Chapter 11

Storytelling about CSR:
Engaging Stakeholders through Storytelling about CSR

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling has proved to be effective in fields such as education and healthcare, but also in public relations, branding, organizational management, and employee engagement, what has led to the emergence of the terms corporate or organizational storytelling, where narration is related to corporate issues. The benefits of storytelling show that it can be used as a tool to communicate CSR information in order to engage other stakeholders. This chapter provides several examples of storytelling about CSR in four successful companies with the aims of transmitting values, fostering collaboration, leading change and sharing knowledge: Cisco Systems, The Coca-Cola Company, Patagonia, and KPMG Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social disclosure refers to 'the information provided by the companies related to their activities, aspirations and public image regarding environmental, community, employee, and consumer issues' (Gray et al., 1995) and it has always been in the spotlight. ESG information (environmental, social, governance information) is mainly qualitative, more heterogeneous, and sometimes not measurable, with more groups of interests as recipients of information than those interested in financial information. Those different characteristics with respect to financial information involve several challenges for companies: how to manage ESG information, how to disclose it and how to verify it.

It is precisely the greatest number of recipients of information, embodied in different groups of interest with different demands, what implies that companies have to make available lots of information that in most cases only serves to be printed on a corporate social responsibility (CSR) report or on a sustainability report available on the corporate website. Has the reader ever read a complete sustainability report? Does the reader know anyone who has already read it? Unless the reader mentions analysts and academics dedicated to that, answers will be probably negative. The nature of most of these responses evidences a lack of effectiveness when reaching the last user of information (Baraibar-Diez & Luna-Sotorrío, 2012), so that the future lies in working on improving the efficiency when reaching the receivers of information and recognizing their fundamental role to gather the information they are interested in.

Thus, it is inarguable that the receivers of the message have changed and evolved, and companies need to use new techniques to engage them. One of these techniques is the use of stories, which are well known outside the business world, and they are also starting to be used by companies to disclose several pieces of information:

- The mission of the company,
- The origin of the company,
- The personal background of the entrepreneur, or
- Issues about products and services.

The fact of telling stories is obviously not new, and the concept of storytelling is used in the field of education to enhance learning (Geanellos, 1996; Bryant & Harris, 2011; Mokhtar et al., 2011; Rahmani, 2011) and in the field of marketing to increase consumer loyalty (Kent, 2015).

Storytelling is starting to being used as a mechanism to disseminate the CSR actions in a company (Wille et al., 2014), combining hard information with soft information and contextualizing the information that is disclosed and trying to attract the attention of the receiver beyond the mere collection of data. However, the use of storytelling and its implementation is underdeveloped as technique to disclose CSR.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the concept of storytelling as a tool to disclose CSR information. In this sense, the concept of storytelling will be approached first from its traditional use and then from how it is used nowadays in society, focusing on its use within the strategy to disclose ESG information and CSR activities. This chapter will compile the uses and benefits of storytelling, as well as the different approaches of patterns in storytelling that literature shows. Given the lack of theoretical frameworks to develop storytelling related to CSR issues, we propose a step-by-step framework to implement effectively storytelling in the field of CSR. Last, the chapter will include the analysis of several examples in well-known companies that implement storytelling techniques to communicate some issues of their CSR strategy. The chapter ends with solutions and recommendations to implement storytelling as well as an overall conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Once upon a time, a company realized that telling stories was an effective and useful strategy to achieve many of its corporate goals. For centuries, humans have used storytelling to convey events, wisdom, culture, situations, knowledge and legends from generation to generation. It is a phenomenon that is fundamental to all nations, societies and cultures (Gill, 2011). When a storyteller tells a story, it is as-

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