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## The communication of CSR activities via social media

A qualitative approach to identify opportunities and challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises in the agri-food sector

*Oliver Meixner\*, Elisabeth Pollhammer and Rainer Haas*

*\* Corresponding author:*

*Institute of Marketing & Innovation  
Department of Economics and Social Sciences  
University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna  
Feistmantelstr 4  
A-1180 Vienna / Austria  
[oliver.meixner@boku.ac.at](mailto:oliver.meixner@boku.ac.at)*

### **Abstract**

Within this paper we analyze a state-of-the-art type of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, communication via social media. This type of communication with stakeholders is of growing importance. Opportunities and challenges of communication through social media channels are identified with special emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the agri-food sector. 8 expert interviews were conducted on the basis of a broad literature review. The results of the qualitative interviews are analyzed by means of a comprehensive computer aided qualitative content analysis. The study enables the reader to get insights into the current situation regarding the implementation of CSR communication through social media channels in SMEs. Opportunities and threats of the application of social media are identified. The results are compared with relevant findings from literature.

**Keywords:** Small and medium sized enterprises, social media, corporate social responsibility

### **1 Introduction – The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility**

The concept of “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR) comprises all activities related to the social responsibility of enterprises, i.e. the responsibility of companies for their impacts on wider society as part of a sustainable economic development. The concept goes back to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Howard R. Bowen stated in his book “Social Responsibilities of the Businessman” (1953) that this concept “refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (Bowen, 1953, 6). Bowen’s considerations can be seen to be the starting point for a worldwide development in organizational management. Quite often, international guidelines from governmental organizations are influencing CSR frameworks, but we also see an increase in collaborations between the private and civil sectors to establish platforms for responsible business practices (Poetz et al., 2013, 59). Actually, no company is in a position to neglect the import of the CSR concept.

Although there is no single commonly accepted definition of the concept itself – Dahlsrud (2008) alone identified 37 commonly used definitions of CSR – the definition of the European Commission (EC) can be considered to reach broad consensus. The EC defines CSR as a concept “whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis. Corporate social responsibility concerns actions by companies over and above their legal obligations towards society and the environment. Certain regulatory measures create an environment more conducive to enterprises voluntarily meeting their social responsibility” (EC, 2011, p. 3). In brief, we can reduce the available definitions to three main points:

- Voluntariness, beyond a company's legal obligations
- Integration into all business operations and interactions with stakeholders
- Sustainable development towards society and environment

The precise definition of CSR affects business organizations in the long run, therefore, the concept is of strategic relevance. In particular, we could talk about a pyramid of CSR: "Corporate social responsibility encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic expectation placed on organizations by society at a given point in time" (Carroll, 2009, 35). The pyramid of CSR can be described as follows from economic responsibility, the base of this pyramid to the top, philanthropy (Carroll, 1991, 42):

1. Economic responsibility: be profitable (the foundation)
2. Legal responsibility: obey the law (society's codification of what is right and wrong)
3. Ethical responsibility: be ethical (right, fair, just)
4. Philanthropic responsibility: be a good corporate citizen (improvement of quality of life in society)

Consequently, a company's responsibility goes towards a three domain approach (Schwartz and Carroll, 2003, 505pp): economic, legislative, and ethical (including philanthropy), with none of these components outweighing the other ones (cf. Himpel et al., 2008, 119). The concept of CSR is comparable to the more general concept of sustainability<sup>1</sup> which is a part of modern management (Garriga and Melé, 2004, 58). CSR means that companies are responsible for their direct and indirect stakeholders (cf. Bassen et al., 2005, 234). Following Freeman's (1984) distinction between internal and external stakeholders, they should aim to maximize the creation of "shared value" for the internal stakeholders (shareholders, investors, employees, etc.) and external stakeholders (the public, clients, NGOs, etc.) as well (Clarkson, 1995, 105ff; Mitchell et al., 1997, 853).

In summary, we can assume that enterprises are responsible for their impact on society (European Commission, 2011, 6), which encompasses the economic, ecological and social aspects, the so-called "triple-bottom line" (Elkington, 1994; Crane und Mattens, 2004, 24f). Within the food sector, companies are forced to make all efforts to guarantee resources-saving, energy-optimizing, and low-emission production processes (Maloni und Brown, 2006, 44). Given that a specific company is making these efforts and initiating relevant CSR projects or activities, one core question arises: How should this company inform the public about these activities?

## 2 CSR communication via social media

A key function of the CSR management approach is the adequate communication of CSR activities to the interested public. Companies want to achieve credibility. They inform transparently about CSR activities and integrate stakeholders into the CSR progress and all related processes. Topics like food security, traceability, origin, animal welfare, and environmental impacts are of growing interest for a number of stakeholders and companies, NGOs and the public administration is obliged to deliver relevant information (Forsman-Hugg et al., 2008, 1; Maloni and Brown, 2006, 36; Heyder and Theuvsen, 2008, 177). This is getting even more important as a number of food scares shocked the whole supply chain in the past. Food companies can reduce disparities by implementing an appropriate CSR strategy including appropriate communication.

However, traditional communication tools like the mass media are losing importance, as up to date communication tools try to initiate a true stakeholder dialog via social media like weblogs, wikis, video podcasting via social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). The application of social media demands specialized knowledge. For larger companies in the food sector Meixner et al. (2013) show that, even

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<sup>1</sup> Confirming the Brundtland-Report "sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need " (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, 8).

though social media are innovative alternatives to initiate a true customer dialog, social media tools have not to be applied on a broad basis; and 2 way communication depends on the size of companies as to which social media tools are applied. “Smaller companies still seem to be less interested in social media – or they do not have adequate know how and/or resources” (Meixner et al., 2013, p. 32).

### 3 Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and CSR communication

The focus of this study, the application of social media for CSR purposes, does not include the whole food sector. It only addresses SMEs, and important opportunities and challenges of this specific type of communication for SMEs are identified. Confirming Günter Verheugen, a member of the European commission “Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the engine of the European economy. They are an essential source of jobs, create entrepreneurial spirit and innovation in the EU and are thus crucial for fostering competitiveness and employment” (EC, 2005, p. 4). In the EU 28 there are over 20 million SMEs representing 99% of all businesses and almost 90 million jobs (Muller et al., 2014, p. 14). The definition of SMEs conforming to the EC regulation 2003/361/EC can be taken from Table 1.

**Table 1. Definition of SMEs according EC recommendation**

	Compulsory attribute			Interchangeable attributes (in Euro)	
	No. of employees	Annual turnover		Annual balance sheet total	
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ 50 million	or	≤ 43 million	
Small	< 50	≤ 10 million	or	≤ 10 million or	
Micro	< 10	≤ 2 million	or	≤ 2 million or	

Source: EC, 2005, p. 14

The main goal why companies try to achieve an adequate CSR communication strategy is gaining competitive advantages (Hooghiemstra, 2000, 64). CSR communication is part of public relations (PR) (Huck-Sandhu, 2011, 207). Confirming Morsing und Schultz (2006) there are 3 particular strategies available concerning PR and stakeholders: the “stakeholder information strategy”, the “stakeholder response strategy” and the “stakeholder involvement strategy”. The stakeholder information strategy mainly aims to provide objective, company related information to the public (Morsing und Schultz, 2006, 326f.). When applying a stakeholder response information strategy, feedback and opinions of stakeholders are considered. There is a true stakeholder dialogue but only based on the information provided by the enterprise itself (asymmetric communication; Osburg, 2012, 473). If companies are eager to implement open and interactive communication with stakeholders they should follow a stakeholder *involvement* strategy. Both, companies and stakeholders are defining the contents (symmetric communication). It “... assumes a dialogue with its stakeholders. Persuasion may occur, but it comes from stakeholders as well as from the organization itself, each trying to persuade the other to change” (Morsing und Schultz, 2006, 328).

If SMEs want to include stakeholders in their CSR strategy (by means of a stakeholder dialogue), a further integration of social media into the strategic communication policy would be extremely valuable. In brief, “Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allows the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, 61). The core elements here are Web 2.0<sup>2</sup> and the creation and exchange of User Generated Content, in other words interaction and dialogue.

<sup>2</sup> Instead of only passively consuming internet-based web content, Web 2.0 refers to a more participatory approach of actively creating and sharing content. “Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them” O'Reilly (2006).

On the one hand, there are some important barriers in SMEs (Kuhndt et al, 2008, 67ff), mainly a lack of financial and human resources, a lack of know how with regard to social media and only limited availability of SME specific tools. On the other hand, there are some important advantages to SMEs when using social media for CSR communication, amongst others a usually manageable business field, high flexibility, easiness of identification of CSR potentials, narrow relation to stakeholders, etc. In brief, the following opportunities and challenges can be identified by means of existing publications. Opportunities are that:

- Compared to classic mass media, social media are available at comparable low cost (Jarolimek, 2011, 137).
- A real, two sided dialogue with stakeholders is possible. This might be an incentive for stakeholders to interact with enterprises (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).
- A comparable high share of communication with direct contact to target groups can be realized (Fieseler et al., 2010, 24).
- Stakeholders can be addressed in a direct and focused communication (Fieseler et al., 2010, 25)
- Stakeholders get an integral, highly involved participation in the CSR strategy of an enterprise.

Challenges are that:

- The interested public is getting more and more critical (Osburg, 2012, 470).
- Pressure on enterprises is increasing, as even small groups are able to effectively publish opinions, needs and requests.
- They are transforming the classic split between information sender and information recipient which increases complexity for organizations. In fact, this can lead to undesirable developments (e.g. "shitstorms") because companies no longer control the launched information (Mavridis, 2012, 246).
- If social media are not applied properly (e.g. "greenwashing" campaigns to manipulate a companies image as being ecological; Reilly and Hynan, 2014, 756), it usually leads to negative judgment of users and quite often to a dramatic loss of credibility.
- Financial resources and human manpower must be available.
- Social media and the Web in general are changing rapidly, including a hardware change to phones, phablets and tablets and away from desktop/laptop.

The following empirical findings will try to identify and evaluate important opportunities and barriers for SMEs concerning the communication of CSR related topics via social media. Compared to other fields in management sciences, only a limited number of scientific publications are available concerning CSR and SMEs. E.g., Ciliberti et al. (2008) investigated the application of CSR in supply chains using a multiple case study approached from a SME perspective. They analyzed the implications for supply chains and how SMEs could get their stakeholders within the supply chain more involved into the corporate CSR activities. Ma (2012) published a study on models of CSR for SMEs. However, it is questionable if traditional communication theories are still valid for social media and CSR – even more if we want to apply them for SMEs. Therefore, we used a qualitative, hypotheses generating approach using expert knowledge to get more insights into this more or less unexplored scientific field.

#### **4 Methodology**

In order to gain insights concerning opportunities and obstacles for the successful implementation of social media in CSR communication for agri-food SMEs, a qualitative approach was used. 8 Experts from the food sector, media, and consulting were interviewed. The interviews roughly followed a semi-structured interview guide. However, the interviewees themselves determined the course of the interviews to guarantee a natural and vivid discussion about all relevant topics. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed, the contents were coded and aggregated by means of a qualitative, computer aided content analysis. The main aim of this approach is to systematically condense all information to more compact data without significant information loss. The core contents of an interview should persist and irrelevant information should be omitted. The outcome of this approach are hypotheses, helping to evaluate findings from literature and to expand theory where applicable.

The main topics of the interviews referred to CSR in general, CSR communication in general, and CSR communication via social media.

## 5 Results

*CSR in SMEs.* In general, the results show that the CSR concept is already integrated in the strategic planning of most SMEs. During the last 5 to 6 years, CSR developed significantly, mainly because “big players” in the food supply chain focused on the topic. Further, we have to consider the specifics of the food supply chain: Transparency and traceability are of increasing importance, food scares forced companies to actively use applications to interact with stakeholders and to improve communication with them. However, confirming the experts this could also be due to omissions of SMEs in the past. SMEs are following concepts that large-scale enterprises already successfully applied.

*The triple bottom line.* Confirming the interviewees, the triple bottom line is broadly accepted. Economic, ecological, and social aspects are equally important (“CSR means more than reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions”). It requires an open discussion with stakeholders about shortfalls in order to gain credibility. There was a consensus about the definition and the understanding of the concept “CSR”. Probably, the practical applicability of the CSR concept dominates SMEs’ strategies. In this respect, the experts see a lot of work which has to be done for SMEs.

*CSR communication.* Most SMEs are *not* explicitly including social media in their overall communication policy. They are not benefiting from the opportunities of these interactive communication tools and still rely on “mainstream” communication channels (like corporate Website, CSR reports, etc.) enabling only a one sided communication without the possibility to develop real interaction with stakeholders. It has to be mentioned, that personal, verbal communication is still the best form of achieving credibility. This implies that, e.g., employees should be aware that they act as corporate ambassadors when interacting face-to-face with clients or other stakeholders. Classic media like print media or corporate publications (sustainability reports), as well as the corporate website are useful and broadly used tools to spread information about CSR activities. The experts suppose that “modern” agri-food SMEs have already implemented social media into their CSR communication strategy, (but as mentioned above, most SMEs didn’t). These tools can be beneficial and helpful in building (brand loyal) communities and transporting messages. It depends on what an enterprise wants to achieve and which target groups and stakeholders should be reached. However, up to now companies are rather reluctant to open themselves towards a real stakeholder dialogue. Obviously, the possibilities and limitations of social media are misinterpreted and mainly connected to traditional marketing purposes. The experts assume that most of the social media tools like Facebook or Twitter are applied because the enterprises want to increase sales or improve the overall image of the company. The mistake here is that the responsible persons want to manage the processes like in the past as was with other media channels. But the professional application of social media demands a lot of authenticity and much higher efforts; enterprises must be willing to interact with their stakeholders. They must react immediately and this dialogue should be maintained on a permanent basis. We can consider this to be the core success factor for the efficient implementation of social media into one’s CSR communication strategy. In particular within the organizational structure of SMEs it demands permanent financial and personnel resources. Confirming the experts it is highly questionable if SMEs in general can provide the required structures.

*Stakeholders / target groups.* Not all internal and external stakeholders are reachable via social media. It highly depends on the relevant target group. E.g., usually it is easy to reach employees and potential employees via social media. There are particular applications available that are specialized in employer related communication. Enterprises present themselves as socially responsible organizations to gain attractiveness as employers. To attract customers, Facebook and Twitter are usually excellent tools. However, other stakeholders like governmental agencies or other companies quite often limit access to

social media. For these target groups CSR relevant topics are barely transportable by means of social media.

*Success factors.* Important success factors for the implementation of social media are credibility, transparency, an open dialogue, and integration of stakeholders (not to forget the inclusion of the employees of an enterprise). External stakeholders should be invited into this dialogue even if they are skeptical. Only then a transparent discussion about CSR-related topics will be feasible. Further, enterprises must be willing to maintain the activities on a long term basis. It is not easy to reach the proper level of social media activities (“A company should not over-stress the topic”). Therefore, companies should develop specific topics in their communication efforts and work on these topics in the long run. For the agri-food sector these topics can be related to food security, food production, additives, health, packaging, ecological impacts, etc.

*Cost.* Concerning budgetary aspects of the application of social media, the experts confirm assumptions from theory: Usually, social media are significantly less costly compared to traditional mass media. Nevertheless it is necessary to calculate and provide resources. Adequate personnel and financial resources are a must for the successful application of social media. They are a low-cost but not a no-cost alternative to traditional communication channels. In this context adequate training of the staff is necessary to guarantee the necessary know how. Further it has to be considered that the rules for the professional application of social media might change in the future. Channels that can actually be used at no or only low cost for companies might require e.g. licensee fees in the future. In this situation a shift away from these channels is time consuming and not always possible.

## **6 Résumé**

In total, it is possible to make use of the advantages of social media for communication purposes. Considering the above mentioned opportunities and challenges the following extension of theoretical findings are feasible:

- **Low cost alternative:** In general, the experts agree that up to now social media are available at comparatively low cost for SMEs. However, effective cost management is necessary and in the future, the general free availability of some channels might change. In order to guarantee the required know how, employees must be trained. This too has to be considered when calculating personnel and financial resources.
- **Wide reach:** Experts agree, social media are an excellent tool to reach the public. However, especially in the food sector, for CSR other possibilities in the marketing mix like packaging are of huge importance (in view of end consumers). And, as mentioned before, adequate know how and resources are mandatory.
- **Image and brand awareness:** Social media can support a positive image of a company. However, confirming the experts these media are less controllable. This could also have negative effects (“shitstorms”). However, confirming the experts a “shitstorm” usually can be avoided if a company respects the above mentioned success factors (transparency, credibility, etc.).
- **In general, stronger relations between enterprises and stakeholders are probable if a proper strategy was adopted.**
- **Target groups:** In particular younger persons can be reached via social media; other important target groups might be difficult to be reached via social media. A company should consider that when applying social media for communication purposes.
- **Critical public:** Experts agree that in particular, in the food sector the public is highly sensitive to undesired developments (also due to food scares). There are opinion leaders out there influencing others also via social media (boycotts etc.). Companies must learn to properly deal with this kind of criticism. In particular, they should be able to make trustful, open-minded, and factual replies to criticism coming from these opinion leaders.

- Messages: A proper language and informative and entertaining contents are required. Compared with traditional communication channels, recipients are gaining power. Enterprises must react promptly.
- The Web: Because of their openness, enterprises are exposing their vulnerabilities to attack. And finally further requirements have to be considered, e.g., protection of individual rights (protection of data privacy), unlimited permanence of published contents, etc.

Most of the findings are confirming what we know from former studies and publications. The requirements for the successful application of social media for CSR communication are quite specific for SMEs. Limited resources and know how still limit the efforts of SMEs in the food sector, at least on a broad basis. But considering the flexibility, creativeness, and innovativeness of SMEs, we might agree to the European Multistakeholder Forum when arguing: "Just as the best of SMEs are a source of innovation for business generally, so it can be assumed that the best of environmentally and socially responsible SMEs will offer CSR innovations. Efforts to engage more SMEs in CSR should be mindful of this fact" (Emsf, 2004, 3). Confirming our study, CSR is already broadly accepted by SMEs. The next step, an innovative implementation of powerful communication tools like social media might therefore be only a question of time.

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