved parties will have access to the project once it has been completed.

Appendix 7: Example of participant consent form

Brunel
UNIVERSITY
WEST LONDON

Brunel Business School
Research Ethics
Participant Consent Form

Many thanks for agreeing to participate in my research project. The project has to be completed in part fulfilment of my degree programme and so your assistance is much appreciated.

Consent:
I have read the Participation Information Sheet and hereby indicate my agreement to participate in the study and for the data to be used as specified.

Name of participant or informed third party:

Signature:

Date: 26/7/11

Appendix 8: Consent from Julia Hailes to be named in thesis (page 1(2))

Re: Quotes from interview
Julia Hailes [_____.com]
Sent: 31 October 2013 09:57
To: Christina Scandelius [staff]
Attachments: 2013-10 PHD - JH quotes 3~1.docx (16 KB)

Hi Christina,

I'm quite rushed. But I've amended the quotes in the copy below.   Think they read better - but haven't had a chance to review, because I have to leave now...

Hope that's helpful.

Julia

On 30 October 2013 10:57, Christina Scandelius [staff] <Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk> wrote:
Dear Julia,
Please see attached the document - I removed the text boxes and highlighted your quotes with blue text instead.
Many thanks for your help!

Kind regards

Christina Scandelius

Deputy Director of MBA Programmes
Member of CREAM (Centre for Research in Marketing)
Brunel Business School

Brunel University - London | Uxbridge | Middlesex UB8 3PH
Office: Eastern Gateway Building 104m
Tel: 01895267201 | Email:christina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk | Web: www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs
_____
From: Julia Hailes [_____m]
Sent: 25 October 2013 15:00
To: Christina Scandelius [staff]
Subject: Re: Quotes from interview

Home number at bottom of email.... Julia

On 25 October 2013 14:38, Christina Scandelius [staff]
<Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>> wrote:
Great, what number can I call you on?

Christina Scandelius

Deputy Director of MBA Programmes
Member of CREAM (Centre for Research in Marketing)
Brunel Business School

Brunel University - London | Uxbridge | Middlesex UB8 3PH
Office: Eastern Gateway Building 104m
Tel: 01895267201<tel:01895267201> |
Email:christina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Email%3Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk> | Web:
www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs>
_____
From: Julia Hailes [_____com<mailto:_____.com>]
Sent: 25 October 2013 14:26
To: Christina Scandelius [staff]
Subject: Re: Quotes from interview

Wednesday or Friday is fine with me - I'm afraid Monday no good.... Hope that's OK..

Julia

On 25 October 2013 14:01, Christina Scandelius [staff]
<Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>
<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>>> wrote:
Thanks Julia, that would be great! I'm a bit tight of time next week so it is primarily on Monday I could phone you ,
or Wednesday morning, or possibly Friday afternoon. Any day and time that works best for you?

Kind regards

Christina Scandelius

Deputy Director of MBA Programmes

Appendix 8: Consent from Julia Hailes to be named in thesis (page 2(2))

Deputy Director of MBA Programmes
Member of CREAM (Centre for Research in Marketing)
Brunel Business School

Brunel University - London | Uxbridge | Middlesex UB8 3PH
Office: Eastern Gateway Building 104m
Tel: 0189526720l<tel:0189526720l><tel:0189526720l<tel:0189526720l>> |
Email:christina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Email%3Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>
<mailto:Email%3Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Email%253Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>> |
Web: www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs><http://www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs>

From: Julia Hailes [mailto: .com<mailto: les.com>
<mailto: .com<mailto: .com>>]
Sent: 25 October 2013 13:26
To: Christina Scandelius [staff]
Subject: Re: Quotes from interview

Dear Christina,

I'm a bit baffled by the quotes you've sent me. They don't sound like the way I speak. And I'm not clear what's being said.

The paragraph that beings with "Yeah, but of course the only interpretation......" doesn't finish and I don't know what it's referring to. And the paragraph that follows should be much tighter.

Next paragrpah 'Well, I definitely have, because I think there are very different......" sounds familiar but should also be tighter.

Perhaps you should call me - next week - and I will send summary of my quotes, for you to include.

Best wishes,

Julia

On 22 October 2013 14:10, Christina Scandelius [staff]
<Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>
<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>>
<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>
<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Christina.Scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>>>> wrote:
Dear Julia,
Hope you are progressing well on all your projects!
Thank you again for giving me some of your time in January 2012 for the interview for my PhD on sustainability communications. I'm now only weeks away from submitting my thesis, and before doing so I wanted to confirm with you if you approve that I link your quotes with your name, or if you rather prefer to be anonymous. Please see attached the relevant pages of my thesis.
Once the PhD is completed I am of course very happy to share the whole report with you.
Looking forward to hear from you!

Kind regards

Christina Scandelius

Deputy Director of MBA Programmes
Member of CREAM (Centre for Research in Marketing)
Brunel Business School

Brunel University - London | Uxbridge | Middlesex UB8 3PH
Office: Eastern Gateway Building 104m
Tel: 01895267201<tel:01895267201><tel:01895267201<tel:01895267201>><tel:01895267201<tel:01895267201>
<tel:01895267201<tel:01895267201>>> |
Email:christina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Email%3Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>
<mailto:Email%3Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Email%253Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>>
<mailto:Email%3Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Email%253Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>>
<mailto:Email%253Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk<mailto:Email%25253Achristina.scandelius@brunel.ac.uk>>>
| Web: www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs><http://www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs>
<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs>

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Julia Hailes MBE|
Sustainability Consultant & Writer, Director and Co-founder of E For Good Ltd,

                                                              mailto:

Appendix 9: Template for case study analyses

1. Introduction

Introduction of respondent position and experience. Details about date, venue and length of interview.

Rationale: to provide details about interview

2. Company profile

Introduction of the company incl turnover, number of employees, location of operations, corporate mission and values.

Rationale: to provide information to answer RQ6. Information on corporate mission and values is sometimes linked to sustainability, and part of sustainability communications and is therefore important to understand for RQ4 and 5.

3. Sustainability definition and strategy

How is Sustainability defined, and what is included in sustainability?

Rationale for sustainability definition: to answer RQ1.

How is the sustainability strategy presented?

Rationale for sustainability strategy: illustrates how sustainability is communicated and therefore linked to RQ4 and 5.

4. Stakeholder strategy

Provide details on categorisation of stakeholders, and attributes for this.

    a. **Key stakeholders**

    b. **Stakeholders that are not mentioned**: can further illustrate which stakeholders the business has least interaction with.

Rationale: to answer RQ2.

5. Communications Strategy

This section should detail the general communications strategy around sustainability, detailing following information:

    5.1 Evolution of Sustainability communications

This section should primarily provide insights into RQ1, but could also shed light on how sustainability communication is related to the capability of the organisation and therefore linked also to RQ4-5.

5.2 Keywords used in Sustainability Communications

This section highlights words that are used in relation to sustainability on the first page of the CSR/Sustainability report. However as the analytical phase progressed it became evident that the interpretation of keywords would require a different methodology and therefore the focus was rather to search for special words used in relation with sustainability and not to offer any interpretation.

5.3 Specific versus vague Communications

Provide examples of communication on sustainability targets and performance, and rationales if available on the choice of specific versus more vague communication. This section can therefore contribute to RQ4 and 5.

5.4 International Communications

In the early data collection phase the interview would include some aspects on how communications may be different for different countries, but this was later considered as excluded from the scope of this research.

6. Communications to Stakeholders

This section should provide information on how and why communication is targeted to the different stakeholder categories and the objectives behind the communications strategy, delivering answers to RQ2, 3, 4, and 5.

6.1 Communication to the wider stakeholder groups

6.2 Communication to specific stakeholder groups

6.2.1 Internal communication

6.2.2 Communication to Suppliers

6.2.3 Communication to Customers/Consumers

6.2.4 Communication to Shareholders

6.2.5 Communication to Local Communities, NGOs and Governmental organisations

6.2.6 Communication to Industry colleagues

7. Driver for change in the value chain

Provide information on the respondents' opinion on who is leading sustainability progress

in the value chain. This question was asked in early interviews but wasn't considered as contributing to the research aim of this research.

8. Challenges and hurdles in communicating sustainability initiatives

Details on challenges mentioned in the interviews.

Rationale: to provide answers to RQ4 and 5.

9. Responsibility of Stakeholder Communications strategy

Which function in the organisation is responsible for designing the corporate sustainability strategy. The rationale for this section is to ensure that the correct individual was interviewed within the case company.

10. Miscellaneous (free node)

10.1 Branded Programme

Information about branded sustainability programmes if available. Contributes to RQ4 and 5.

11. Conclusions

Brief summary of findings for each case company.

Appendix 10: Example of first level of coding of transcript

M&S, 24.11.11

139 change, sufficient levels of information and being consistent in what you're asking
140 for.

141 **Yes. Would you use the same kind of communication strategy to all**
142 **stakeholders, or...? For instance, I mean, the consumers are obviously a very**
143 **different group from business stakeholders, so how would you encourage**
144 **consumers or other possible groups to, you know, to think about the holistic**
145 **life cycle perspective, to help out, to be more, you know, for consumption**
146 **practices to be more sustainable?**

147 I think it's completely different, and you... with business, the way you... The business   *6.2.2*
148 communications are based on a business case and based on clients and based on a
149 direction of where your business is going in the future, so that tends to be the sort of
150 language you use in a business to business environment. The other group, in terms
151 of opinion-formers and influencers, if you like, those who will make commentary on   *6.2.5*
152 your performance, then I guess our, the strategy you employ there are being open
153 and transparent with them about what you're doing and some of the real, actual,
154 tangible barriers, why you can't go faster, why you're not doing more compostables
155 when they think you should be doing it. So that works well with that group. When it
156 comes to consumers, then you really need to think about what are you trying to
157 communicate to them. They don't necessarily want a whole story about the
158 packaging and the lifecycle, they're not interested. Consumers are interested when
159 there's something for them to be... when there is a need for them to do something   *6.2.3*
160 and engage. So on packaging, the most obvious thing is disposal and the symbols
161 around recyclability and the ability to recycle in your area, so that's probably been
162 the most important thing. On some of the, we have however had some challenges   *8.*
163 around the perceptions and the science, as I mentioned earlier. So most consumers
164 will still say, "Oh, the biggest problem is all this packaging," and still think, they'll   *6.2.3/*
165 always cite examples in the produce aisle, and actually, no-one talks about the wine   */8*
166 bottles that they, you know, and actually, from a science point of view, we could
167 make much more progress by eliminating wine bottles and moving to the foil and the
168 bag in box, but the consumers are obsessed about wrapping the cucumber in the
169 cellophane. So it's just that sense of, so almost you had to, we had to earn the right
170 to talk to them about the science. If we tried to say that on day one, you've got no
171 hope, you just, you know, you haven't actually got permission to talk to them about
172 something. You first of all need to address some of their perception, I think which is
173 why in Year 1 and Year 2 we had to address those perception issues, it's still, you   *6.2.3*
174 know, the things that people keep pointing to and saying, "How come...? How
175 come...? How come...?" And even if the solution may be scientifically wasn't the
176 best, for a while we still had to do something about that and be seen to do something
177 about that. Once we had done that, we could then move to have some more
178 informed discussions with them, so we actually, we've used people like Julia, and
179 again, it's who do they trust to speak on this area, so we used ▬▬ who was quite
180 good...

181 **Sorry, what was that?**

182 Sorry?

183 **What organisation was that you said that you were using? Pardon? Sorry, I**
184 **didn't get that.**

Appendix 11: Example of second level of coding of case company analysis

6.2.3 Communication to Customers/Consumers

A key challenge with consumer communication is that perception sometimes is in conflict with science and during the early years of Plan A, a lot of focus was put into bridging this gap (T24).

The objective with consumer communication on sustainability is to change and influence their behavior, e g informing them about recycling. At the same time communication needs to address issues that are perceived as important by the consumers.   C

Consumer communication needs to focus on tangible possible actions and the tone must be encouraging, non-technical, non-preaching and be delivered by someone that consumers trust.   E

"Consumers are interested when there's something for them to be... when there is a need for them to do something and engage. So on packaging, the most obvious thing is disposal and the symbols around recyclability and the ability to recycle in your area, so that's probably been the most important thing. On some of the, we have however had some challenges around the perceptions and the science, as I mentioned earlier. So most consumers will still say, "Oh, the biggest problem is all this packaging," and still think, they'll always cite examples in the produce aisle, and actually, no-one talks about the wine bottles that they, you know, and actually, from a science point of view, we could make much more progress by eliminating wine bottles and moving to the foil and the bag in box, but the consumers are obsessed about wrapping the cucumber in the cellophane. So it's just that sense of, so almost you had to, we had to earn the right to talk to them about the science. If we tried to say that on day one, you've got no hope, you just, you know, you haven't actually got permission to talk to them about something. You first of all need to address some of their perception, I think which is why in Year 1 and Year 2 we had to address those perception issues, it's still, you know, the things that people keep pointing to and saying, "How come...? How come...? How come...?" And even if the solution may be scientifically wasn't the best, for a while we still had to do something about that and be seen to do something about that. Once we had done that, we could then move to have some more informed discussions with them, so we actually, we've used people like Julia, and again, it's who do they trust to speak on this area, so we used ~~Helen~~ who was quite good..."(T24, L158-180)   E D C

Appendix 12: Example of excel spread sheets used for the preliminary meta-analysis; Strategic ambiguity by Brand owners.

Appendix 12: Example of excel spread sheets used for the preliminary meta-analysis; Strategic ambiguity by Brand owners (continued).

Appendix 13: Glossary of key concepts

Appendix 13: Glossary of key concepts

Appendix 13: Glossary of key concepts

Appendix 13: Glossary of key concepts