

## How the Voice of the People Is Driving Corporate Social Responsibility

The business case for corporate social responsibility (CSR) is becoming easier and easier to make. You can argue that it boosts a company's brand, manages risk, and just plain saves money. But perhaps most importantly the general public is clamoring for companies to enact good, fair business practices — and most of that public pressure comes through social media.

There are plenty of (very public) examples of businesses moved into more sustainable practices by a social media backlash: Immediately following this year's factory collapse disaster in Bangladesh, companies who sourced materials from the country quickly came under fire; now retailers including H&M, Zara, and Abercrombie & Fitch have banded together to create a safety plan to improve conditions in Bangladeshi factories, and the Gap was not far behind. In another example, last year the Internet cried foul when the Susan G Komen foundation decided to yank funding for Planned Parenthood, and the outcry caused the non-profit to reverse its decision within days. And in 2010, Greenpeace attacked Nestlé with a viral video over its use of unsustainable palm oil. After 3 months of holding its ground against vocal naysayers on Facebook, the company finally agreed to cancel contracts with vendors who clear cut rainforests to make room for palm oil plantations. (Nestlé is now much more proactive about CSR.)

Feedback through social media is immediate, permanent, and extremely public. When individuals feel strongly about a company's performance on social or environmental issues, one small voice can quickly become a swarm, difficult for even the most shielded executive to ignore. For this reason, social has become a driving force in many companies' CSR agendas

One of the easiest ways to be on the right side of the social media tide is to be proactive — and personal — by listening to feedback and responding in an authentic way. Firms that are excelling in this regard have active, branded Twitter accounts, but they also encourage their executives to use Twitter as well. You can easily reach Dave Stangis, Campbell's Soup's CSR lead on Twitter, where he talks about the company's initiatives as well as global sustainability issues. Another great example is Bruno Sarda, Sustainability Operations Director at Dell. Both of these execs, and many more, make their company's corporate sustainability extremely personal, just by being present and approachable to the people of Twitter. To get a similar impact, make sure that the people in charge of your social media accounts understand what your CSR efforts mean for your brand, and empower them to act in a positive way to support your company.

One company that is leading the way on using social media to inform its sustainability program and communicate about its CSR agenda is Unilever. The personal care product and food conglomerate has dozens of brands and thousands of products, which makes its sustainability program both extremely important and difficult to communicate, because it spans issues from health and hygiene to greenhouse gas reductions. Yet, Unilever has managed to bundle them all under one umbrella, the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan. The plan includes a multifaceted plan for communicating progress through a wide variety of methods, from video to Facebook to Twitter chats. It also includes traditional advertising tactics and public awareness campaigns from Dove's Real Beauty Sketches to a Lifebuoy hand-washing campaign delivered by roti in India.

Behind every great communicator is a great strategy. These campaigns and individuals are successful because they reinforce the company's brand and goals around both sustainability and consumer engagement. Unilever is an excellent example of a company with a bold, high-level strategy which

informs all its sustainability communications. The company uses a variety of in-person and virtual strategies — like its online global dialogue, the Sustainable Living Lab, which in April had 550 attendees from 80 countries. Participants were extremely active, sharing 1,750 comments on all aspects of sustainability. Through these initiatives, Unilever has demonstrated that interactive communication through social media is one regular component of its CSR strategy. This comprehensive strategy also allows communication teams at far reaching brands from Dove to Ben and Jerry's to put the strategy into practice in a way that suits the individual brand, while supporting the company's overall sustainability mission.

Ultimately, social media is just a communication tool like any other. But it is one consumers use to talk about brands, and the world is listening. It is easy to fear the tide of social media for the risks it can bring, but this onslaught of information can also be viewed as an opportunity. By listening to those early whispers of complaint, companies can act quickly to minimize the fallout — while also gaining important knowledge that can inform and improve a company's internal CSR report.

17/07/2013