



Effective Communications For A CSR Program

By Matt Spaulding, President, Spaulding Communications

*Editor's Note: This is the **second** of two articles on how to effectively integrate a corporate social responsibility (CSR) program into a business and how to promote it through strategic communications.*

THE COMMUNICATIONS LANDSCAPE TODAY: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

There is an exciting and unprecedented convergence happening right now that has important consequences for businesses and marketing communications professionals: The growth of green consumerism, green business and web 3.0. Consumers are becoming more knowledgeable and apt to selecting green products and brands. Organizations are increasingly looking at ways to integrate social, environmental and governance issues into their core business strategies*. And, the emergence of web 3.0 is fueling the maturity of how people and businesses view, understand and ultimately become more environmentally responsible. Organizations that realize this unique dynamic know there are opportunities and challenges associated with this. Yet what they may not know is the critical role a strategic communications program can play in ensuring business and brand success in this new environment.

In today's new media world where millions of people are connected via the internet, mobile devices and other technologies, simply taking a product and "promoting" or "marketing" it is no longer viable or effective. That approach falls woefully short of how organizations should be thinking of their business and their brand marketing communications today – especially when they are looking to effectively communicate their CSR programs.

Our multi-connected world means disparate audiences can share, spread and even shape an organization's brand. Smart organizations understand this. They are harnessing and leveraging a multitude of communications tools to their advantage. No longer are the smart companies simply "taking and promoting" their brands, products or services. Rather, they are engaging, connecting, communicating, listening – and most importantly – evolving with what their audiences are saying, needing and wanting.

When done correctly, organizations that employ strategic communications based on this new, ever-evolving dynamic can achieve a myriad of important business goals and benefits. These goals and benefits can include: building credibility, creating advocates, rebuffing critics and skeptics, developing allies, and unearthing new market, product or operations opportunities. In essence, a strong strategic communications program can achieve the same goals as a business CSR program: reduce risk and cost, and increase revenue and brand value.

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Of course achieving this business-communications nirvana is easier said than done. Organizations should keep in mind many of the tenets used in developing their enterprise-wide CSR program (see article no. 1), most important of which is that a holistic business and brand approach is always best. Communications programs that do not take a top-down and comprehensive view will always fall short.

When aligning a communications strategy to a CSR program, it's important to keep these essential steps in mind:

1. START WITH THE VISION

Having a clear vision and a defined goal(s) is critical. From a communications standpoint, it provides a rallying point from which to energize employees, customers and other audiences. Just as importantly, it helps create credibility, especially with the media. When professional communicators can take all the individual achievements of a CSR program and show how they meet a company's stated end-goal, it provides a sense of context the media can understand and appreciate.

2. SHOW RELEVANCE

Although this should be at the top of any list when it comes to communication fundamentals, many organizations overlook this aspect when communicating their CSR program. Can an organization demonstrate why their CSR program matters, why it matters now and how it is making a positive difference in a broad yet easy to understand context? If an organization can not clearly and succinctly articulate why they have a CSR program and why it matters, then their marketing communication professionals will be handcuffed in their attempt to build even simple awareness and recognition for it, let alone affinity, preference or admiration. If a company begins its CSR program by starting at the planning phase (as mentioned above), then the relevance issue will inherently be resolved.

Showing relevance also means speaking in terms people can understand and relate to. In almost every industry, there are multiple green certification or accreditation organizations, each with their own standards, measurements and evaluations. There are also numerous clean technologies or green manufacturing processes that create green products and services. With all of this comes a multitude of acronyms and arcane terms that can easily confuse or obfuscate their real value, purpose or benefit. Where possible, confusing or arcane terms should be replaced with simple language that relates back to the relevance of the organization's CSR program and its overall mission.

3. BE CREDIBLE AND ACCOUNTABLE

For any communications or public relations campaign to succeed, credibility and accountability are key – and even more so in today's "green media marketplace." Over the past several years, companies eager to promote their eco-friendliness or green products have eschewed, forgotten, neglected – or even worse – ignored showing tangible proof to back up their environmental claims. This disturbing trend led to the term greenwashing, which was recently added to the American Heritage Dictionary and is defined as, "The dissemination of misleading information by an organization to conceal its abuse of the environment in order to present a positive public image." As the media have become more aware and knowledgeable about green issues and trends, they have also become more skeptical of green claims and assertions made by companies. In turn, this makes a professional communicator's job more difficult for the organization he or she is representing. Yet there

are several ways in which an organization can be credible and accountable for its CSR program. Those include being transparent and providing real results.

4. BE TRANSPARENT

Transparency is the new mantra for business today. With the internet and the ability for customers, competitors, the media and other audiences to find, share and even shape information quickly, organizations of all sizes and in all industries need to be more transparent; without this they invite skepticism and doubt. Today, the media is adverse to covering a company or its product if the company can't show complete transparency. Case in point: In 2009, *Environmental Building News* wrote a lengthy feature story about a company's new green product in one of their monthly issues. Although it covered many positive points, the article ultimately created a negative effect with readers. The reporter was highly skeptical of the product and the company's green claims, writing that, "... the product's positive attributes are tempered by marketing claims on its website that are difficult to confirm..." and "...[company] does not discuss source materials, technology or additives, leaving most environmental claims unverifiable." The article closed with an admonishment: "[Company] may want to protect its technology, but greater transparency could strengthen the company's claims."

As this article demonstrates, showing anything less than full transparency could cause a negative public reaction. This can lead to a lack of credibility, and worse, a damaged reputation for the brand.

5. PROVIDE REAL RESULTS

Once an organization has put a stake in the ground and has declared the ultimate goal they want to achieve with their CSR program, it's important to show real, tangible results related specifically to that goal. The media love a good story, but they need numbers, statistics and real proof they can provide their readers.

Toyota has a business goal of becoming the market leader in fuel-efficient vehicles. At certain milestones, the company issues press releases providing information on their progress toward this goal. A 2009 press release stated that total combined Toyota and Lexus hybrid vehicle sales in the U.S. had topped the one million mark. The release went on to say that: "...Toyota has commanded nearly 75 percent of all hybrid vehicles sales in the U.S. over the past 10 years. Overall, cumulative worldwide sales of Toyota and Lexus hybrids have exceeded 1.7 million vehicles through January of this year."

These kinds of statistics, especially as they relate to sales and marketshare, demonstrate tangible business growth. And this, in turn, provides the media with the proof they need to begin developing a story for their readers, viewers or listeners that is credible and based on fact.

6. RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Smart organizations – no matter how big they may be – realize their green work alone will not solve all of the world's environmental challenges and that it truly "takes a village" to make a difference. That's why the best companies develop partnerships with similar-minded organizations to drive and promote even greater change. Cox Conserves, the CSR program for Cox Enterprises, a \$17 billion media conglomerate, partners with no less than 16 organizations to "help protect natural resources, conserve energy and enhance our communities." Among its various partners: The Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, the

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EPA and the World Wildlife Fund. Cox Conserves has earned awards and national recognition for its environmental stewardship. Various partnerships play an important part in their overall success.

Strategic partnerships can extend to include other initiatives, such as sponsorships and awards. Zeftron® nylon (client), a premier, environmentally responsible branded commercial carpet fiber, for example, seeks to recognize and reward individuals that are practicing environmental responsibility through its Sustainable Practices Award. The winner of the award program, which asks facility managers to provide tips on how they are green at work, home and in their community, receives a \$2,000 donation in their name to an environmental organization.

By developing strategic partnerships and alliances, marketing communications professionals can show the media that their company or their client is truly working toward a greater good, and that not everything they do is in their own self-interest. And, by aligning with the right organizations, companies can further enhance their brand’s credibility and recognition.

7. CREATE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Unlike advertising or most traditional marketing approaches that focus on “showing” or “telling,” only strategic communications, through its multi-functional capabilities, is uniquely qualified to play the central role in an organization’s CSR program. Using effective communications, organizations can create meaningful engagement opportunities for a multi-way dialog with their stakeholders to further advance their CSR program. Organizations should engage employees, partners and customers about their CSR vision, goals and results. They should ask them what actions they would like to take to support the organization’s environmental goals. They can also engage them to see what ideas they may have or what’s important to them from an environmental standpoint.

Starbucks strives to create the Starbucks Experience every time a person comes into contact with one of their products. The most important way to create this unique experience, according to company Chairman, President and CEO Howard Schultz, is by, “putting our feet in the shoes of our customers and responding directly to their needs.”

In 2008, Starbucks created “My Starbucks Idea,” an online community for people to post suggestions, vote on them, discuss them and then see which ones are acted on by the coffee concern. The program covers every aspect of Starbucks’ business, including its environmental stewardship. Although this interactive and dynamic initiative can generate recommendations ranging from the good to the bad, it’s created an environment for the company to meet that goal of getting inside their customers’ shoes and finding out their needs.

Whether an organization has the resources or the communications maturity to develop something like the “My Starbucks Idea,” it should always be looking to create engagement opportunities. For this, organizations should consider a full-suite of both traditional and online communications tools, including surveys, questionnaires, podcasts, webinars, social networking sites and even the tried-and-true face-to-face meetings or teleconferences.

It’s important to remember that environmental stewardship doesn’t lie with one person or

the leadership of an organization. Yes, the organization sets the vision and the goals. But everyone the company comes in contact with can contribute to reaching that vision and goal. Organizations and companies need to have as many people engaged and participating toward their shared vision as possible. With this engagement and participation, an organization has advocates internally and externally out in the marketplace. And with more advocates, the easier it is to develop solutions to future challenges and setbacks.

SUMMARY

The convergence of rising green consumerism and increased CSR integration among organizations, combined with the multiple ways people (customers, employees, suppliers, etc.) can communicate has created a new paradigm. This new paradigm easily shows that people and businesses are inextricably connected (and will be even more so in the future) with communication acting as both the glue and the lubricant between the two. Businesses and consumers can be affected by and affect each other, both for the positive and negative. Only strategic and effective communications can mitigate and manage this give-and-take, this sharing, this understanding, this shaping and this affectation.

Ultimately, a company that implements a CSR program aligned to its mission and brand and earnestly communicates it in a credible and transparent way in partnership and consideration with its various audiences, will find itself growing and in a stronger position than that of its competition. At the same time, this proactive, highly engaged and holistic, top-down approach – where communication is playing the central role – can mitigate potential threats and risks to the company and its brand.

Companies and consumers now live in a new, highly shared, highly interconnected and highly symbiotic world. This new world has its challenges, but it's also full of opportunities and rewards. Those organizations that embrace this new world and utilize strategic communications to its fullest extent will reap the benefits.

Matt Spaulding is the president of Spaulding Communications and has nearly 20 years of experience in public relations and strategic communications. Since founding Spaulding Communications in 2002, he has been helping companies develop communications programs that advance their brand while meeting their business and corporate social responsibility goals. For more information, visit www.spauldingcommunications.com.

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*The first of this two-part series covered the green business and consumer landscape, and provided thoughts for how organizations can effectively integrate a CSR program into their business.

