

Captivating CSR: How to produce an engaging sustainability report

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Ahead of edie's Smarter Sustainability Reporting conference, Matt Mace investigates how companies are going beyond compliance with their reports to drive engagement on a range of CSR issues among key stakeholders.



An increasing number of companies are now experimenting with various new technologies and media platforms to push their sustainability strategies to wider audiences

Sustainability reports, for all their [complexities and pitfalls](#), are having a 'coming-of-age' moment. Previously, an annual CSR report served as a multi-paged badge of honour, highlighting the dedication of a company, and holding its progress to account. Now, these reports are becoming a vital pillar for business growth.

--- [10 top tips to drive engagement with your CSR report](#) ---

The London Stock Exchange (LSE) was among [21 of the world's leading stock markets](#) that pledged to introduce new sustainability reporting standards at the back-end of 2016. After becoming a member of the UN's Sustainable Stock Exchange (SSE) initiative, LSE now delivers guidance on what information listed companies should place into their corporate social responsibility reports.

The SSE follows blueprints set by another recently-established financial group, the Financial Stability Board's [Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures](#). The Task Force is the first global, industry-led effort to publish recommendations for climate-related financial disclosures.

Overall, more than 60 stock exchanges, representing more than 70% of listed equity markets and some 30,000 companies with a market capitalisation of over \$55trn, are now covered by the SSE initiative. That is a lot of influence and a lot of financial clout that companies could be missing out on by failing to report well on sustainability.

Disclosures relating to climate change risks are still largely voluntary, although some governments refuse to acknowledge the credibility of a business and its assets without evidence of a sustainability report. But of course, money makes the world go round, and if the financial sector wants to see disclosures and sustainability reports, then sooner rather than later, that is what they will receive.

But as stock exchanges and task forces begin to heighten their requirements in regards to reporting, actually producing the report is in danger of becoming another tick-box exercise. With this in mind, engaging key stakeholders and consumers through a sustainability report is in danger of drowning amidst external pressures and overlapping reporting frameworks.

So, how should a company produce a sustainability report that both informs and engages its intended audience?

Beyond Business is an "inspired" CSR consulting and sustainability reporting firm that has helped the likes of Intel Israel, GSK Romania and the Strauss Group publish engaging sustainability reports. For the organisation's chief executive Elaine Cohen, a sustainability report forms just one part, albeit the centrepiece, of what should be a thorough and well-thought-out communications strategy – and getting the report right means knowing your audience.

“Getting the sustainability report right is about getting the communications strategy right,” Cohen says. “It’s the one place where you should have everything: from the data to how the company is performing; everything that is relevant should be in the report. The communications strategy should go beyond this and cover the key stories and milestones and should target the stakeholders that you want to engage with.

“You need to look at the audience you are trying to engage with and there are different ways to target different groups. Mass consumers are unlikely to engage directly with your sustainability report because it’s produced for your stakeholders, so if you want them interested you have to do it in a way where you’re not giving them a sustainability report but a reason to engage with the sustainability programme.”

Experimental phase

Cohen notes that a number of companies are now “experimenting” with various technologies and media platforms to push their sustainability strategies to wider audiences. Heineken, for instance, recently promoted its annual sustainability report [through a rap video](#), while Virgin Media media tested [augmented reality](#) to captivate stakeholders. Even academia is shaking up how reports are shared: the University of London decided against publishing a dedicated CSR report, turning instead to broadcasting its achievements through [tweets and online presentations](#).

Virgin Media is one of the companies that Cohen believes could be striking the right balance between engaging communication platforms and substantial and informative reports. The firm recorded its "[biggest ever" annual carbon reduction](#), with emissions falling by 6.1% between 2014 and 2015 as part of its '[Digital for Good](#)' sustainability programme launched last year.

Unsurprisingly, the company has been keen to share this great progress and has turned to technology to accompany the [various infographics, videos and social media promotions](#) in order to share its story online.

However, Cohen remains unsure of the influence that these types of add-ons can have in drawing consumers, if that is who the company is trying to target, to the actual sustainability report. Instead, she believes that the rise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which are appearing more regularly in CSR reports – provides companies with a means to connect sustainability targets to stakeholders and consumers.

“The SDGs have really taken route with the business community much more quickly than most expected,” Cohen adds. “Beyond mapping, they should be looking at aligning business interests with the SDGs to see how they can do more.

“Every company can reframe and refocus its efforts to objectives aligned with the SDGs. Instead of companies focusing on their own operations, the SDGs tells them to start from what the world needs and then see what you can achieve from there. It is a revelation for some companies and it is starting to shift the needle on how companies view their role in society.”

Mapping internal and operational objectives against world megatrends gives external stakeholders a broader understanding of how a company interacts with society, Cohen argues. It also gives consumers insight into some of the more technical goals and aspects of the report without bombarding them with data.

Capturing hearts and minds

One company that is readjusting its sustainability report to account for both consumers and stakeholders is computer and technology giant Dell. In 2013, the US-based company launched its new 2020 Legacy of Good Plan, a set of 21 ambitious goals covering environment, communities and people.

Dell’s resulting [2016 CSR report](#) is a 138-page behemoth, filled to the brim with interesting data, insightful case studies, eye-catching infographics and useful benchmarks. The launch of the group’s 2020 CSR goals, alongside its recent agreement to join the [Net Positive Project](#) - which streamlines how businesses measure and report on net-positive claims by developing practices and tools that companies can use - allow the company to revisit how it presents its strategy thought the report.

“Our sustainability report is a ‘one-size-covers-all’ approach,” Dell’s corporate sustainability lead Louise Koch explains. “If you’re in the sustainability sector it’s a really interesting read because we share challenges, results and the journey to where we are; but from next year we’ll do a shorter report with additional information available online in order to engage with different audiences.

“Our two primary audiences are customers and employees. The employees are very interested in our sustainability agenda but more customers are also interested in what we do on sustainability. The report acts as a basis for dialogue for how we can contribute more to sustainability and society.”

Koch says that Dell’s future CSR reports will be shortened to around 30 pages so that the “dialogue” with consumers isn’t lost through page after page of data. The sustainability

report will be "an introduction to the sustainability agenda", Koch says, and will seek to seamlessly integrate with web portals offering more information for stakeholders and different users.

Looking at the broader picture, a growing number of consumers and professionals are now actively seeking to [align themselves with sustainably-orientated companies](#), and Koch believes that the key to an engaging report is striking the balance between the facts and the stories.

To ensure that Dell's sustainability journey resonates with target audiences, the sustainability department works closely with the marketing team to create platforms and videos that spread the right message to the right audience. Dell's sustainability team also consists of colleagues "dedicated to the communication of sustainability" which actively seeks to promote discussions internally.

Internally, 25% of Dell's workforce take part in the "[Planet employee resource group](#)" which uses the sustainability report as a source to build awareness amongst staff (although Koch did note that this data would be refreshed shortly). Externally, the [@Dell4Good twitter handle](#) is an exclusive social media channel to communicate Dell's sustainability strategy.

Koch claims that some of the video and social media content is being watched and absorbed at a greater rate than other core business information, largely because sustainability enables firms to attach a story to the figures in a way that areas like finance can't.

"You need a balance between the facts and the stories in these reports," Koch adds. "These are usually more engaging than the numbers, you need to speak to the hearts and minds of the people while facilitating the needs of the investors. You're never going to make everyone read a massive report, so to engage more it is important to have other communications to almost advertise the report to your audience.

"It is important to remember that the report is not the goal of your sustainability work; it is the means of communication for what you stand for as a company; it is about maximising positive value and communicating this in the right way."

February is edie's engagement month. Read of all of our engagement-themed content [here](#).

Download a free 'top-tips' guide to driving engagement with your sustainability report [here](#).

edie's Smarter Sustainability reporting conference

Dell's corporate sustainability lead Louise Koch is among the expert speakers appearing at edie's [Smarter Sustainability Reporting](#) conference at London's Inmersat Confernce Centre on 1 March.

Koch will be discussing how businesses can align sustainability goals in the overall company purpose and will also offer insight on using the sustainability strategy to drive innovation across the value chain.

[Find out more about the Smarter Sustainability Reporting conference and register to attend here.](#)

Matt Mace