

'Prove it' is the new standard

When it comes to CSR communications, proof has replaced trust as the organising principle

A few months ago, after more than a year of unrelenting global economic bad news, a client said to me: 'It's time we stopped doing CSR PR.' This was the opposite of bad news, a green shoot in its own way, and we both knew it.

Over the past decade, the client's company, like so many others, has spent a great deal of time mastering various CSR 'tests' in both operations and communications. It has won awards, earned regular positive media coverage, made the FTSE4Good Index, and enhanced its reputation scores in various measures of such. And when recession came, CSR was one of several functions quarantined from cuts – which may have sparked the client's unorthodox musings. 'We need, and the world needs, to stop thinking about CSR as an image issue,' said the client. 'So we should stop doing CSR PR, and just put all our efforts into becoming a sustainable company.'

This raised a predictable question – does it matter how sustainable you are if nobody knows about it? In counterpoint, is it more responsible and sustainable during a severe recession to spend, say, £500,000 on PR or on additional employee and community initiatives? And if, say, new energy efficiency initiatives would save the company money, or spur innovation that creates a patent, do we need PR to help us achieve those goals, or something else?

While it is unlikely that this company will cease all CSR PR activity – internal communication, in particular, is more important than ever – it is entirely valid that the purpose and value of CSR PR is scrutinised very closely.

After all, the past decade of unsustainable lending, borrowing and consumption that caused the global economic crisis was accompanied by a decade of constantly increasing PR about how business has embraced CSR and sustainability.



EMILIE FOLASANDY

Views in brief

Which company has produced the most relevant and resonant corporate responsibility work over the past year?

Wal-Mart's Sustainability Index (profiling the impact of all of its products) is a fascinating experiment that resonates because of its scale.

Give an example of how an enhanced corporate reputation has boosted sales/profits/another corporate objective

It's hard to beat the stunning and sustained turnaround in Fiat's reputation and financial performance under CEO Sergio Marchionne. He also seems to be the visionary of the auto sector.

A new and improved model for CSR/sustainability PR will undoubtedly emerge from the internal debates and business plans being formulated at a range of companies during this recession. My bet is that it will be much more focused on direct employee, customer and investor communications, rather than via traditional media, which is shrinking and increasingly interested only in major breaches of CSR commitments, truly big new ideas or major and provable impacts.

The focus will also shift much more to communicating the sustainability of products – whether those are mortgages, mobile phones or metal pipe – with specific and verifiable evidence via labelling, point-of-sale information, factsheets and websites linked to social media channels. This will require integration of CSR/sustainability PR with product marketing and investor communications, and the high standards of proof and veracity that should go with that.

This will also help to accelerate the much-needed incorporation of corporate-level CSR/sustainability reporting into annual reports and web-based reporting, which, in turn, will be aggregated into emerging high-quality searchable sector and cross-sector databases. This will also increase the pressure for measurement and disclosure of sales, savings and profits from sustainability initiatives.

Underpinning all this will be proof, which replaces trust as the organising principle for CSR communications. Instead of asking employees, customers and investors 'Do you trust X?', we will ask 'Do you believe X? What proof has X given you? What forms of proof, measurement and recognition matter to you?' The answers to these questions will set new standards that will shape corporate responsibility and sustainability for years to come.

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