



Sustainable New Media: *Connecting with Connected Stakeholders on CR Issues*

Out with the old, in with the new...media, that is. So it goes for corporate responsibility (CR) communications today as companies abandon one-way channels and strive to reach connected consumers in the dynamic world of microblogging and viral video. Yet, despite the ubiquity of viral kitten clips and Facebook "FarmVille" applications, new media channels are not outlets to be taken lightly. They are one of today's most powerful opportunities for responsible businesses to reach and engage key stakeholders in a meaningful and relevant way.

Perception is often reality, and the new media world is a hotbed for fostering plenty of it – both the accurate and the misinformed. Yet perception can also be *opportunity* as companies use new media to acknowledge their CR issues, inform people of their efforts and seek feedback and collaboration. Cone's research found close to half (44%) of American new media users are actively searching for, sharing or discussing information about companies' corporate responsibility efforts, and a full 74 percent expect companies to participate in online conversations about their business practices.

Reputation, Risk and Reward

Simply put, new media provide companies the opportunity to enhance reputation and mitigate risk. Companies can join the dialogue around pressing issues and receive feedback and ultimately credit for their CR efforts. By communicating from the highest levels of senior leadership, companies including Ford and Timberland are successfully engaging with stakeholders and demonstrating their commitment to relevant CR topics. At the same time, new media channels enable perceptive companies to identify chatter about emerging issues before they become crises. They can open or enhance dialogue with critics to build more mutually beneficial relationships.

Of course, with opportunity always comes risk. New media communications demand a level of transparency that stakeholders expect, but which the corporate world has not fully embraced. Companies like SC Johnson¹ are taking on transparency with vigor by providing open forums where stakeholders can find product details and learn about CR issues, but this openness is not yet routine. What's more, new media ventures can fall flat when the channel precedes the substance.

To ensure more sustainable new media communications, consider these three phases:

Phase 1: Address the substance

Conduct a readiness assessment to evaluate your organization's material issues.

¹ <http://www.whatsinsidescjohnson.com/>

Questions to consider: Why is this an opportunity for your company? What does transparency mean to your organization? Are you comfortable ceding some control of the conversation to your audience? Are you structured to engage effectively and prepared to commit the necessary resources to see it through? Although new media are a relatively inexpensive way to connect with audiences, there can be substantial costs associated with the employee resources needed to ensure robust, ongoing dialogue.

Phase 2: Determine the audience

If you find yourself debating the merits of social networking versus Twitter, you are putting the cart before the horse. First, identify and prioritize your audiences, and start your journey by listening to them. Use free and fee-based monitoring tools to determine the size, weight, tone and velocity of the online dialogue. Only then consider the messaging, channel and voice that is appropriate for these groups. Starbucks' Shared Planet website is an example of a forum that caters to consumers, from light to dark green. Through outlets like mystarbucksidea.com, the company is connecting with the vocal audience that wants to collaborate to make the business better in a variety of areas.

Phase 3: Develop and continually refine communications

Unlike most corporate communications, which occur in a defined window of time, the very nature of new media means it is perpetual. The issues continuously change and so too should your communications and approach. Stay attuned to stakeholders and continually refine your efforts so consumers know you are truly present and they have been heard.

For most companies, there really is little question that you will have to venture down the new media road. Today it is less a question of *if*, as it is *when*. Now is the time to develop or refine your strategy so that while your competitors are busy building the latest one-off online widget, you can be building your brand and reputation through meaningful interaction with stakeholders. Creative applications may capture stakeholders' attention, but it is substance and the right level of participation that will define their perception.