# Integrated CSR Communications

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**Abstract** Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has developed over the years from being a mere social idea to becoming a corporate concept and philosophy. In recent years, it has gained a remarkable amount of attention from top management as a strategic concept that is designed to promote the competitive competence of a corporation by espousing the principle of social legitimacy. A company's public commitment to cooperate with a socially accepted ethical code improves its reputation and brand image, enhances its relationships with stakeholders and with the public, and thereby helps it to achieve better long-term performance. To fully exploit its strategic potential, CSR requires—more than any other strategic program or initiative—a credible and consistent communications management system. Although Integrated CSR Communications risks being seen as a vehicle for window-dressing or green-washing owing to the increasing information and options that internal and external stakeholders have access to, it is, nevertheless, an underestimated strategic tool. This article reflects on different perspectives in managing Integrated CSR Communications at different organizational levels. On the basis of an Integrated Communications concept, it discusses how companies can plan CSR Communications as a strategic communications approach, as well as how they can implement it as a more content-based approach, by targeting specific departments or using specialist CSR teams.

## 1 Relevance of Corporate Social Responsibility

The necessity of implementing a CSR concept has socio-normative and economic reasons. The socio-normative approach focuses on the legitimation of institutions in society and social responsibility as a "license" for them to operate, whereas in the

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economic approach, the creation of intangible assets, such as reputation or trust, are the credentials of an institution's moral and financial viability. As consumer decisions have become increasingly influenced by ecological, social and economic aspects of sustainability, companies have met this trend by adopting and proclaiming principles of corporate social responsibility. A variety of different studies by academics as well as consultants shows that the majority of managers believe corporate social responsibility and its reporting are vital to a corporation's success, and different business cases prove this correlation (e.g., Hansen & Schrader, 2005; Ingenhoff & Sommer, 2011; KPMG, 2013; Waßmann, 2013). Thus, CSR has become a genuine and strategically important field of research for all types of companies and their affiliates and not only for the typical suspect ones.

## 1.1 Development of the CSR Discussion

Governments and businesses around the globe are prioritizing CSR objectives. Although CSR has a plethora of definitions and references, and is used as an umbrella term for a variety of linked ethical concepts such as corporate citizenship, sustainable management and corporate social responsiveness, each has its own objectives, scope and functions. The CSR concept today refers in general to a company's voluntary assumption of social, economic and environmental responsibilities exceeding legal compliance for the benefit of society (European Commission, 2001; Waßmann, 2013). Our understanding of CSR today is the result of decades of research on concepts and models for CSR. Historically the academic debate on CSR started with Bowen and his discussion of the social responsibility of the businessman in the United States (Bowen, 1953; for the historic development of CSR and a discussion of similar concepts, see Crane, Matten, & Spence, 2008; Hansen & Schrader, 2005, pp. 375–377; Waßmann, 2013, pp. 11–18). Within Europe, CSR became manifest with the European Union's Green Paper, with the establishment of a European Multi-Stakeholder Forum on CSR (EMS-Forum) and the European Commission's Strategy on CSR for 2011–2014 (European Commission, 2001, 2011). Since the 1990s, the discussion about CSR and the role of companies has intensified due to globalization, increasing environmental problems and economic crime. Today, it is an integral part of a company's oversight operations.

Consumers prefer companies that are perceived as acting sustainably (Interbrand, 2013). Therefore, when CSR initiatives are deployed, companies must ensure that their CSR activities are integrated within their operations and are communicated clearly to their relevant stakeholders. A company has to guarantee that the content of CSR Communications is not only factually correct, but that the information is communicated effectively via suitable channels. Although CSR Communications can be successfully employed to engage consumer interest, many corporations have not yet embraced it as a strategic tool: its acknowledged potential still needs to be realized in general practice (Dawkins, 2004, p. 108; Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010; Lewis, 2003). Neither the academic nor the business community presently gives sufficient attention to CSR Communications (Tench, Sun, & Jones, 2014, p. 4).

## 1.2   The Factual Dimension of CSR

Today, CSR is an acknowledged strategic concept that, when correctly implemented, has the capacity to strengthen a company's competitiveness and long-term-performance as long as the social requirements and the business case are integrated within one approach. In addition, it is vitally important for the success of the approach that the factual dimension of CSR as well as the communication dimension of strategic CSR programs should be integrated. With respect to marketing and communication, as disciplines, which focus on the stakeholders that create and generate value for a company, different applications of CSR have been developed, such as corporate sponsorship, sustainable marketing, and cause-related marketing (Waßmann, 2013, p. 18).

An adoption of CSR as part of the corporate program requires that a number of different fields of action are taken into consideration. In the course of the CSR discussions in the 1990s, the Triple Bottom Line (3BL) organizational framework was proposed (Crane & Matten, 2004; Elkington, 1994), identifying the different spheres of action that companies have to pursue. This model, which also supports the concept of sustainability, obliges responsible companies to consider the social, economic and environmental requirements of actual and future stakeholders. According to Porter and Kramer, the need to integrate the business model with CSR is growing, since many companies have only launched CSR activities in isolated pockets or started programs for specific activities, so that their atomized actions do not achieve the intended social objectives, nor do they serve the companies' goals (Porter & Kramer, 2007, p. 6). The authors call for a "shared value" approach, which means embedding social goals within the goals of the corporation and thereby generating opportunities to enhance the company's competitive advantage by innovating business models that meet social and environmental demands (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 6).

## 1.3   The Communication Dimension of CSR

The more CSR initiatives are launched and achievements are communicated to different stakeholders, the more important credibility and authenticity become in order to avoid "boomerang effects". Aggressive as well as deceptive communications of CSR programs run the risk of scrutiny and criticism, and thus fuel a backlash against the company, especially if the promoted claims do not correspond with companies' actions (Bruhn, 2014a, p. 332). With the changing roles in communication between stakeholders and companies in a Web 2.0 context, where media are no longer owned, and content is no longer offered or supplied, but is, instead, co-created in an interactive community (Fieseler et al., 2010), the communication dimension of CSR becomes even more sensitive to public response and merits increased diligence (Isaksson, Kiessling, & Harvey, 2014, pp. 64–65).

Consequently, the communication of CSR requires professional and strategic effort; it has to involve internal[1] and external communication and should avoid inconsistent and contradictory messages. CSR Communications faces major challenges (Illia, Zyglidopoulos, Romenti, Rodriguez, & Gonzalez del Valle Brena, 2013): (1) There is a general distrust of corporate communications regarding the achievements of CSR—apparent especially in the public skepticism shown towards major companies; (2) CSR issues are highly complex; (3) Company publications are difficult to verify for the stakeholders, owing to a lack of corporate transparency; (4) Stakeholders demand valid information beyond the requirements of legal compliance; and, finally, (5) Certain news media seize on bad, rather than good, news.

Practicing CSR Communications thus involves much more than producing and promoting an ethical claim because of the complex groundwork that is required (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011, p. 3). Comparing activities with the services sector, CSR Communications is more challenging than other responsibilities, as the stakeholder here can more easily check up on CSR programs while interacting with employees in customer contact and dialogue situations (Bruhn, 2014a).

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, as well as the significance of credibility and trust, it is vital that corporations and organizations avoid contradiction and ambiguity when communicating on CSR. By adopting an integrated approach to CSR Communications, it is possible to achieve consistency across an increasing number of communication instruments and channels, across multiple stakeholders, and across different messages and contents; however, the degree of CSR integration often remains a missing key performance indicator. The question of how to organize CSR Communications is a further challenge that has to be met for the integration of CSR Communications, as responsibilities are often widely spread, from the board of directors to individual communication departments (e.g., PR, Sponsoring, Marketing Communications, and Internal Communications), and specialized CSR teams.

## 2 Significance of CSR at Corporate Level

The most relevant goals of CSR are gaining a competitive position in the market by ensuring a company's legitimacy and strengthening its reputation with consumers and employees. In view of the range of stakeholders, CSR has to be established as a strategic concept, which is beneficial and linked to the overall corporate strategy as well as to corporate objectives and priorities in order to be successful and accepted (Isaksson et al., 2014, pp. 66–67). Consequently, CSR demands the strategic

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[1]To get deeper into the topic of internal CSR Communication see also Chap. 6 of this Handbook: *"Investigating Internal CSR Communication: Building a Theoretical Framework"* by Sigrid Bekmaier-Feuerhahn, Paula Maria Bögel, and Carina Koch.

attention of the top management, if it is to be managed systematically. This entails that they analyze and monitor the changing expectations of numerous stakeholders, plan CRS programs along the value chain in alignment with the strategic orientation of the company, and successfully implement them. This, in turn, involves the vital question of communication. Thus, the questions regarding where and how to root and organize CSR are crucial, as they are specific to each company and frequently reflect the significance and relevance of the CSR concept.

## 2.1 CSR at Top Management Level

Where CSR is appreciated and established in a company as a strategic concept, being integrated in its business model, it will usually be managed and coordinated at top management level; for example, by a CSR Committee, a top management CRS Team, or the Board of Directors (e.g., the CRM-Director on the Board of Directors at H&M, or the Director of Sustainability & Issue Management at MIGROS). Strategic CSR demands the attention and support of (senior) management, if it is to be seen as an investment that is aligned with the business model.

The question of which organizational unit has responsibility for CSR reporting in a company also indicates its strategic status. According to the KPMG CSR reporting study covering over 4100 companies in more than 40 countries, only around one quarter (24 %) of these companies state that the Board of Directors has ultimate responsibility for CSR reporting; in 61 % of the world's 250 largest companies, CSR reporting is managed on a day-to-day basis by a CSR team or by sustainability units (KPMG, 2013). A look at national studies reveals a different picture; e.g., in Sweden, CSR is mostly an upper or executive management task (Isaksson et al., 2014, p. 68). The responsibility for CSR comprises a multistep process involving the following activities: an analysis of the company's motivation and reasons for implementing CSR; fixing CSR objectives; a subsequent evaluation of relevant stakeholders and their demands and expectations; the development and implementation of actions and programs that are capable of meeting these expectations along the whole value chain; and the communication of CSR engagements and achievements to internal and external stakeholders on the basis of CSR. Thus, top management has to ensure social responsibility across the whole value chain of the organization, as well as support the relevant processes necessary for realizing a CSR strategy.

## 2.2 CSR at Department Level

In practice, many cases empirically demonstrate that all questions and tasks in the context of CSR are delegated to a single department or function that is in charge of handling the topic and thus meeting the expectations of different stakeholders.

Specialized CSR departments, Corporate Communications, and Public Relations may be in charge of the planning, implementation, and communication of CSR. The organization at department level faces the problem that an individual department often has to coordinate its actions without being delegated decision-making authority over other communication functions, and little or no authority over other functions involved in the CSR agenda, such as production, human resources, purchasing, logistics, and marketing. If strategic and operative CSR tasks are delegated to Public Relations as a significant management role (Kim & Reber, 2008), this is often considered to be critical, as internal and external stakeholders might get the impression that CSR Communications is simply a goodwill and reputation campaign (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 9; Tench et al., 2014, pp. 4–6).

## 2.3   *Integrated CSR Communications at Different Planning Levels*

CSR's threefold objectives mean that CSR Communications has to be anchored at different organizational levels, which apply different implementation methods. Following the general options of embedding CSR within the corporation, CSR Communications can also be organized at different levels in a company. Section 4 considers Integrated CSR Communications at corporate level, where CSR is discussed as a strategic value proposition and a vital element in a corporate strategy, which has to be coordinated and integrated with other value propositions. The CSR positioning affects the whole company and it is part of the brand identity of the corporation. Section 5 looks at the planning of CSR Communications at a functional or departmental level. CSR Communications, in this case, is not a strategic positioning dimension for the corporation as a whole, but rather a content platform, which communicates the company's CSR activities using multiple instruments and programs.

Given the different activities and initiatives, which have to be coordinated, companies employ CSR as a form of content marketing. Before differentiating these various levels of CSR Communications management in detail, it is essential to give a brief explanation of the underlying concept of Integrated Communications.

## 3   Planning and Realization of Integrated CSR Communications

For decades, academics and managers have been looking for ways to coordinate their diverse communications activities in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness. The concept of Integrated Communications has gained importance over the last two decades, and with it, a variety of concepts and definitions have emerged

(Bruhn, 2014b, pp. 36–37). There is an ongoing debate to reach consensus about the meaning of the concept (e.g., Cornelisson & Lock, 2000; Duncan & Mulhern, 2004; Kerr, Schultz, Patti, & Kim, 2008; Kitchen & Schultz, 2009; Kliatchko, 2005; Low, 2000). Integrated Communications is therefore defined here as a strategic and operative process, which involves analysis, planning, organizing, implementing and monitoring, and which aims to communicate a coherent and consistent image of a company or reference object by integrating the company's distinctive sources of internal and external communications (Bruhn, 2014b, p. 38).

## 3.1   The Concept of Integrated Communications

In comparison to other concepts, the underlying approach used with Integrated Communications focusses on the management process for integrating internal and external communication and goes far beyond a mere formal integration of communications. Real integration is more extensive, comprising formal integration, the question of timing, and—is the aspect most difficult to achieve—the integration of messages and content in communications. Figure 1 gives an overview of these forms of integration, their underlying targets and tools.

To be successfully managed, Integrated Communications needs to be planned at different levels simultaneously; i.e., strategic planning at corporate level, and the integrative strategic planning of each single communication tool or program at the level of different departments. In order to build an "entity", which can be easily identified by the corporations' or the brand's target groups, it is essential to define a strategic concept of communication at the corporate level. This strategic concept sets the framework for the planning and execution of any single communication

| Form of integration | | Object | Target | Tools | Horizon |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Content Integration | Direction of Integration / Levels of Integration | Thematic coordination by connection lines | • Consistency<br>• Differentiation<br>• Congruency | Consistent<br>• Messages<br>• Arguments<br>• Statements | Long-term |
| Formal Integration | | Compliance with formal design principles | • Presence<br>• Conciseness<br>• Clarity | Consistency of<br>• Branding and Brand Name<br>• Fonts / Sizes<br>• Colours<br>• Key visuals | Medium- to long-term |
| Temporal Integration | | Coordination within and between planning periods | • Consistency<br>• Continuity | • Timing | Short- to medium-term |

**Fig. 1**   Different forms of integration (Bruhn, 2014b, p. 144)

activity, program or tool and comprises three basic elements: the strategic objective in the sense of competitive strategic positioning, the key message as a central marketing idea or claim, and the key communication tool to be employed. Once these three objectives are determined, the strategic framework is fixed; however, it is far too abstract and conceptual to be used or implemented in a corporation. Therefore, it has to be broken down for the purposes of a single department, program, or activity.

## 3.2   Realizing Integrated Communications

The application of the strategic communication concept to a specific case can be supported by establishing a set of guidelines and rules (see Fig. 2), which build the basis for the realization of an Integrated Communications concept and which enable departments to address strategic decisions at their level. These conceptual rules are intended to clarify the communication strategy to everybody concerned and to give it an obligatory character. The guidelines thus structure the implementation of an Integrated Communications concept. A closer look at Fig. 2 and the described rules reveals the principle of this approach. Integration is realized by hierarchization of objectives, messages and tools. For instance, at the level of the message platform, the key message as a central claim communicates a message that is valid for the entire corporation or the underlying brand (e.g., 3M Innovation). This guiding concept or focal message is embedded in the core messages that are developed and designed with respect to the different target groups and stakeholders (e.g.,



**Fig. 2**  Concept paper of integrated communications (Bruhn, 2014b, p. 262)
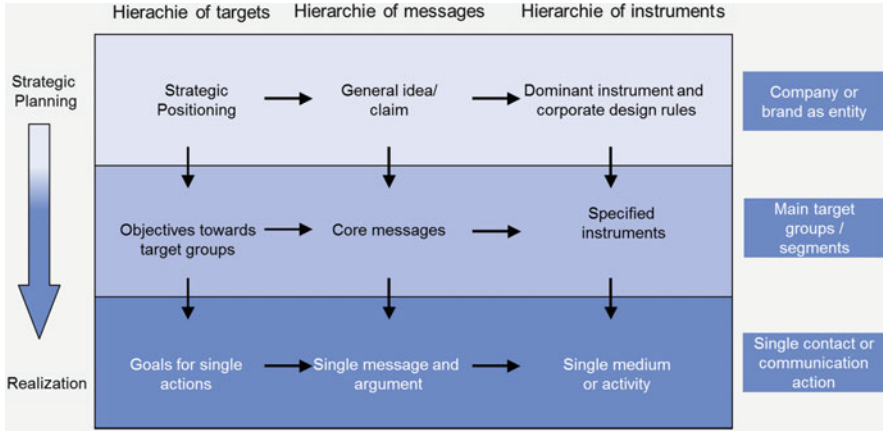
**Fig. 3** Ordering system of integrated communications (Bruhn, 2014b, p. 294)

clients, suppliers, employees and partners), whereas single arguments and patterns of argumentation prove the core messages by supplying traceable evidence. This creation of hierarchies should not be seen as a prescription of contents or messages, but rather as a guideline that enables different organizational units to define their communication contents so that these reinforce each other without contradiction.

The approach for Integrated Communications outlined above is efficient and has been implemented successfully several times in German and Swiss companies for the purpose of structuring and ordering the communication systems and thereby making integration manageable (see the best practice cases in Bruhn, 2014b, pp. 515–674). Figure 3 shows the procedural order of the Integrated Communications activities that are necessary for achieving targets, messages and instruments in terms of its strategic hierarchy.

CSR as well as CSR Communications can take place at different levels of an organization. As already mentioned, CSR Communications at corporate level can be integrated on the basis of a strategic concept, whereas at department level, it is managed as content, which has to be promoted through different communication instruments and media.

# 4 CSR as a Strategic Communication Option at Corporate Level

## 4.1 The Strategic Communication Concept of CSR

In order to realize Integrated CSR Communications according to the above-mentioned concept at corporate level, the strategic concept of CSR Communications has to be defined first (see Sect. 3.1). This comprises the following activities:

defining the strategic positioning, selecting the key instruments for the realization of the prime targets of CSR Communications, and formulating the corporate claim on CSR. The need for a consistent and convincing link between the strategic positioning of the brand and CSR as a value proposition can only be realized, if the CSR strategy is integrated and embedded in the corporate strategy, which means that there is a natural, credible link between brand identity and CSR positioning for all stakeholders. Using CSR as a focus in strategic positioning is reasonable for companies and brands that seek a niche position (e.g., the Body Shop or the German brand "Frosch"—sustainable cleaning products with a long tradition and a consistently pursued sustainable orientation), and where the focused CSR dimensions are highly relevant to the prior stakeholders as central value and product or service requirement. Furthermore, companies need to have significantly more strength than their competitors. To ensure their credibility, they should only use dimensions that demonstrate proven success through long-term use for their strategic positioning, and avoid short-term solutions (for further requirements regarding strategic positioning, see Bruhn, 2014b, pp. 266–272).

The second element that should be defined in a strategic concept of Integrated CSR Communications is the communication instrument to be used predominantly to achieve the CSR positioning. This key instrument should have a greater capacity to achieve the corporate goal of strategic positioning than other subordinate communication instruments. Based on a worldwide survey of companies, the corporate social report seems to be a leading communication instrument, as 93 % of the largest companies throughout the world and 71 % of the total number of 4100 companies analyzed apply CSR reporting (KPMG, 2013). However, it is not sufficient for a company to simply focus on CSR reporting for public relations purposes, since public relations activities are stereotyped as being misused to polish a company's image.[2]

Developing a key message or claim (or a key visual like the frog for Frosch), which is valid for the corporation as a whole and which fits for all stakeholders and competences is the third strategic element that has to be determined. This key message has to translate the strategic positioning into a promotable style and is comparable with a corporate claim or slogan. This claim often has to cover not only the CSR initiative, but also other competitive positioning dimensions, which are strategically relevant to the company, such as innovation or quality. For example, the key brand message of Ford, the leading green automobile brand, to "Go Further" (Interbrand, 2014), is independent of single stakeholders and, as a global, unspecific claim, fits all functions in the value chain. With the help of a concept paper, the three outlined strategic elements of CSR Communications can be

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[2]To the relation between PR and CSR Communication see also Chap. 7 of this Handbook: "*Organizing CSR Communication Challenges for Integrated CSR Communication from a PR and Organizational Communication Perspective*" by Stefan Jarolimek and Franzisca Weder.

implemented in the company's organization and ensure consistency in the brand's internal and external appearance (see Fig. 2).

## 4.2  Target Platform of CSR Communications

Strategic positioning is the primary communication objective that has to be achieved for the corporation as a whole or for the brand, by employing different communication instruments. Since the strategic positioning objective is rather abstract, it has to be explicated for further communication activities. As explained above (see Sect. 3.2) this can be achieved by hierarchization, which means the strategic positioning objective has to be expressed in concrete terms for the main stakeholders in the CSR strategy, and every single CSR Communications tool has to achieve a certain, predetermined goal. Employees, customers, suppliers, shareholders and owners, political parties and governmental institutions, as well as the public itself can be identified as possible important stakeholders. It is recommended that the positioning platform should focus on the most important stakeholders. Particular communication objectives have to be determined with regard to these stakeholders. The company has to ensure that its communication recipients are provided with the requisite information. It has to inform the public about CSR activities, and it has to build reputation and differentiate its products in order to stimulate its customers' purchase behavior, as well as promote positive word-of-mouth, as an indicator of customer loyalty (Birth, Illia, Lurat, & Zamparini, 2008). The company should have a candid policy that is available to governmental institutions and environmental activists; i.e., these external groups should be motivated to engage in a dialogue with the corporation. For the latter purpose, a corporate CSR blog would be a suitable instrument, as it has the capacity to capture the stakeholders' attention (Fieseler et al., 2010, p. 601). A further CSR objective is to create strong employer branding (von Walter, Tomczak, & Wentzel, 2010). At the level of single communication activities or contacts, clearly measurable targets can be set; e.g., a fixed number of followers on twitter, or comments on a blog entry within 1 week.

## 4.3  Message Platform of CSR Communications

The message platform allows a general message, such as Ford's key claim "Go further", which is rather abstract, to be translated into a more specific language for the stakeholders. In order to generate content that is beneficial and effective, a value-based system of messages has to be developed for the different stakeholders. The key message thus has to be underlined and put in concrete terms by using a set of core messages, where each targets a particular stakeholder. Prior to developing this system of core messages for particular stakeholders, it is vital to analyze their

specific needs, motives and expectations, by gathering inside data on message acceptance (Buerke & Gaspar, 2014) and becoming familiarized with the language and symbols used in such communications. With respect to individual communication contacts at the project realization stage, the individual message or content has to be defined (e.g., the message of a CSR advertisement). At this stage, it is essential to deliver transparent and traceable proofs and arguments, such as stating the $CO_2$ savings achieved by switching from using a fleet of cars to using e-cars. A study conducted by NetFed revealed that only 57 % of the analyzed companies, which have a CSR-section on their homepage, do not provide any insights or evidence relating to the performance measurement of their CSR strategy (as cited in Heinrich, 2013, p. 92).

## 4.4  Instrument Platform of CSR Communications

In addition to the target and the message platforms' development of a hierarchically structured system of objectives and messages at different levels, it is also vital to coordinate the heterogeneous communication instruments and tools employed within CSR Communications. Here it is extremely important to include internal and external communications to support the strategy (Bruhn, 2014a, b; Isaksson et al., 2014, p. 67). The key instrument (for example, the CSR report or the CSR website) is fixed within the strategic concept of CSR Communications with the task of achieving the strategic positioning goal. A closer look at actual business practice reveals that the different CSR instruments are often not coordinated with regard to timing, form or message content, and that this consequently reduces the scores for recall, recognition and brand reputation (Heinrich & Schmidpeter, 2013). The integration of CSR Communications at instrument level requires analyzing the function, which each instrument serves with regard to specific stakeholders and the underlying targets. CSR reports, for example, are mainly structured according the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards and are designed to inform and assure shareholders and owners as well as financial accountants about the effectiveness of CSR Communications. Thus, this instrument can be regarded as highly specific to a specialized and highly involved target group, but it also has to be coordinated, for example, with PR activities at the same time. Socio-Sponsoring is another example of a CSR Communications instrument. This CSR instrument does not primarily focus on shareholders, but, instead, targets stakeholders, as clients, and the public as a whole. To establish a coordinated integrated approach, it is essential to define the set of instruments employed, their specific target groups and functions. Furthermore, it is necessary to specify the Corporate Design, which should comprise all the formal rules and offer a second guideline for integrating the instruments. Companies are well advised to introduce a form of media or editorial planning in order to coordinate communications at the level of the single impetus. For the implementation to be successful, it is highly recommended that a

concept paper for CSR Communications involves all the departments from the beginning, so that the concept is planned down-up, and not top-down.

# 5 CSR as an Autonomous Communication Option at Department Level

## 5.1 Strategic Aspects of the Communication Option

CSR is not of vital strategic importance in every business context, nor is it always an essential aspect of brand identity. In many cases, the communication of CSR topics is used to set the agenda as part of a brand-enlarging strategy (Brunner & Esch, 2011, p. 32). It may even have no context to brand identity, and only be the result of some initial external pressure, thereby forcing, rather than motivating, companies to put the topic on their agenda. Implementing CSR as a more independent, autonomous communication option focuses on three questions: (1) If and how CSR can generate benefits for the corporate or the product brand, as well as for key performance indicators, such as reputation; (2) how to integrate communication at the level of a specific content; and (3) which instruments and channels should be engaged in different campaigns. CSR Communications according to this approach can often be observed in businesses where CSR has had a crucial impact due to the company's business model or field of action (e.g., oil and coal companies, pharmaceutical businesses, cosmetic industries, and textile companies) and in which public criticism and suspicion is high owing to past scandals and crises regarding the environment and labor conditions (Du & Vieira, 2012). In such contexts, CSR is often organized in the Public Relations department, or in a specialized CSR Team, or in some similar function.

The strategic question here is how a company should be perceived with respect to CSR and its multiple dimensions. In contrast to advertising and promoting CSR as a strategic value proposition, the autonomous CSR Communications option seeks to inform, involve and engage, sometimes also to entertain its target audiences. The content owner makes a strategic decision on which CSR dimensions to employ, e.g., labor conditions, child work, health, education, environmental standards of production,—and the extent to which these dimensions should be enhanced using CSR Communications. The corporation has to be aware of and ensure a fit between the content or topic and the brand image, the corporate culture and the corporate behavior, for its CSR performance to be credible. A benchmark example of successful CSR Communications is the twice-awarded CSR initiative of the German telecommunications provider Telekom. With their campaign "Big changes start small" ("Grosse Veränderungen fangen klein an"), they collected more than 585,758 used mobile phones and made a donation of 2 € per phone to the well-known foundation "A heart for children" in Germany. Prior to the establishment of this content platform, Telekom invested approximately 10 years of work and effort

in their CSR performance and sustainability management before launching the campaign (Andree & Hahn, 2014).

## 5.2 Objectives, Messages and Instruments Employed by CSR Communications

Using CSR as content also demands a systematic planning and implementation approach. This starts by defining the goals that need to be achieved in order to convince management, to make resources available and to commit and engage employees. Similar to the structure of communication goals within marketing, the objectives here can be differentiated into affective, cognitive and action-orientated goals. Where CSR is employed as communication content, the objectives are not necessarily ambitious or geared to the competition. This attitude can be seen in a study where Investor Relations Managers acknowledge that they do not intend to achieve an outstanding reputation with CSR Communications, but a "good enough" image so that the core values of their companies are not subject to the scrutiny of journalists or hostile actions by stakeholders, such as environmental or consumer organizations (Arvidsson, 2010). The Telekom initiative, in contrast, aimed at mobilizing consumers' social responsibility (cognitive) by eliciting their engagement asking them to participate in handing back used mobiles (action) and thus improving core drivers of the company's image (affective). In a study by Kim (2014), the author reveals that a company's acknowledgement of its self-serving objectives in its use of CSR Communications will help to pre-empt skeptical reactions. The author also favors cognitive measures as well as actions of different stakeholders (2014). Backlash effects are only likely to occur where companies already have a poor reputation for their CSR programs, which are only seen as promoting society-serving motives. Thus, a transparent CSR Communications policy is more likely to generate long-term credibility.

CSR content platforms are an ideal measure for reinforcing the dialogue and interaction between different stakeholders. Content platforms not only enable a good CSR image to be promoted by employing a number of instruments simultaneously in one story, but also enable and encourage dialogue and interaction with stakeholders. It is vital that the central communication message is in line with the strategic positioning statement of the company, as this helps to confirm the credibility of the company's reputation. Taking stakeholders' different levels of involvement into account, the style and tonality of the information conveyed in the communication are likely to differ. Shareholder attention is gained by "hard-fact" information, whereas the attention of customers and potential employees is gained by a mix of informative and emotional messages. In view of the increasing variety of online communication platforms, the present need to "define messages" is likely to become obsolete; instead, rules and standards in the sense of CSR

Communications guidelines are likely to replace this need to ensure credible story telling.

A successful realization of CSR as content at a functional level calls for the use of numerous instruments and channels, which have to be coordinated. CSR websites and landing pages (or lead capture pages) are playing an increasingly important role as a key instrument (Fieseler et al., 2010; Gomez & Chalmeta, 2011; Hong & Rim, 2010). Vital communication platforms can be linked to supplementary information, such as downloads of reports, CSR newsletter subscriptions, corporate CSR blogs, and social media channels such as YouTube or Twitter. Research reveals that using interactive communication channels within CSR Communications increases credibility and identification, which in turn leads to enhanced corporate reputation and more intense word-of-mouth.[3] On the other hand, however, negative evaluations via these channels have a much greater impact on opinion than positive evaluations, which means that interactive channels have to be closely monitored (Eberle, Berens, & Li, 2013).

# 6 Conclusion and Future Research

CSR has become an indispensable concept and can no longer be thought away from the manager's agenda. Its business relevance is irrefutable, as demonstrated by various studies on its importance from the perspective of stakeholders, such as customers, employees and others. Companies, which are able to integrate social responsibility and the business model gain a competitive edge. One major challenge, which has been neglected by practitioners and scholars over the years, is CSR Communications. To achieve successful Integrated CSR Communications, the following six principles and findings should be taken into consideration:

1. CSR Communications has to generate benefit for the corporation, via the market and via its stakeholders, and thereby build its reputation and public goodwill in order to involve management and employees in the CSR Communications initiative.
2. Credible Integrated CSR Communications can only be realized with a long-term perspective and with the proviso that it fits with the corporate strategy, corporate culture, corporate behavior and corporate CSR performance. The definition of a strategic concept for CSR Communications and its implementation both have to follow rules and methods similar to those prescribed for Integrated Communications.
3. Compared to other communication challenges, CSR Communications requires dialogue and interaction as well as the simple promotion of CSR achievements: both of these objectives are not easy to integrate from a communications

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[3]To gain a deeper insight into this topic see also Chap. 11 of this Handbook: "*The World Wide Web and the Social Media as Tools of CSR Communication*" by Paul Capriotti.

perspective. Success, here, requires that a corporation has the capacity, not only to be socially responsive to stakeholder expectations and communicate effectively, but also to promote its CSR achievements. The question of selecting suitable instruments for CSR communications cannot be answered without a detailed analysis of the stakeholders involved and the targeted CSR objectives.

4. As with brand competition, companies should devote special attention to a focused, consistent and unique, and not interchangeable, CSR Communications approach. This requires strategic planning and integrated action.

5. CSR Communication has to monitor sensitivities and weak signals among stakeholders and address problems in a timely and appropriate manner without forfeiting its own strategic framing.

6. Finally, the responsibility for CSR Communications should not be delegated to functional units, which might cause utilitarian interests to outweigh ethical objectives, as when Public Relations are used to buoy up Investor Relations.

CSR Communications is a new field that has attracted only limited research interest so far. As a research discipline, it poses several methodological challenges and will also demand an interdisciplinary research approach (Ihlen et al., 2011; Jarolimek, 2012). The following research topics, which are of interest to both scholars and practitioners, need to be addressed: (1) The integration of CSR Communications within a global setting with intercultural differences in stakeholder management; (2) The impact of company structure and company size on the organization of Integrated CSR Communications; (3) The integration of on- and offline channels for CSR Communications (Integrated CSR Communications 2.0); (4) The identification of the CSR reputation drivers in different stakeholder groups at company or sector level; (5) The impact of CSR Communications on the perception of services; and finally (6) Measuring the effects of corporate social performance on overall brand performance.

From a managerial perspective, the concept of Integrated Communications is a helpful framework for structuring and handling CSR Communications. It is vital to gain a conceptual and practical understanding of CSR and its communications aspects. Although this academic venture presents very complex, multi-optional approaches to be followed and highly sensitive issues to be resolved, once a communication framework is established with structures and hierarchies that explain the mechanisms involved in combination with value-adding, authentic and transparent content can generate long-term social and economic success.

## 7  Exercise and Reflective Questions

1. Explain the two different levels of Integrated CSR Communications and evaluate the different approaches (Pros and Cons).
2. What do you think are the main negative repercussions of CSR Communications to companies?

3. Discuss the main stakeholders for CSR Communications and describe their expectations, values and communication behavior toward corporations.
4. Develop a system of integrated and consistent messages an oil company could provide to its main stakeholders.

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