

Chapter 18

Crowdsourcing Corporate Sustainability Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides cameo case studies of the way in which three large companies -- Unilever, Sony and J. Sainsbury -- have employed crowdsourcing exercises to review, refine and develop their corporate sustainability thinking, commitments and strategies. It also offers some wider reflections on this process. The chapter begins with an outline of the origins and basic characteristics of crowdsourcing, followed by a short discussion of the concept and contested meanings of sustainability. The material for the three cameo case studies is drawn from the reports Unilever, Sony and J. Sainsbury posted on the Internet about the crowdsourcing exercises they conducted to review their sustainability plans and strategies during 2010, 2011 and 2012. The findings reveal that the crowdsourcing exercises undertaken by the three companies attracted a wide range of constructive comments and produced a number of recommendations designed to develop new sustainability initiatives and to enhance their existing corporate sustainability strategies. While crowdsourcing offers a number of attractions to companies looking to review and develop sustainability strategies, not least in that it seems to offer a cost effective way of tapping into a number of other corporate organisations and to a potentially large number of consumers, it is not without its problems. The chapter provides an accessible exploratory review of how three major companies are employing crowdsourcing in developing and reviewing their corporate sustainability thinking, commitments and strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

The European Environment Agency (2013) has argued that *“consumption of products and services impacts the environment in many different ways”* suggesting that *‘the things we buy contribute, directly or indirectly through the product life cycle, to climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss and resource depletion’* and branding ‘unsustainable consumption’ as *“the mother of all environmental issues”* Growing numbers of companies and customers are expressing increasing concerns about the environmental, economic and social impacts of their activities and buying behaviours. There is growing awareness that many business leaders increasingly see sustainability as one of the bases of competition and as a significant source of opportunity for, and risk to, competitive advantage. At the same time many companies are increasingly looking to harness the new media to communicate their sustainability strategies to stakeholders and in some cases to develop these strategies. A number of companies are taking an interest in crowdsourcing, a term used to describe a web-based model that enables companies to address problems and challenges by harnessing the collective thoughts and ideas of a large number of people and organisations to develop, refine, and test stakeholder reactions to, their sustainability strategies. This chapter reviews how three large consumer goods companies, namely, Unilever, Sony and J. Sainsbury, have employed crowdsourcing to review and develop their corporate sustainability strategies.

CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES

In reviewing current trends in corporate sustainability strategy and performance Ernst Young and Greenbiz (2012, p.2) argued that *“over the past two decades corporate sustainability efforts have shifted from a risk based compliance focus*

where rudimentary, voluntary, sometimes haphazard initiatives have evolved into a complex and disciplined business imperative focused on customer and stakeholder requirements.” There is a growing awareness that many business leaders increasingly see sustainability as becoming one of the cornerstones of competition and as a significant source of opportunity for, and risk to, competitive advantage. Many business leaders have been developing sustainability plans and programmes as an integral component of their corporate strategies. A number of factors seem to be important in helping to explain this trend. These include the need to comply with a growing volume of environmental and social legislation and regulation; concerns about the cost and scarcity of natural resources; greater public and shareholder awareness of the importance of socially conscious financial investments; the growing media coverage of the activities of a wide range of anti-corporate pressure groups; and more general changes in social attitudes and values within modern capitalist societies. More specifically a growing number of companies are looking to publicly emphasize and demonstrate their commitment to sustainability in an attempt to help to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to enhance corporate brand reputation. More generally Elkington (2004, p.1-2), for example, argued that future business success depends on the ability of companies to add environmental and social value to economic value as part of the ‘triple bottom line’ (TBL), which focuses on *“people, planet and profit.”*

However it is important to recognise that a number of critics see the growing business interest in sustainability as a little more than a thinly veiled and cynical ploy, popularly described as ‘green wash’, designed to attract socially and environmentally conscious consumers while sweeping pressing environmental and social concerns under the carpet. So seen the moves towards sustainable marketing might be characterised by what Hamilton (2009, p.573-574) describes as *“shifting consciousnesses”* towards *“what is best*

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