

A guide to communicating about CSR



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1. Why should you communicate about your Responsible Entrepreneurship?

Many smaller companies do not communicate about their responsible entrepreneurship activities. Some don't want to be seen to be “blowing their own horn” or using it as a cynical marketing ploy. Some think that CSR communications are the exclusive preserve of big corporations. And to others, responsible entrepreneurship is so completely second-nature that it would never occur to them to talk about it.

In fact, by letting people know what you are doing in the area of responsible entrepreneurship, you are providing them with information they want about your company's values and, about the products or services you bring to the market. In addition, you are setting a positive example for other businesses to follow.

Strong arguments have also been made that while big companies are better at *communicating* about their responsible entrepreneurship, smaller companies actually have more impact, since they are always closer to the communities they serve, and are often more integrally involved in their responsible entrepreneurship activities. If raising awareness about your responsible entrepreneurship efforts has never been a priority, you might want to reconsider. Letting people know what you stand for will not only open the door to potential business benefits for your company; it might even encourage others to get involved.

2. What can communication do for your business?

For the vast majority of enterprises – big or small – it is clear that regular, effective communications can have a direct and positive impact on the bottom-line, particularly by opening up new business opportunities.

Other beneficial results from communicating about your company's responsible entrepreneurship can include:

- higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty;
- improved company, brand and product reputation;
- more motivated and productive employees;
- better relations with the local community and public authorities; and
- increased cost savings.

Deciding what messages your company is going to communicate about responsible entrepreneurship will also give you the opportunity to reflect upon what you actually do as a responsible entrepreneur.

3. What is effective communication?

Just as there are a thousand ways of delivering products and services to customers, there are many ways of delivering business-related messages – the choice of the best route depends on the people you want to reach, your own capabilities and resources and, very often, the subject you want to talk about. Effective communication consists of transmitting information to a target group – such as your customers, consumers or suppliers – that is relevant to both your company’s and the target group’s goals.

To give you an idea, a few examples of commonly used CSR communications tools include product labels, packaging, press/media relations, newsletters, issue-related events, reports, posters, flyers, leaflets, brochures, websites, advertisements, information packs, or simply word-of-mouth. In short, effective communication requires whatever it takes to make sure that your target audience really “gets the message”.

4. Who are you talking to?

A good rule of thumb is that your **customers, employees, local community** (the wider public) and the **local press** will be interested to know about initiatives your company takes that show commitment to responsible entrepreneurship. Depending on the initiative you are talking about you should consider informing specific target groups. These will vary, but a bit of common sense (and the list below) will help you decide who exactly to inform.

Generally speaking, most companies' responsible entrepreneurship initiatives fall into four major categories: **marketplace, workplace, community** or **environment**.

Marketplace Audiences

If your company wants to raise awareness about the way it operates responsibly in the market, you will want to consider which of the following groups to notify: **employees, customers; consumer associations; suppliers; business partners; and investors.**

Workplace Audiences

If your company wants to make a statement about improvements in its workplace policies, you could think of informing: **employees; trade unions** (if any are involved); the **local community**; and **public authorities**.

Community Audiences

If your company wants to convey information about its commitment to the local community, you could focus on communicating to: **employees**; relevant **local organisations** or **institutions** (e.g. associations, schools, hospitals); **public authorities**; and **relevant not-for-profit organisations**.

Environment Audiences

Finally, if your company wants to communicate about its initiatives that help to preserve the environment, you might speak to: **employees; business partners; relevant not-for-profit organisations; consumers; public authorities** and the **community** around you.

5. What should you be talking about?

This section provides some useful examples highlighting how communicating about responsible entrepreneurship could positively differentiate your company.

Marketplace Content

Marketplace-related communications should show how your business has integrated responsible entrepreneurship into practice. Examples include your company's efforts to improve: **support of local suppliers**; and **timely payment of bills**; **customer retention and satisfaction**; **product safety**; **quality of product/service**; **disclosure of information, labelling and packaging**; **fair pricing**; **marketing and advertising ethics** and **consumer rights**; **after-sales service** and **consumer education**; **criteria for selecting business partners**; **working and living conditions** and **human rights issues in developing countries** where you may source raw materials.

Workplace Content

Workplace-related communications should centre on new or innovative actions taken by your company such as the improvement of working conditions, pay, benefits or increased job creation. Examples include actions to improve: **job satisfaction**; **health and safety**; and **staff training and development**; **equal opportunity employment** and **diversity**; **the work/life balance** (flexible hours, balancing family and work, etc. for your employees).

Community Content

Community-related communications should concentrate on any company-supported volunteer activities by owners or employees, charitable donations or sponsorships and ways in which the company promotes economic regeneration. Examples can include your company's efforts to improve: **social integration** (ethnic tolerance and social cohesion); **community healthcare** or **education**; **quality of life** (sports/culture); the **local infrastructure**; and **security**.

Environment Content

Environment-related communications should demonstrate ways in which your company takes actions that protect the natural environment. Examples include your company's initiatives that: increase **energy or water conservation**; **reduce air and water pollution**; **reduce use of hazardous chemicals**; **maintain biodiversity**; and **reduce waste generation and hazardous waste**.

6. Who is talking about you?

The short answer is: everyone. The people talking about you regularly include your competitors, employees, business customers, consumers, business partners, suppliers, neighbours and investors. Increasingly, as you establish yourself as a responsible entrepreneur – through your successful communications efforts – you will also be talked about by the press, consumer associations, trade unions, public authorities, community organisations and institutions, and sometimes even interested not-for-profit organisations.

You may find this hard to believe, but it's true. The first group of people mentioned above – those most closely involved with your business – will talk about your company, products or services regardless. You already know about the power of word-of-mouth to drive your business, so you have seen the effects of these groups talking about you. The second group – the press, community organisations, etc. – will become interested when they learn more about who you really are and what your company stands for.

7. The “How To” Guide to Effective Communications

There are many ways of communicating to a target audience. The most commonly used tools include meetings, newsletters, issue-related events, reports, posters, flyers, leaflets, brochures, websites, advertisements, information packs, product labels, packaging, among many others. Always know what you want to say – and why – before you communicate it, and also decide which audience(s) you are addressing. While brochures are more appropriate for business-partners than for journalists, information packs are more fitting for journalists than for consumers, and packaging or product labels are more suitable for consumers than for employees.

Some of these methods, for example flyers and leaflets, are simpler than others to conceive, create and distribute. Below you will find information on a number of techniques, including press releases and press relations, communicating with your employees, and other means of communicating about responsible entrepreneurship. This guide is by no means an exhaustive report on all the options available. Rather, it focuses on the simplest, most common and most effective means of communication, specifically those for smaller companies that have limited resources: time, manpower, expertise and finances.

7A. How to communicate with your staff

Keeping your staff informed of and involved in the efforts you are making towards responsible entrepreneurship is extremely important. Communicating with and involving employees is an integral part of building a successful business.

There are a number of ways to communicate effectively with your workforce. The right choices for your company depend largely on the number of employees you have and the resources (expertise, time, funds, infrastructure, etc.) available to you. For example, if you own a small software publishing firm you are likely to have more access to intranets and email than if you own a small bakery.

Providing proper, relevant information about responsible entrepreneurship will keep your staff in the loop, educate them about company activities, make them feel like a member of the team, motivate them to perform and build their confidence. More specifically, when employees understand what is going on in the company, you can expect:

- better worker morale
- heightened pride in the business
- easier recruitment of quality talent
- increased employee loyalty
- more engagement and productivity
- higher efficiency; and
- more cooperation.

Below are three very basic examples.

- If your employees are fully informed of the environmentally-friendly nature of your products, they can then pass that information on to customers, possibly giving your company an edge over competitors.
- If you are offering new or better work-related benefits to your employees, letting them know will help to keep them motivated and productive.
- If your staff recognises that the company is committed to responsible entrepreneurship, they may well have valuable suggestions, they will feel better about where they work, and, as natural ambassadors of the company, they will communicate that information to others.

Company Value Statement

A company value statement is a single sentence that encapsulates the most basic business objectives of the company. For example, an ecologically-sustainable farm's statement might be:

“To provide our customers with the best-quality organic vegetables at the most competitive price.”

Involving your staff in the process of writing this statement could bring added-value and employee ownership to the process.

Regular All-Staff Meetings

The smaller a company is, the easier it is to have all-staff meetings on a regular basis. Every meeting is an opportunity to inform staff about the company's progress on responsible entrepreneurship initiatives and it is also a unique opportunity to get their feedback.

New Employee Orientation

Probably the least practiced – but most important – moment to inform your employees about the company's values is when they are initially hired. You have a golden opportunity to educate workers about responsible entrepreneurship and the company's commitment to it.

Suggestion Boxes

Suggestion boxes are a great way to involve your staff in responsible entrepreneurship. Some of them will have new ideas that the company might want to adopt, while others will submit hints to help improve or streamline any existing initiatives.

Posters and Banners

Posters and banners are easy to produce and are relatively inexpensive. They can be placed wherever your employees gather – and they are a strong visual reminder of your company's values.

Newsletters

While they are probably not an efficient use of resources for very small businesses, regular internal newsletters can be very useful for informing a company's workforce about what is going on in the firm. If you already have an internal company newsletter, consider inserting a regular article dedicated to responsible entrepreneurship.

Memos or Emails

A simple way to bring your staff into the loop about the company's efforts towards responsible entrepreneurship is to send employees regular memos or emails explaining your thoughts on the subject. This is also one of the most cost-effective methods but remember that written messages should not substitute face-to-face communication with your staff.

Internal Videos or Brochures

For companies with a larger number of employees and more resources, brochures or videos that explain your ideas about responsible entrepreneurship can be very useful. While the creation of effective, credible videos or brochures may be expensive because they require outside expertise, they can add real value to staff education and training.

Intranets

Technologically-advanced businesses can make use of intranets (controlled-access websites for internal use) to inform employees about responsible entrepreneurship activities. Like suggestion boxes, intranets also allow for employee feedback and participation – this kind of two-way communication is crucial to secure employee involvement.

7B. How to communicate with your community

Providing relevant information to the community in which you do business has many advantages. Being considered a good neighbour will help you differentiate your company from others, highlighting your innovative, transparent and open attitude to business.

There are many ways to tell people about your company's commitment to responsible entrepreneurship - some of the simplest are listed below. But remember, regardless of the resources you have available for your communications efforts, you will only be successful if you deliver the right message to the right people.

Company Brochures

Credible brochures may require a bit of work and expense, but they are an excellent way to reach a wide variety of audiences, particularly customers and consumers.

Mailing Lists

Keeping updated lists of names and addresses of people who have clearly expressed interest in your company is an invaluable first step to communicating with them. You should try to have separate lists for the various target audiences, as they are interested in different kinds of information.

Product Labels and Packaging

What your product labels or packaging say can make an enormous difference to customers and consumers. Labels can let them know that you are committed to responsible entrepreneurship and may set your products apart from those of your competitors. For example, buyers are interested to know if your product is "green" (bio-degradable, made with recycled materials, organic, free range, etc.), who made it (hand-crafted, made locally, made abroad with fair trade labour, etc.), or if a proportion of profits go to support community initiatives, charities or not-for-profit organisations.

Events

If you are launching a responsible entrepreneurship initiative, you may want to consider organising a specific event (such as a reception or a small press gathering) to draw attention to it. Such events are also a great way to celebrate excellent results or the end of a particular project. In addition, your company might consider sending a speaker to responsible entrepreneurship-themed events at local clubs or associations

Websites

If your company has a website, it should definitely let visitors know about your commitment to responsible entrepreneurship. Websites are extremely useful for this because they offer information to every target audience, and because they can be easily and cheaply updated.

Advertisements

Advertisements, like product labels and websites, offer an opportunity to reach many target groups – especially customers and consumers. Consider using your advertising to let people know about the values your company stands for. Such advertisements may also attract new employees who wish to work for a responsible company.

Newsletters and Company Reports

If your company already produces a regularly-distributed company newsletter or public report (such as an annual report), bear in mind that these can be an excellent means of keeping customers and other interested parties up-to-date with what is going on in your business. To take this approach a step further, you may want to consider producing a publication or report dedicated to your responsible entrepreneurship activities. This might have the added benefit of allowing you to take a more objective and comprehensive look at how your company deals with responsible entrepreneurship. It might also serve as a benchmark against which you can compare your future activities. Awards are sometimes available for such publications.

7C. How to communicate with the press

The media is one of the most effective ways of communicating your message to the largest possible audience. However, many people are nervous about dealing with journalists. This section therefore provides some helpful tips about working together with the press.

What is “news” for a journalist?

There are some characteristics that will help a story make it into the media. The best stories often combine some of the following:

- people – relevant local celebrities, underdogs, heroes
- the unusual or special
- extremes – the latest, first, biggest, smallest, cheapest, fastest

How to write a press release

A press release is the standard format for conveying information to journalists so that they can produce a story.

The release should be laid out very clearly with your company’s name and logo at the top, double-spaced with wide margins, and be no longer than one A4 page. A press release should contain: the date; a headline at the top of the page; any scheduling information; and a contact name and number.

Structure

Use simple language, the present tense where possible, and active rather than passive verbs. The press release should answer the basic questions of **who**, **what**, **when**, **where**, **why** and **how**. Journalists like to use quotes in their stories, so your press release should contain a quote from someone in your company or a third party who is involved in the initiative.

Where to send your press release

Send your release to individual journalists. If you don’t know who to send it to, call the media organisation to find out who the relevant reporter is. Make a list of the names and contact information of interested journalists for the distribution of future press releases.

Interviews

A successful media interview is one in which you get your message across. If you agree to an interview, practice beforehand with a colleague or a friend. This will reduce any nervousness and allow you to think about the best way to convey a clear message about your company’s responsible entrepreneurship.

Remember, people want stories that are easy to digest – avoid specialist terms and acronyms. Even though journalists appreciate stories that are supported by key statistics, watch out that you do not use too many.

You will feel more confident if you know the following information before an interview:

- Who does the reporter work for?
- When is the reporter's deadline?
- What is the focus or direction of the story?
- Who else has the reporter spoken to on this story?
- What format will the interview take (in person, by phone, taped, live, in studio, etc.)?

Some basic tips for interviews:

- Be focused. If the interview is on your premises, eliminate all distractions and ask colleagues not to disturb you. Turn off or divert your telephones, and shut down your computer.
- Be honest. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so, and offer to get back with the information at a later date.
- "Off the record" does not exist. It is best to assume that anything you say to a reporter could end up as part of their story.