The Future of Corporate Environmental Communication: Trends, Contents, Media, Technologies

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Abstract

The various developments within the field of corporate environmental communication are arranged to a comprehensive and reasonably structured survey. On the one hand, from an academics' point of view, this survey offers an overview of recent literature and empirical studies in this field. On the other hand, from a practitioner's perspective, helpful guidance on how to employ the Internet and other associated technologies and services productively is provided. Based on rising challenges environmental communicating companies are more and more confronted with, the survey focuses on environmental aspects. However, the general insights can be transferred also to financial, social, or sustainability communication - seen as a currently emerging phenomenon towards an integrated approach containing environmental, financial, and social aspects. According to the pioneering effort of structuring the multitude of developments, it appears useful to describe the overall contours in a basic framework. In a more detailed fashion, the framework rests on a set of four substantial categories, illustrated by four characteristics that are relevant for the field of corporate environmental communication. This framework includes: (i) current trends representing the major developments, challenges, and determinants for progress, (ii) important contents representing essential subjects, crucial themes, and critical issues companies and target groups are communicating, (iii) various media like hypermedia, multimedia, printed media etc. used for corporate environmental communication purposes, and (iv) the professional utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICT) and its applications, in particular the huge opportunities and benefits of Internet technologies and Internet services. The proposed framework should be regarded as schematic, not photo-realistic. However, it is helpful to highlight substantial differences between outdated, very early stages of managing corporate environmental communication e.g. by providing simple "green glossy brochures" just put as Portable Document Format (PDF) on the Internet for the sake of merely smart presentations in contrast to a forward-looking environmental communication system - perhaps sometimes called as a "cybernetic communication system". As such, a cutting-edge environmental communication system offers a set of appropriate contents (customised information and personal reports on demand), media (printed media, Internet, CD-

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ROM), presentation styles (target group tailoring), and distributing principles (push, pull) by an efficient manner. In terms of corporate environmental communication, taking the four categories into account will improve the way in which companies give environmental information, communicate environmental related topics, and manage their environmental management internally and externally. By so doing, such a corporate environmental communication system may be beneficial for all members involved that are reporting companies, addressed key target groups, and other stakeholders like standard setting institutions, and benchmarking organisations.

Keywords

Contents, Environmental Communication, Internet, Media, Sustainability Communication, Technologies, Trends

1 Background

Corporate environmental communication is a multifaceted, rather developing field, affecting companies' communication strategies and image profiles as well as organisational structures, personal and legislation aspects, and, in particular, their ICT capabilities. Thus, today it is quite difficult to predict what exact shape the future of corporate environmental communication will take. The assessment of addressed companies, who are primarily affected by the developments, but also the estimation of their different target groups vary from opportunities to threats, strengths to weaknesses, and chances to risks. In this ambivalent situation orientation is needed. Companies as well as customers, suppliers, legislators, consultants, financial analysts, insurance agents, media representatives, and the public on the one hand as well as (environmental-)informatics, software developer, database experts and internet service providers on the other hand will benefit from such a substantial forward-looking orientation. Of course, no one is able to anticipate the future of corporate environmental communication in all its details, but everyone who takes responsibility in this field should take care of going ahead, and, as a rationale consequence, everyone should set the course for success, preferably at an early stage.

2 Goal and Scope

At first view, corporate environmental communication is the genuine domain of companies' environmental management staff or other related departments who are designing the fashion of environmental communication practice directly. Furthermore, also politicians, academics, researchers and scientists, media experts and journalists, ranking and rating organisations are addressed. They have an indirect, but considerable influence on profile, requirements, standards, and effects of corporate

environmental communication, e.g. by environmental legislation, by defining norms like the amendments of the European Eco Management and Auditing Scheme (EMAS II) or the world wide ISO 14000 series, by setting industry specific standards and committing guidelines, and, last but not least, by researching and teaching in several educational establishments.

In this contribution, substantial orientation is given and promising ways of change towards a forward-looking corporate environmental communication system are presented. As a larger goal, the contribution provides useful guidance for all who are professionally dealing with or affected by corporate environmental communication, especially companies' environmental management staff, members of public relations, and, no less importantly, members of the ICT department.

3 Contents

The various developments (theoretical insights and empirical findings) that are identified within this field are structured by a basic framework. This framework rests on four main categories, i.e. (i) trends, (ii) contents, (iii) media, and (iv) technologies. Starting right from the current state, these four categories represent a convenient scheme for surveying the multitude of heterogeneous movements within the field that are crucially important for corporate environmental communication in a broader sense:

- Trends (i): What are the so-called "big issues", "hot topics" and emerging tendencies relevant for and affecting the field of corporate environmental communication seen from the perspective of different key target groups?
- Contents (ii): What are the essential subjects, crucial themes, and critical issues companies and key target groups are communicating today and probably in the future?
- Media (iii): What kind of media may be used to create, administrate, distribute, and present environmental communication instruments appropriately, while meeting the target groups' requirements?
- Technologies (iv): What may be the role of contemporary ICT-applications for corporate environmental communication, either a more or less mere "nice accessory", or an indispensable tool, emphasising the outstanding role Internet technologies and Internet services might have for future environmental stakeholder communication, customisation, interactivity, and dialogue?

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

The presented survey concerning the future of corporate environmental communication serves as a helpful theoretical overview and a hands-on practical guidance on

how the current state of practice may probably develop. Thus, the survey represents a convenient scheme for all environmental communicating companies, on the one hand, in order to derive conceptual clarity, and on the other, helping to take the opportunities computer based media may enable and Internet technologies and Internet services may offer for environmental communication purposes.

For some companies, environmental communication in total might seem purely a smart accessory, a nice extra or just a buzzword in comparison to traditional corporate communication like financial communication, classical investor relations and conventional public relations. However, the idea of corporate environmental communication and the multitude of technical benefits by employing up-to-date ICT are much more than a buzzword. In particular, the utilisation of Internet technologies and Internet services are definitely not loose and should not be overlooked lightly. Actually, they should not be degraded merely to new channels for distributing or presenting specific environmental communication instruments. They are going to spur a groundbreaking shift towards an efficient, hypermedia-featured, interactive, dialogue-oriented, and customised environmental communication system. Furthermore, they may be seen as an indispensable tool for providing a set of forward-looking environmental communication instruments.

The world wide web (WWW) offers companies an expedient Internet service for distributing and presenting communication instruments: Hypermedia-features, online environmental information, global reach and 24-hours availability. Moreover, the companies' workflow of environmental communicating can be fundamentally improved: Environmental data may be captured in different data sources, combined despite various data formats, analysed for decision supporting, professionally mastered and hypermedia featured, customised according to different target groups' information needs, distributed and presented to preferred channels, e.g. via e-mail, or perhaps alternatively via fax or via mail. Aside from this, the contents and the design of communication instruments will be transformed: Online-availability, downloads, additional environmental documents, interactivity, feedback opportunities, contact details, automatic order forms, environmental electronic forums on the one hand and hyperlinks, graphical designed websites, navigation features, search engines, webrides, regular updates, and site promotion on the other hand represent some of the content and design capabilities that are already realised to a certain extent.

Sensing that traditional corporate environmental communication solely on printed media might be limited, companies are considering how to improve their practice in general. Bearing this in mind, one challenge seems to be the forward-looking management of emerging trends, crucial contents, appropriate media, and efficient technologies. Internet-based corporate environmental communication will change the workflow of environmental communicating processes as well as the underlying purposes, contents and design of the various communicating instruments.