

Corporate Social Responsibility and Consumer Brand Advocacy

A Reflection in a Time of Crisis

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Abstract

Web 2.0 offers users the unprecedented possibility of taking part in an uninterrupted flow of global communication that encompasses a growing number of people within its network and connection points (Ferreira, 2002). Users/consumers find here a space governed by a logic of connectivity, openness, conversation, and participation. These dimensions are exponentially enhanced by the growing ubiquity of social networks, whose interactive and collaborative architecture has shifted power to user communities (Mollen & Wilson, 2010). This renewed communicational context creates several challenges for organizations, converted into brands whose value depends on the rankings that measure their reputation with the public, who have become avid consumers and producers of information (Kotler et al., 2017). Thus, the process of stakeholder empowerment and the consequent loss of control by companies over the dissemination and circulation of information that concerns them have reinforced the vital need for companies to build and maintain close relationships with their audiences, in which concern for the opinions, needs, and concerns of the latter is clear (Antunes & Rita, 2008). Therefore, communities are increasingly demanding of the perceived contribution of business to the sustained and sustainable development of society, “in the face of the worsening of a wide range of economic, social and environmental problems on a global scale, and the governments’ inability to address them” (Serpa & Fourneau, 2007, p. 97). That said, it is imperative for organizations to adopt an ethical and transparent conduct, which will enable them to gain customer confidence and support over the longer term (Pérez & Bosque, 2015). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies can be seen, then, as important drivers of the desired consumer loyalty to brand and further online advocacy.

Keywords

corporate social responsibility, web 2.0, prosumer, consumer loyalty

Corporate Social Responsibility and Consumer Engagement

The exacerbated economic growth of the last century has brought with it an unprecedented destruction of social and environmental capital, giving birth to the view that the repercussions of the activity of companies as substantial centres of power are not restricted to the economic sphere: “governments, activists, and the media have become adept at holding companies to account for the social consequences of their activities” (Porter & Kramer,

2011, p. 62). That said, the disappointment of citizens with the divorce between organizations and social needs is imposing (Gonçalves, 2005), and there is a demand for companies to take on a political role that extends beyond a mere conformity with legal standards (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

Presently, when reviewing similar products, consumers show a growing tendency to consider social and environmental criteria, requiring more from companies than just quality products at inviting prices (He & Lai, 2014; Pérez, 2009). The measure of success for an organization is no longer financial performance alone (Holzweber et al., 2012); the quality of its contribution to the well-being of society is emerging as an increasingly decisive assessment factor: “CSR is well established in today’s business world. It is part of its reality. Doing good is now widely accepted as being part of doing well as a firm” (Kesavan et al., 2013, p. 60).

To combat the social legitimacy deficit they face, companies must incorporate into the core of their strategic options CSR policies that take into consideration the undeniable impact of the corporate world in areas such as human rights, the environment, sustainable development or the quality of life of the communities (Moure, 2010). As such, Mohr et al. (2001) maintain that a socially responsible stance is materialized in the efforts of companies to minimize or eliminate any negative impact of their activity, seeking simultaneously to maximize their long-term positive impact on society.

For Carroll (2000), the exercise of corporate citizenship must concomitantly comprise the goal of generating profit and maintaining profitability, a rigorous compliance with the laws and regulations adopted by the legislative authorities, the guidance of business according to ethical principles and a commitment to contributing in a constructive manner to the harmonious development of society. Elkington (1997), in turn, bringing together the dimensions “profit”, “planet”, “people”, reiterates that organizational sustainability must stand on three central pillars: first, the company’s financial security and stability; second, the minimization of the negative environmental impact it generates; and last, a conduct that conforms to the needs and expectations of the community.

An organization that, in pursuing its goals, is detrimental to the society in which it is inserted will conclude that any success achieved in this way will turn out to be nothing but illusory and ephemeral (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Therefore, companies must seek to develop routines that respond to the emerging expectations of consumers, which are increasingly directed towards social and environmental subjects (Bertels & Peloza, 2008).

For that reason, individuals tend to infer from the incorporation of CSR practices certain desirable attributes that they associate with corporate identity: “a company’s character as revealed by its CSR actions is not only fundamental and relatively enduring but also often more distinctive by virtue of its disparate and idiosyncratic base” (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001, p. 228). Thus, associations that refer to corporate social responsibility will result in an increase in the company’s perceived trustworthiness and credibility, which will, in turn, have an impact on the increase of its reputational capital (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990).

In a market characterized by an intense proliferation of products, profuse communication, and consumer disenchantment, the possibility of differentiation has been decreasing. However, by making the corporate agenda gravitate towards ethical and moral priorities, corporate social responsibility policies show an unparalleled capacity to singularize and humanize the organization, by reflecting the guiding values and idiosyncratic features of its corporate profile (Du et al., 2007; Holme & Watts, 2000).

Subsequently, the proactive exercise of corporate citizenship emerges as a prolific tool to encourage customer loyalty towards the organization (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), by providing a chance to increase the value of its intangible assets, creating an image of prestige and good repute:

customers are more likely to believe that responsible companies operate honestly in their activities and reflect interests of both parties in the relationship when making decisions, which contribute to the trustworthiness and honesty of these companies and the satisfaction of customers. (Martínez & Bosque, 2013, p. 97)

However, it is important to consider that consumer trust in the organization could be severely shaken by the detection of an incongruence between the ethical or sustainable speech that companies disseminate and their actual everyday conduct. In that context, to minimize the scepticism of the public, it is vital for companies to carefully consider how their CSR practices are conveyed, ensuring that their stance is not correlated with extrinsic motivations, monetary in nature, but stems from a genuine concern over the social needs and the goal of producing shared value – an asset for society that shows itself to be equally beneficial to the organization (Ellen et al., 2006).

Traditionally, companies make use of conventional advertising and public relations channels to communicate their corporate citizenship policies. Thus, the messages relating to the socially responsible conducts of companies

have been put across through official documents (such as social responsibility reports), press releases, television commercials, ads in the press, product design or the organization's website, for example (Du et al., 2010). However, this type of communication tends to be seen as self-promotional and, as such, as having little credibility; there is an inversely proportional relationship between the controllability and the credibility of the communication of CSR activities (Kesavan et al., 2013).

As previously explained, the online sharing of experiences and opinions holds much higher credibility than that bestowed upon commercial communication (Huang & Chen, 2006). In this context, it is paramount for companies to take into consideration in their communication strategies relating to corporate social responsibility this particular power of influence inherent to the conversations taking place within digital social networks (Kesavan et al., 2013).

A consolidated stance regarding a social responsibility strategy, as a notable tool for corporate branding, stems from a *sui generis* ability to promote positive word-of-mouth from consumers, by fostering the establishment of lasting and robust relationships based on the development of feelings of identification, trust, affection, and loyalty.

Aiming to illustrate this view, Du et al. (2010) use the paradigmatic case of the Ben & Jerry's brand, whose stance is chiefly based on an active, even interventive, exercise of corporate citizenship.

Their well-established stance regarding CSR has led to an increased ability to strengthen consumer loyalty and identification with the brand. This idea is evident, for example, in the comment shared by a web user with regard to one of the organization's products, in which the importance accorded to the company's social responsibility efforts is clear: "besides the great flavour that the Ben & Jerry's Butter Pecan Ice Cream offers you, a portion of the proceeds go to the Tom Joyner Foundation... [that] provides financial support to students attending historically black colleges and universities" (Associated Content, 2008, as cited in Du et al., 2010, p. 14).

In summary, a strong investment in consolidating an irreproachable and responsible conduct, since it enriches corporate identity, making it more attractive, distinctive, and trustworthy, will prompt the development of a deep-seated sense of consumer loyalty towards the organization. As such, we may conclude that companies, in guiding their strategic decisions according to CSR ethical guidelines, will be able to convert their customers

into an army of loyal ambassadors, whose advocacy in the interactive context of web 2.0 emerges today as a dominant sales force.

A Portrait of Corporate Discourse on Television During Emergency and Contingency State in Portugal and Spain. Is it CSR?

In July 2020, we were rapidly approaching 10,000,000 infections and 500,000 deaths worldwide, making it impossible to establish a pattern of development of the situation globally. In Portugal, the first COVID-19 case was reported at the beginning of March (2 months later than Spain) and on the 18th March the state of emergency was declared. In May, it was passed to the state of calamity. Since then, the situation has continued to evolve differently in the two countries.

During this initial period, March to May, when observing how organizations tried to improvise communication solutions that would allow them to maintain contact with their audiences, Hellin Ortuño et al. (2021) analyzed the commercials on public television to understand what type of content and promises the corporations were offering in the midst of a situation of absolute bewilderment.

The authors analyzed all commercials broadcasted in primetime at the public television in Portugal and Spain (85) during the emergency state and contingency state, from March to May 2020. Although the different they stated in the funds spend in advertising during their period, the researchers saw a mutation in the corporate discourse that we refer here, such as:

- The decrease in the dissemination of advertising messages, evidenced in the duration of the ad units, which was substantially reduced. However, the production and premiere activity of new campaigns was very intense, since 55 advertisements appeared in Spain with a COVID-19 theme and 30 in Portugal. In Spain, there is a higher percentage of advertisements of corporate nature (69%). In Portugal, the distribution is more homogeneous, although the highest percentage corresponds to corporate advertisements, the high number of institutional advertisements (23%) stands out compared to Spain (2%).
- Technical and practical information on health maintenance expressed clearly and concisely, without artifice or rhetoric, if possible, from reputable voices or at least from credible, media, and socially well-accepted people, a clear call to general and particular responsibility.

This information may come from public institutions: “one advise of DGS [Direção-Geral da Saúde]” (Direção-Geral da Saúde [DGS], 2020), “be a public health agent” (Rádio e Televisão de Portugal [RTP], 2020); or private: “is good to stay at home” (Skip Portugal, 2020), “can you please go home?” (Santander Portugal, 2020).

- Being united in the face of COVID-19 is one of the keys to overcoming it: “together we will overcome the difficulties” (Lidl Portugal, 2020); “together to what is more important” (Intermarché Portugal, 2020); “only together we can make a difference” (El Publicista, 2020); “we are going to be linked” (NOS, 2020).

Suddenly, most companies suppressed the commercial discourse by one more emotional, disinterested, and aligned with the needs of consumers and society: ensuring the health of all, complying with public health standards, such as the duty of confinement.

Clients can stay safe, because there are companies and professionals that also take care of the population: “we continue to provide service, let’s keep hope”; “attentive to the needs of the clients” (Banco BPI, 2020); “we are open for you. Now safer” (Burger King Portugal, 2020).

In general, the authors concluded that the situation of social alarm corresponded to a situation of communication crisis for which the corporations did not have response plans.

Most of the companies present in both countries decided to suspend their advertising campaigns and only a few maintained their presence on television, achieving great visibility and acquiring social notoriety. The messages focused on the social themes present in social networks, related to the need for consolation in the face of uncertainty and with companies and institutions as protagonists, as consolation providers.

On the other hand, when the alarm or emergency situation has disappeared, these messages also disappeared, without others that have given continuity to the open lines of communication, evidencing the lack of prior planning and the desire to return to the situations (market, positioning, consumption) prior to the pandemic. For this reason, unfortunately, we cannot speak of a versatile corporate social responsibility or a mission of the brands that is expressed over time, adapting to the circumstances. Perhaps we should just call it tailoring the speech to the opportunity, while expecting for a better business opportunity.

Is There Still Hope for CSR? “Nike: Play Inside, Play for the World”

A large number of campaigns on social networks launched a message of support to society in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. Some of them have managed to establish that connection with the audience, so longed for brands, and that takes on a greater significance at a time when people have had to stay at home to stop the coronavirus.

“Play for the world”, the campaign with which Nike encourages those who continue to practice sports in different areas of their home, has triumphed in the United States during the month of April, with more than 25,000,000 views (Ads of Brands, 2020; *Nike: Play for the World | An Ode to the Athletic Spirit in the Wake of a Pandemic*, 2020; see also *Nike: Play Inside, Play for the World*, 2020). This is revealed by the AcuityAds report, which collects a ranking of the brands and spots on COVID-19 that have managed to capture the attention of consumers in the last month.

The campaigns that appear in the top 10 of AcuityAds seek to send a positive message to help people who remain in their homes, and most of them use musical themes that refer to overcoming, such as the song of “Under Pressure” by Queen and David Bowie that accompanies the Facebook spot – in ninth position. We also find leading sports figures such as Paul Pogba, a Premier League player, or Patrick Mahomes, of the American National Football League, present in the Adidas ad.

The Nike campaign made specially for the web gives visibility and voice to athletes who are unable to leave home to train due to COVID-19, transforming athletes (and brand clients) into prosumers, but also seeking to increase the engagement within this special type of client (most of them rich and famous).

The smart slogan Nike makes a call to action (“Play with us” that seems “the pray for” used frequently during crisis or terrorist attacks) brings at least a double sense: the responsibility of staying at home (for the security of all, “the world”), although the need for training; the opportunity of being an example for the world, doing sports inside small houses.

The place used by everyone (basements, kitchens, courtyard) is used as scenario to approach the athletes to the normal ones, that play sport at home during quarantine.

The outside is rarely presented (just appear in two frames) but states the situation that the world is now living, empty outside, without public.

In this specific time, Nike does a call for the world: playing (praying).

In a future article, it would be interesting to compare the values expressed in this campaign with the brand's statement of principles. A content analysis of the feedback given by brand followers would provide a better understanding of the real engagement and loyalty of consumers.

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