

Reflections on communication and CSR after the CSR COM conference in Vienna Sept 2017



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Background

I attended the 4th academic conference on communication and CSR in Vienna 21-23 September 2017. I presented a paper on the implementation of the EU directive, which has been published in research report 3/2017. Here I make some reflections on the outcome of the conference.

1. The subject

A CSR manager in Europe is usually reporting to the Director of Communications. The reason is probably that directors of communication see CSR as an important face of the company. Another reason could be that the communications director needs to have CSR people close by to quickly react to allegations against the company. Once when I was in a country in Southern Africa I asked Swedish CSR managers to whom they reported and they all reported to the HR director as the important issue was to have and retain healthy staff (Aids/HIV, illnesses, literacy etc). The press posed no problem in that country. So, is CSR and Communications a good combination?

2. The conference

There were 15 sessions with 4-5 presentations in each session. All presentations are included in the conference proceedings <https://t.co/UdBCod604e>. Most presentations at the conference came from universities in German speaking countries. Many of the key note speakers and moderators were US professors. The latter were usually in the area of marketing even if they claimed to be CSR experts.

Therefore I felt that CSR managers are not able to present their view but that communications directors always have the last word. It is not good for CSR as it will reduce trust in the CSR work. Many CSR managers are however relaxed about this problem as they on the other hand will have more chances to get the message out. If, however there will be too much greenwashing it would be more logical from a pure CSR point of view of moving over to integrated reporting and then the CSR manager would be working closer with the economic administration and the auditing part of a company.

At the conference, the issue of integrated reporting was not raised. One reason could be perhaps that there is no clear link to the communication strategy. Instead many studies were devoted to companies' choice of digital marketing, relations to consumer organizations, handling of CSR crises etc. I listened to two large companies from the German speaking world, T-Mobile which is the mobile arm of Deutsche Telekom and Palfinger, a machinery company in Austria located right at the German border. I was not impressed by them and understand that companies in Central Europe are a few years behind.

An example of the level of CSR debate was a study by three universities (Vienna, Bochum, Mannheim) about whether an active CSR policy could be said to build a stock of moral capital that helps to handle a crisis or if an active CSR policy *"lead to higher expectations of moral conduct amongst consumers and can therefore trigger even more negative consumer reactions in case of a negative event"*.

A new book as launched at the event by Springer Verlag, "Handbook of Integrated CSR Communication". 500 pages and terribly expensive but I guess everything is there inside.

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3. Development of a company's CSR strategy

An example from Netherlands was an interesting case. Beate Kviatek had studied how the Dutch gas company NAM (50% state owned) had responded to worries from people in the Groningen area about seismic effects of gas exploitation. First NAM said that there were no seismic effects. Later convincing evidence were presented, there had actually been earth quakes and then NAM agreed that yes there was a small problem here. The Dutch debate was however only about the risk for people in the Groningen area, not about the fossil exploitation as a cause for climate warming. NAM had actually convinced the population that natural gas was much cleaner than coal.

A team from University of Salerno had gone through a large number of companies' web sites and found that companies in controversial industries (tobacco, mining, gambling, chemicals, banks) are more prone to have information and involvement strategies in their CSR platforms than companies in non-controversial industries (manufacturing, media, telecom).

A Korean team had studied CSR among companies in the luxury sector. Consumers with good education and social status tended to appreciate CSR policies of these companies while consumers of low social standing were not interested in the CSR policies of producers of luxury products.

4. CrM - Cause-related Marketing

One important aspect of combining CSR and marketing is CrM where a study was presented by a German-Hong Kong team that had studied H&M's campaign "All for children", a campaign for children's clothes every autumn where 25% of revenues go to UNICEF. The study indicated that German students were far more critical of H&M than Chinese students.

A team of 4 researchers from Appalachian State University had studied CrM from the point of view of shareholders' value and their conclusion was that CrM was a positive tool to increase shareholders' value.

5. Greenwashing

Another topic that was discussed frequently was greenwashing. The first article on greenwashing that also coined the term was from 1985 when a researcher examined hotels' campaign to ask customers only to use one towel and thereby "contribute to saving the planet".

In Sweden, we all think that greenwashing is bad and that consumers by now see through clumsy attempts to portrait companies as greener than they are. A researcher in the field, Peter Seele from Lugano university published a book on the subject a few years ago with the following introduction:

Is greenwashing a concept describing companies using misleading communication or is it co-constructed in the eye of the beholder? By discussing the literature, we find that existing definitions of greenwashing overemphasize the strategic intention to mislead and do not incorporate unjust allegations. Then, by combining signaling theory with legitimacy theory, we frame the communication process of the greenwashing accusation and the emergence of a negative narrative caused by the accusation and its effect on legitimacy. Hence, in this paper we argue that greenwashing epistemologically is constituted in the *eye of the beholder*, depending on an external accusation. Following this view, the greenwashing accusation is understood as a distortion factor altering the signal reliability of green messages. Based on our conceptual analysis, we provide a conceptual framework introducing a new typology of case-based

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greenwashing (*greenwashing, false greenwashing, potential greenwashing and no greenwashing*) and the effects of these types on corporate legitimacy. Finally, we propose a revised definition of greenwashing as *co-creation of an external accusation toward an organization with regard to presenting a misleading green message.*

At the conference, he had developed his theories and said that greenwashing is such an inexact term that it can only be said to exist if there are accusations from a third party. Another leading expert at the conference, Wim Elving, who is professor at Amsterdam University, frankly said that a little greenwashing is OK. I assume he meant that in such a case the ambition is still to be green.

6. Storytelling

Communicators have a soft spot for storytelling. It seems to be cheap to produce, void of references and hard facts. Experts on communications had however seen through this and ascribe it limited value. One study by Aarhus university compared Google and Microsoft storytelling with reference to Diversity Management. It turned out that Google used videos with young enthusiastic Google users while Microsoft used videos with people with a broad diversity (age, style, nationality etc) giving the real names of those interviewed. The researchers found Microsoft's approach more trustworthy.

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