

## The role of new communication technologies in companies' sustainability

Lavinia DOVLEAC<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *As marketing communication becomes increasingly integrated with the digital space, marketers start to understand that social media is a valuable tool to create digital linkages with customers. This paper aim to show that social media is an appropriate tool for companies to spread the information about sustainability issues. Consumers are taking more factors into account when making purchasing decisions and using digital marketing and social media help companies to increase engagement and strengthen the relationships with customers.*

**Key-words:** *social media, sustainability, communication channel, strategy.*

### 1. Introduction

Rapid growth of Web-based platforms that facilitate online social behaviour has significantly modified the nature of human interactions and their perceptions over the social and economic environment. The most important aspect of the digital dimension is that allows individuals to *share* knowledge (Budden et al, 2011; Kumar et al, 2010).

Although companies have always talked to their customers, now they are pressured to a more digital presence because online communication tools allow customers to respond to them (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Borges Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). Another reason is that consumers believe strangers within their community more than they believe companies (Kotler et al, 2010, p.39). The increase in popularity of applying social media in the business world has forced the managers to change their way of business operating (Ngai et al, 2015).

Social media has the ability to change a business model in the following areas: (1) from selling to connecting with customers, (2) from large campaigns to small rapid actions, (3) from controlling the message to transparency, (4) from hard to reach to available everywhere (von Scheel et al, 2015, p.379).

Social networks have a growing importance as communication channel being adopted by companies in their marketing strategies. They are also used in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, [lavinia.dovleac@unitbv.ro](mailto:lavinia.dovleac@unitbv.ro).

relational marketing, related to the preoccupation of the companies to create and maintain long-term relations with potential or current customers (Chițu and Albu, 2013).

Together with the efforts of communicating the company's offers and promotions using the social media, comes the effort of showing the company's mission and values. Large social networks such as Facebook or MySpace are effectively media owners (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2012, p.22). So, one of the challenges facing businesses is how to communicate sustainability in terms that "make sense to the outside world". This means talking about issues that are crucial to business survival, such as resource scarcity, sustainable supply chains and energy efficiency, in terms the public understands and cares about (Malone, 2015).

## **2. Digital marketing and social media – essential communication tools of sustainable development**

Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010, p.61) have offered the following definition of social media: 'a group of Internet-based applications...that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content'. Another definition of social media which comes to complete the first one is given by Sterne (2010, XVII): "Social media allows anybody to communicate with everybody. In other words, consumer-generated content distributed through easy-to-access online tools".

The applications that could be used by companies and individuals for communication are grouped in 6 categories (Harrison, 2013, p. 8): Collaborative projects, such as Wikipedia (1), blogs and micro-blogs, such as Twitter (2), content communities, like YouTube (3), social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn (4), virtual game worlds, like World of Warcraft (5), virtual social worlds, such as Second Life (6).

Social media allow information to be transmitted across multiple platforms in a variety of formats, including text, sound, video, games and interactive sequences. This has encouraged organisations to attempt to heighten the impact of messages through the use of social media to deliver material intended to shock, enthuse and entertain.

Many companies are still approaching social media as a collection of tactics: developing a Facebook company profile, tweeting a few links and posting some videos on YouTube (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). Acting like this, they show that they still not understand what's important about using social media: not being in many places on the internet but having message content interesting for the audience (Bright et al, 2015).

Social media is one of the major drivers in the change of the public's perceptions, as it allowed the spread of information and misinformation, about sustainability issues.

Sustainability and Corporate Responsibility Reports have been growing in importance for companies in recent years, due to the consumers' interest in this matter. As online media and social media in particular have become part of the communication mainstream, more and more companies are realising the value their Sustainability Reports can play online (SMI, 2012).

According to a report from Sustainly (2015) global companies are increasingly turning to social media to communicate their sustainability initiatives to the public. A number of 273 companies were found to have some form of dedicated social media sustainability efforts, a significant increase on the 120 recorded in 2011. This means that in 4 years the number of companies raised with 127%. The growth highlights the need and business benefits of communicating sustainable practices to consumers.

In Romania, the reporting rate of sustainability intentions of companies was 54% in 2011 and 69% in 2013.

### 3. Research results

Sustainability practitioners at first were slow to realise social media's potential to help communicate their efforts but over the last three years they've made up for lost time (Yeomans, 2013).

In 2012 SMI and Custom Communication found 176 major companies around the world that had allotted dedicated resources and social media channels to their sustainability dialogue. Together with Wizness Publisher (an online platform which allows organizations to create interactive sustainability reports and exchange with their stakeholders) SMI created a report named *Social Media Sustainability Index*. This report presents how 100 major companies are using social media to communicate sustainability and corporate social responsibility and offers indepth analysis of best practice social media sustainability communication (SMI, 2012).

From this report we find that Twitter and Facebook were favorite channels for sustainability communicators. 60 dedicated blogs or sustainability social media magazines were published, suggesting the importance of editorial storytelling in describing a company's practice on sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

In 2015, Salterbaxter Mslgroup realised the first study which combines sustainability expertise, quantitative data and a complex proprietary scoring system, proving the value and impact of sustainability communications. SB Influencers 100 measures the social influence on sustainability on three attributes in order to create a score. The attributes are: Activity, Engagement and Reach.

Based on these attributes, the following table shows the overall score for the first 10 companies considered the best communicators in social media, regarding the sustainability matters. As well, this table includes each company rank for each attribute.

Organisation	Score	Rank	Reach	Rank	Activity	Rank	Engagement	Rank	Industry
Nestle	92	1	24	6	33	11	35	1	Food and Beverage
Hewlett - Packard	91	2	21	16	36	4	34	3	Technology
Unilever	90	3	22	13	35	6	33	6	Consumer goods
Cisco Systems	88	4	20	19	36	5	32	9	Technology
Virgin Group	87	5	23	11	31	15	33	7	Conglomerate
Johnson & Johnson	86	6	19	24	38	3	29	15	Healthcare
Dell	86	7	24	9	34	9	28	19	Technology
Intel	86	8	25	1	26	26	35	2	Technology
GE	84	9	19	23	34	10	31	13	Conglomerate
Microsoft	82	10	24	8	25	33	33	8	Technology

Source: Sustainly, 2015.

Table 1. *Top 10 companies by Social media Sustainability Index*

So, although Nestle has the higher score (calculated on the 3 attributes) and is ranked the first on this top, it isn't the first ranked considering each attribute. Nestle is on rank 1 only as Engagement. Nestlé achieve the highest ranking thanks to both corporate and dedicated Twitter handles that are active on sustainability. In large part, the consistently strong engagement achieved is due to the Twitter account dedicated to their Creating Shared Value (CSV) sustainability strategy. This channel balances information on the company's approach to material issues, broader industry initiatives the company participates in, alongside updates from live events.

In Table 2 are included the companies placed on the first 3 ranks, according to the score achieved for the Reach Attribute. Reach assesses company-led conversations across five different social platforms over a six-month time period.

Rank	Organisation	Industry
1 (Score 25)	Intel	Technology
	Coca – Cola Company	Food and beverage
	Avon Products	Consumer goods
	McDonald's	Food and beverage
	Nike	Apparel
2 (Score 24)	Nestle	Food and beverage
	Dell	Technology
	Microsoft	Technology
	Shell	Oil and gas
	Google	Technology
3 (Score 24)	Virgin Group	Conglomerate
	Philips	Electronics

Table 2. *Best scores by Reach Attribute*

As we see in the following table, the brands whose sustainability posts have the highest social reach are unsurprisingly the major consumer brands, such as Coca-Cola and McDonald's.

Intel Corporation's position in this ranking is largely due to their impressive reach across multiple social platforms. Their over 26 million Facebook fans is more than even sports giant Nike, whilst their dedicated @intelinvolved Twitter channel has more followers than any other dedicated sustainability channel.

In Table 3 we have the companies ranked on the first 3 places for the attribute named Activity. This one means to identify and measure relevant sustainability content on social media channels. The two companies that talk about sustainability more than any other on this ranking are: telecoms and media company BT, and retailer Marks & Spencer (M&S).

Rank	Organisation	Industry
1 (Score 40)	BT	Telecommunication
	Marks & Spencer	Retail
2 (Score 38)	Johnson & Johnson	Healthcare
3 (Score 36)	Hewlett - Packard	Technology
	Cisco Systems	Technology

Table 3. *Best scores by Activity Attribute*

Engagement measures the response to sustainability content on social media by tracking different forms of interaction and we can see from Table 4 that the leaders are Nestle and Intel.

Rank	Organisation	Industry
1 (Score 35)	Nestle	Food and Beverage
	Intel	Technology
2 (Score 34)	Hewlett – Packard	Technology
	UPS	Logistics
	Nokia	Technology
3 (Score 33)	Unilever	Consumer goods
	Virgin Group	Conglomerate
	Microsoft	Technology

Table 4. *Best scores by Engagement Attribute*

After analysing all the attributes, we searched for the main industries where companies use social media to communicate their sustainability intentions. Data shows that most companies are from Food & Beverage Industry (14), followed by

Consumer Goods (11). On the third rank are placed several industries: Technology, Automotive and Financial Services, each one with 9 companies.

Most of these companies chose to communicate with consumers developing a dedicated social channel for their sustainability strategies or using corporate Twitter and they succeeded in creating partnerships and commitments this way.

The strongest characteristic of Twitter as a social network lies in its 140-character tweet limit. About 39% of the people who took one recent survey indicated that they'd rather hear from companies on Twitter than on any other social platform, beating out Facebook.

In contrast to the corporate Twitter handle, Unilever (rank 3) make good use of Facebook as a consumer-facing channel, encouraging engagement through a variety of media. Unilever demonstrate how sustainable living and the acclaimed Sustainable Living Plan is integrated within the business by communicating it across multiple corporate and consumer-facing social channels. The association of Unilever and sustainability is so widely recognized that virtually every post, tweet and video sparks engagement.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Many companies are still approaching social media as a collection of tactics, using mainly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Consumers and communities are demanding more information about corporate sustainability and responsibility than ever before, and they are sharing their opinions and judgments about companies online. In many cases, the information that impresses consumers could be found in the sustainability report but isn't mined to help demonstrate a company's true sustainability credentials.

How and where to talk to consumers about corporate sustainability is an evolving debate and social media channels are central to this. Some companies communication strategy doesn't clearly distinguish between consumers and stakeholders, whilst others target communications using Facebook for consumers and Twitter for a broader audience including opinion leaders and stakeholders. LinkedIn and YouTube are little used for sustainability content.

Many companies chose Twitter to communicate because users are more likely to be active on their mobile device than on their PC, so the company message can reach them anywhere.

Beside Twitter, Google Plus may be an appropriate tool for business communication, and especially for sustainable development issues. Communities are very strong on Google Plus, so a key strategy for the companies would be to find active communities that are related to this matter and interact with them. The idea is to always offer value to people and understand that participation in communities is mostly about giving. Instagram, a visual social network, is another major player in

the social networking sphere and it keeps on growing. Although is not always preferred by companies, Instagram could be a valuable tool in "talking" about sustainability issues using appropriate and interesting pictures.

In social media, companies should follow the Nestle model of action which involves 4 steps: 'listen, engage, transform and inspire'.

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