

# Digital and Traditional Tools for Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility: A Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature to understand the current state of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication. The authors analyze not only the importance of CSR communication for businesses but also review the literature that deals with both digital and traditional tools adopted for CSR communication. This is followed by a discussion on how today's businesses are more aware of the importance of communicating CSR to their stakeholders. Furthermore, the literature review attempts to investigate how businesses are implementing both digital and traditional tools in a complementary way for their CSR communication strategy.

## KEYWORDS

Communication, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Digital Communication, Literature Review, Traditional Communication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing interest towards the social and environmental side of business has recently attracted particular attention to the communication of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and to the tools adopted by businesses to communicate these activities to their stakeholders (Chaudhri & Wang, 2007). Thus, over the last few years, businesses focused on the different ways of CSR communication and, particularly, on the use of technologies to communicate about their own CSR. In this regard, the web environment (including corporate web sites, social media and mobile apps) is used by businesses not only to communicate their own values, missions and products/services, but also to give more visibility to their CSR-related programs. The use of web-based technologies is increasing year by year and businesses are using them to dialogue, communicate and interact with stakeholders. These technologies provide benefits including the enhancement of reputation, increased customer loyalty, attracting and retaining competent employees, and the gathering of data, information and feedback about social trends.

While traditional communication tools (including reports, codes of ethics, flyers, brochures, events etc.) are still used by businesses for CSR communication (GRI, 2014), today's main communication tools are web-based technologies (Antal et al., 2002; Chaundri & Wang, 2007; Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas, 2013). Thus, the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn is growing year by year (KRC Research, 2011). Indeed, the use of social media by businesses is constantly increasing (HSM Italia Research, 2010). Facebook represents the main social network used by firms, with a percentage of 85%, followed by YouTube (63%), Twitter (48%) and LinkedIn (27%).

Against this background, this paper aims to provide a literature review on CSR communication, focusing on its importance, and different approaches, as well as on the tools (both digital and traditional tools) that are adopted by businesses to communicate their CSR-related activities.

## **2. THE IMPORTANCE OF CSR COMMUNICATION**

According to Dawkins (2004) and Hooghiemstra (2000), the importance for businesses to communicate their own CSR activities stems from the need for transparency and visible adoption of ethical behavior, as well as to build their corporate reputation and create value. Thus, communication has a central importance for CSR, since it has become a "key issue of concern" for businesses (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007). Moreover, CSR has been recognized as a critical factor influencing corporate image, reputation and stakeholder relations (Etter, 2013).

According to Darus, Kamzah and Yusoff (2013), the general process of reporting on CSR has had an increasing development during the last decade. The study noticed that, while literature has strictly focused on traditional systems of reporting (e.g. sustainable reporting, codes of ethics, etc.), businesses, in recent years, have begun to use new tools for CSR communication. However, research on this field is still at an initial state. A corporate web site is considered as a valuable tool for the dissemination of CSR information and related activities to stakeholders. In addition to the issues and links communicated through the use of corporate web sites, businesses are increasingly using interactive technologies namely social media, social networks and mobile applications for these means of communication.

According to Arvidsson (2009), the communication issue is concerned with the identification of the typologies of CSR information that needs to be communicated, and the extent to which it should be communicated in order to satisfy stakeholders' needs and legitimate behaviors. In this regard Ellerup, Nielsen and Thomsen (2007) argued that businesses seem to be completely unprepared for this task and identified the lack of a framework for CSR communication as a major reason.

Hartman, Rubin and Dhanda (2007) argue that businesses have different ways and choices to communicate their own CSR, which may depend on the audience addressed. According to this study, such businesses, by adopting a communicative CSR approach in a strategic way, can reach the following long- term benefits: i) reduce the risks of negative impact to reputation from other firms' activities; ii) protect corporate reputation; and iii) attract and retain valuable employees by maintaining high morale (Hartman, Rubin and Dhanda, 2007, p. 377).

In summary, the importance for businesses to communicate their own CSR is based on a multitude of benefits including corporate reputation, value creation, increasing stakeholders' relations, dissemination of information, reducing risks of negative impacts, making the firm more attractive and appealing to different stakeholder categories and maintaining high morale.

## **3. CSR COMMUNICATION: DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

Literature reveals the existence of two main types of approaches used by businesses to communicate their CSR: i) the proactive and the reactive approaches (Arvidsson, 2009; Birth et al., 2008; Woodward, Edwards & Birkin, 2001; Etter, 2013); and ii) the soft and the hard approaches (Tixier, 2003).

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