

Chapter 4

How Brands Communicate Sustainability Messages in Emerging Markets: A Content Analysis Based on Corporate Websites and Social Media

Aysu Göçer

Izmir University of Economics, Turkey

Tuğba Örtten Tuğrul

Izmir University of Economics, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Sustainability is becoming a key concept of competitiveness for brands around the globe. Brands incorporate sustainability into their strategic plans and communicate messages with an aim to attract consumers. In this context, Web and social media are important communication platforms to access to a large number of target consumers. It is now considered to be critical to understand the extent to which brands use such platforms to communicate their sustainability messages, especially in emerging markets where world trade is expanding towards. In this chapter, sustainability-focused communication strategies and messages of the top 100 Turkish and 100 global brands on websites and social media platforms, namely Facebook and Twitter accounts in Turkish language, are examined by content analysis. Their approaches in delivering messages and publicizing practices about different sustainability dimensions in different platforms are also compared. The results indicate important implications for brands to highlight their sustainability messages online.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is becoming one of the central objectives in today's global market. An increasing number of consumers evaluate brands on a recently introduced sustainability dimension,

and make their purchasing decisions accordingly (Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004; Kotler, 2011). Thus, brands around the globe have started to incorporate the concept of sustainability into their long term strategic plans and daily operations to develop a competitive advantage. The advent of the Inter-

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net and related networking and communication technologies enable companies to communicate their sustainability practices and messages more accurately, rapidly and widely. In this context, marketers have become increasingly aware of the strategic importance of web and social media communications. In terms of social and environmental information, and reporting disclosure, corporate web sites are one of the most commonly used communication channels by the world's largest companies (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Jose & Lee, 2007; Kim, Nam, & Kang, 2010; Maignan & Ralston, 2002). Social media is also becoming as an integral part of organizational communication strategies, given its popularity and accessibility to target consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Hence it seems critical to examine the extent to which brands use such platforms as corporate websites, Facebook and Twitter in a sustainability communication context.

This study is aimed at understanding the sustainability-focused communication strategies and messages of the most valuable global and local brands operating in an emerging market in the context of web and social media sites. After investigation of how brands use their corporate web sites and social media platforms as a way of communicating their sustainability messages, we analyze the difference, if any, between these two communication tools in delivering messages and publicizing practices about sustainability dimensions. Finally, global and local brands are compared based on their sustainability communication strategies and message disseminations in an emerging market. In this regard, the content of Turkish corporate web sites, Facebook and Twitter accounts of the 200 most valuable Turkish and global brands are analyzed in terms of sustainability message disclosures.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is now a global concern for businesses and countries. Despite several definitions

of sustainability from different perspectives, the most cited and accepted definition of sustainability is given by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland, 1987, p.8) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". The paradigm behind sustainability holds the combined idea of "people, planet and profits (3P)" and was first coined by Elkington (1998, 2004) as the "Triple-Bottom-Line" approach, to express the integration and reconciliation of environmental, social and economic concerns into business decisions from a microeconomic perspective. Thus, sustainable development necessitates the satisfaction of not only economic but also environmental and social goals, both for the present and for the future. This approach highlights the concept that economic prosperity can be enhanced through environmental and social performances, which eventually leads to competitive advantage. The main trigger of this shift towards sustainability is the realization of the unplanned costs incurred as a result of bad social and environmental performance (Azapagic & Perdan, 2000). This combined viewpoint is further given in the definition of The Centre for Sustainable Enterprise (2010) as "a way of doing business that creates profit while avoiding harm to people and the planet." Sustainability is nowadays considered as a key issue for long term survival, and not simply an item to be fulfilled in companies' business agenda, but also a purchase criterion for the consumers. This brings a new role to marketing; fostering sustainable consumption (Fuller, 1999; Kotler, 2011). Especially, forces such as internet and social media exert considerable pressures for change. Marketing, in this framework has become more concerned on the environmental and social consequences of practices. At this point, the role of marketing communications is important as it reveals the companies' sustainability efforts, helping them foster their sustainable image (Fuller, 1999). Companies started to communicate their greater commitment to sustainability in their advertisements by highlighting responsible ap-

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