

# Barriers to dialogue - Organizational challenges for CSR communication in social media

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Social media hold promises for companies to engage with a variety of stakeholders about CSR issues and thereby enhance stakeholder relationships. However, by implementing a social media strategy companies face different constraints. With this paper barriers diminishing stakeholder dialogue in the Web 2.0 are identified.

**Design and methodology:** With a single case in-depth-study we analyze the implementation of a communication strategy of a recently launched CSR-twitter-account of a European based pharmaceutical company leading in CSR. Data is derived from interviews with four managers with central roles in strategy formulation and implementation.

**Findings:** Five factors diminishing stakeholder dialogue are identified: Lack of resources, unfamiliarity with social media, managerial scepticism, internal guidelines and culture, and external regulations. These barriers prevent basic principles of relationship building online, such as regular updates or conversational human voice.

**Research limitations:** With a single case study the representative value of the results is limited. However, the results give valuable insights into the challenges and concerns management faces when implementing a CSR communication strategy in social media.

**Practical implications:** The results show that organisational constraints have to be addressed in order to implement a successful social media strategy. We therefore argue that corporate communications has to increasingly emphasis organisational aspects.

**Originality:** To date, only little research has been done about CSR communication in social media. Furthermore, the research paper presents highly relevant and new findings by drawing the attention to organizational rooted challenges of corporate communication and strategy implementation.

**Keywords:** CSR, social media, Twitter, strategy implementation, barriers, pharmaceutical industry

**Article type:** Research article

## **Introduction**

Increasingly, the internet is strategically used by companies to inform about CSR related issues (Angeles & Capriotti, 2009; Birth et al., 2008; Rolland & Bazzoni, 2009). Especially in the pharmaceutical industry companies are able to reach trust by transparently documenting CSR practices online (Sones, Grantham & Vieira, 2009). Furthermore, scholars have heralded the Internet for its potential as a tool for interactivity, dialogue and two-way communication (e.g. Taylor & Kent, 1998). Facilitating interaction between an unlimited number of individuals, the Internet provides organizations with the unique possibility to develop and sustain relationships (Wright, 1998, 2001). The recent emerge of social media has risen the degree of interaction and opened new opportunities for CSR related information dissemination and relationship management. Social media provide access to stakeholders, which could not have been reached in the same intensity before, and enable a more dialogical and personalized interaction (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel, 2010). However, previous research on social media shows that interaction of companies with their stakeholders is very limited (Stieglitz & Latteman, 2007; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Briones et al., 2011). We therefore ask in this paper for the constraints companies face by implementing communication strategies which are aimed to build relationships through interaction with external stakeholders in social media. An in-depth study of the launch of a CSR communication strategy in Twitter shows the barriers a leading pharmaceutical company encounters by communicating CSR issues online. Interviews with four communication managers detect mainly organizational rooted barriers as unfamiliarity with social media, managerial skepticism, lack of resources, internal guidelines and culture, as well as the external rooted barrier regulations. These barriers prevent basic principles of relationship building.

## **Principles of relationship building through dialogue**

Corporate communication, public relations theory, and theory on CSR communication in particular emphasise the importance of dialogue based interaction between organisations and their stakeholders (e.g. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Huang, 2001). Morsing and Schultz (2006) propose effective CSR communication through an involvement strategy incorporating various information and communication channels. Based on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) characterization of models of public relations the authors develop three types of stakeholder relations in terms of how companies can strategically engage through CSR

communication. The stakeholder involvement strategy assumes the highest degree of interaction resulting in an ongoing dialogue with its stakeholders.

Applied to the internet an involvement strategy of CSR communication includes a high degree of interaction to build dialogue based relationships with various stakeholders. In order to establish an ongoing dialogue online organizations have to consider certain principles (Taylor & Kent, 1998; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Searl & Weinberger, 2000). Taylor and Kent (1998) propose basic principles of relationship building through dialogic communication in the internet, enabled through interactive features as forums and contact e-mail forms. The principles are: include useful information on the site; frequently update sites and generate new content to engage publics and encourage visits; make the sites easy to use and navigate; and strive to keep publics on the site. Briones et al. (2011) argue these principles originally for corporate websites still “hold true” (S. 38) for additional channels that have emerged in recent years as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Furthermore, two online relationship strategies have received main attention in the literature: communicated commitment and conversational human voice. Communicated commitment involves attempts to demonstrate that members of an organization are committed to maintaining the relationship with external stakeholders (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Conversational human voice describes an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization’s publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics. With conversational human voice organizations connect personally with publics, invite public to conversation and use a “conversational-style communication” (Searl & Weinberger, 2000, p. 413). Research has shown that communicated commitment and conversational human voice correlate positively with public relations relationship outcomes (Kelleher, 2000).

### **CSR communication in social media**

With the rise of the Web 2.0 and the empowering of its users, communication between businesses and their stakeholders has fundamentally changed (e.g. O’Riley, 2006, Fieseler et al., 2010). The technological advances have consequences for the communication of CSR as companies can reach stakeholders in a more interactive way. The term Web 2.0 describes developing forms of web-based co-operation and data exchange, but also changing social dynamics (O’Reilly, 2005; 2006). Especially the usage of social software like blogs, RSS feed, wikis, electronic forum, social networks or Twitter offer new forms of interactivity and enable companies to address the CSR information to the variety of stakeholders and to enhance stakeholder interaction (Isenmann, 2006). Not surprisingly, Pressley (2006) identified the enhancement of public relations and corporate communication as one major benefit of using social software for CSR communication.

Among existing social media Twitter – an Internet-based micro-blogging service that allows users to publish short messages (tweets) - has become one of the most popular tools, used by millions

of people to publish messages and conversationally interact through their computers and mobile phones (Krishnamurthy, Gill & Arlitt, 2008; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009; Java et al., 2009). Twitter provides a variety of ways for users to become interactive (Danah, Golder & Lotan, 2010; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). First of all, users can declare certain members they are interested in following (friends), in which case they get notified if those members have posted new messages. Furthermore, members are using Twitter to interact with each other directly in an ongoing conversation sometimes resulting in “extended exchange” (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009, p. 1).

### **State of the art**

In view of the work done, research on online CSR communication has in the past almost exclusively focused on corporate websites (Jahdi & Ackidilli, 2009). This research shows that interactive features of web pages are practically not applied to interact with stakeholders online (Insch, 2008; Angeles & Capriotti, 2009; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009). Similar findings apply to websites in general. For example Taylor, Kent and White (2001) found that many organizations are not using websites in a dialogic way. More recent studies consider the technological developments of the Web 2.0 which have changed online communication. Despite the high dialogical potential highlighted by researchers, in an early study on CSR communication in social media on ten high CSR-ranked companies Stieglitz and Latteman (2007) found that companies are not interested in a direct and public discussion with customers over social media. Similarly a study of Bortree and Seltzer (2009) found this to be true for communication in general for blogs and social networks. Therefore Bortree and Seltzer suggest that organizations need to adhere to Taylor and Kent’s (1998) principles by responding to posts and providing useful information. With the aim to identify barriers diminishing dialogic conversation in social media, Briones et al. (2011) conducted a study about Web 2.0 communication of the Red Cross organization. Their results show that staff limitations, time limitations and lack of support by board-members are constraints that prevent relationship building in social media. Nevertheless, a recent study shows an increased activity of companies using social media to communicate CSR in a more dialogical way (Fieseler et al., 2010). Fieseler et al. (2010) propose based on empirical findings on CSR blogs the concept of micro-dialogues created between an organization and highly engaged audiences in online spaces.

### **The Case**

The European pharmaceutical company examined is internationally operating and market leader in its segment. The pharmaceutical industry was selected based on its need for enhancing stakeholder relationships given the recent focus on soaring drug prices, the recall of widely used drugs and other stakeholder concerns (Cheah et al., 2007; Carpenter, 2003). As listed in Dow Jones Sustainability Index the company has a proven track record in CSR-related activities and a long

tradition of intense stakeholder interaction. In 2010 the pharmaceutical company decided to launch their presence in social media. For a long time the department for CSR has used the company's internal social media platforms like the intranet, forums or the corporate YouTube channel to communicate with internal stakeholders. With a new social media strategy it is the aim to reach external audiences through mainstream social media channels, in a first step through a corporate Twitter account for CSR communication. The strategy was set up as an experimental approach that tried to explore the possibilities of social media. Among others the main goal of the strategy was to expand the reach of CSR messages online by building relationships with relevant stakeholders. Certain key performance indicators have been developed for the Twitter strategy covering the targeted audiences, increased website traffic, distribution of content and interaction. Clearly, the strategic goals and the KPIs indicate interaction as an implicit and explicit element of the strategy. It is therefore interesting to analyze which factors prevent the aimed interaction.

### **Research Questions**

Given the company's strategic aim of interaction, and based on the low interaction found in previous studies, the first research question asks for factors preventing a dialogical exchange:

RQ1: What are the barriers preventing a dialogic exchange in Twitter?

The second research question takes into consideration the principles of relationship building online as described in the literature section, and asks which barriers prevent organisations to act according to these principles.

RQ2: Do the identified barriers have a negative effect on the implementation of the dialogical principles of online communication?

### **Methodology**

To answer the research questions, qualitative data, derived from in-depth interviews with four middle managers, were applied. All four managers work for the Corporate Social Responsibility team of the company. The choice of a qualitative research method is ideal as it "properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings" (Berg, 2009, p. 8). The choice of the interview partners was driven by their central role in strategy formulation and implementation. The limitation to four participants was limited by the amount of personnel allocated to the task of social media strategy formulation and implementation. However, following data analysis proved an appropriate level of data saturation. As already mentioned the pharmaceutical company is world market leader in its segment and also

acclaims leadership in CSR, proven by various rankings and reports. The company is known and appreciated for its stakeholder involvement with regards to CSR and decisions involved.

The interviews were conducted four months after the launch of the Twitter account, which allowed identifying factors preventing interaction in Twitter through the managers' first hand experiences. The interviews were conducted face to face at the company, recorded and transcribed. Data analysis followed Pardun and Krugman's (1994) procedure of open coding to identify emerging themes and potential categories. Then axial coding was used to fit data into the categorical themes and therein identify barriers preventing dialogical exchange.

## **Results**

### *Unfamiliarity with social media*

There exists a general unfamiliarity with the medium Twitter, and social media in general. The CSR managers are not aware yet which stakeholder groups they are reaching in twitter. The fact, that various stakeholder groups with various interests and communication needs are possibly reachable, or some as for example suppliers might be excluded after all, leaves a degree of uncertainty. Therefore, information dissemination and interaction has started at a very low level.

*"We work in a multi stakeholder environment, with different groups with different interests. That is a fact we don't know yet exactly how to handle with twitter."*

Communication in social media with external audiences be it for CSR or in general, is new to the company and in the pharmaceutical industry in general. The unfamiliarity with the medium and the lack of knowledge about the effects, negative as well as positive, lead to a high degree of uncertainty and the estimation of CSR communication in social media as an internal risk, as from a financial perspective.

*"Long time effects are hard to predict. To forecast the return on investment is nearly impossible and thereby poses an internal risk."*

Interaction is also seen as source of negative feedback, which is expressed publicly and in the nearest communication environment of the company. Communication managers identify this as reputational risk expressed through negative opinions or statements on an official corporate communication channel. Furthermore, the handling of feedbacks poses a high challenge to communication managers, as for example the agenda setting is not prescribed by the company anymore.

*"The reason we didn't start a blog yet for TBL is, that there is a lot of uncertainty. What do we want to say, how do we handle – possibly negative - feedbacks."*

The unfamiliarity with twitter also expresses through the tone of voice commanded by the corporate account. Even though the Twitter strategy prescribes a human voice of tone to promote comprehension with CSR messages and enhance accessibility for stakeholders as customers, the interview with a communication manager shows that there exists uncertainty about the tone of

voice. As a science based company, the tone of voice traditionally has been rather formal and technical:

*“The company traditionally has very conservative communication. You will be able to find that in Twitter too, for example in the tone [of voice]. This is because we are a science based company - it is rather formal”*

Further, the personalisation of the corporate account which is also a measure to enhance relationships and foster interaction, for example through pictures or short description of the persons responsible for the account, is very low.

### *Managerial scepticism*

The interviews detected a profound amount of managerial scepticism and lack of believe in the effectiveness and outcomes of Twitter. Twitter has been used in a cautious experimental way, whereby the management does not assign much strategic weight to social media. Despite the formulated strategic goal of interaction, one CSR manager does explicitly express not much interest to interact in twitter. The relevance of the social media channel in the overall strategy is levelled very low. Other communication channels, as personal face-to-face communication is considered as much more important and effective:

*“We see twitter not as a dialogue tool at the moment. We want to establish it as an additional extra-channel of communication, as a supplement. We are not setting agendas in Twitter today. This could perhaps be a possibility in the future, but not today. Our communication is mainly done face-to-face and will continue that way. Social media will never be able to replace this media”.*

However, the will to communicate CSR in social media is prevalent among the communication managers. Twitter is considered to represent an important, yet unfamiliar, communication channel that has to be applied, despite the risks and uncertainties it embodies:

*“We have great examples of win-win CSR. That is, what we want to communicate. Our aim is to be visible, to be out there.”*

Especially the communication efforts from competitors in the field urge the managers to pursue more intensive communication. The managers detect a paradigm change in CSR communication, from a more reactive, low intense to a more pro-active, high intense communication:

*“We have this leadership in CSR. Some years ago, we used to be silent about that, not to much communication, so did the other companies. That is changing now, companies start to communicate more aggressively, we have to follow.”*

### *Internal guidelines and culture, and external regulations*

The CSR Twitter channel is restricted by internal guidelines, culture and external regulations. In the pharmaceutical industry the communication is highly regulated and differs from country to country. In general, discussions about products, pricing strategies, adverse drug reactions, legal matters, regulatory issues, patents or intellectual property rights are by law not allowed. Since a

main stakeholder group of the Twitter members are customers with interest and possibly questions concerning products the examined company faces this challenge with a strict policy that prevents information dissemination and dialogues about issues, which might violate any law. Questions from twitter members regarding these issues are not answered or directed to the institutions in charge by a disclaimer on the twitter page. The concern of violating any law is prevalent among the communication managers and reason for a very cautious interaction:

*“Of course we are prepared for the first case - it will come. However, our goal is not to make mistakes.”*

To prevent any legal violation the CSR team has chosen a very cautious way of communicating. The interaction thereby is seen as a possible source of violation of regulations. The managers fear, that through ongoing interaction with different stakeholder details could be communicated, which are not supposed to be publicised. Not surprisingly, the choice for the social media channel Twitter over blogs bases on a less interactive platform.

*“There has been a general reluctance towards blogs in the company due to the risk of legal issues”.*

#### *Lack of resources*

According to the CSR managers, another factor preventing a sound interaction is the lack of temporal, financial and human resources dedicated to the communication channel. The availability of the persons running the account is limited. First of all, tweets are only disseminated during office hours. Different time zones of markets in the US or Asia prevent an on time tracking of questions and remarks. With the emphasis on CSR, at least the Asian regions have been excluded from targeted stakeholders, as CSR issues.

*“Our audience is Europe, UK and the US. We are mainly targeting the CSR community, to tell them how we think, how we see CSR.”*

However, the CSR managers are aware this strategy doesn't prevent of course, that stakeholders from Asian regions approach the company with questions, especially given the fact that the company's business expansions are particularly increasing in the Asian market.

Furthermore, the time dedicated to the account, the monitoring of followers and is limited too, resulting sometimes in a response time for tweets exceeding 48 hours. However, as one CSR manager points out, due to its format Twitter does not demand to much human effort to interact:

*“The good thing about Twitter compared to blogs, it is less time consuming, if you consider the quality of answers you might have to give In blogs”.*

#### *Barriers for strategy implementation according to dialogical principles*

The interviews and the identified barriers clearly show that principles of dialogic relationship building are affected in a negative way, mostly by organisational rooted constraints. The allocation of useful information, the first dialogical principle, is possibly prevented by the identified barrier unfamiliarity with social media. Unfamiliarity might also be a barrier to adapt to the conventions

of social media which ask for a frequency of regular updates. Furthermore we argue that employees unfamiliar with social media will find it hard to establish the right measures to keep publics interested, communicate their commitment to different stakeholder and establish a conversational human voice. Managerial scepticism and scepticism in general are possibly obstacles for all principles of dialogue. The lack of will and believe in positive outcomes are barriers which effect the building of relationship in social media. Similar, a lack of resources, be it time or human resources, has a negative effect on the majority of the principles. We argue that limited resources prevent the selection and supply of useful information, frequent updates, a user friendly website (e.g. enhanced through graphical elements), the establishment of measures to keep publics interested and the communication of real commitment. Internal guidelines and culture can have a negative impact on several principles. When a company, as it is the case in the presented case, has a tradition and guidelines of a rather technical language the establishment of a conversational human voice is prevented. This on the other hand might prevent to keep publics interested. Furthermore the impedes a convenient use. External regulations have an impact on the information companies can provide and therefore a negative impact on the first principle. Therefore it might also be a problem to keep publics interested, when information can not be provided.

Table 1: Barriers preventing principles of relationship building

Barriers	Principles of relationship building					
	useful information	frequent updates	easy use and navigation	keep publics	communicate commitment	conversational human voice
Unfamiliarity	x	x		x	x	x
Managerial scepticism	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lack of resources	x	x	x	x	x	
Internal guidelines and culture			x	x		x
External regulations	x			x		

## Discussion and conclusion

The presented in-depth study shows the constraints a leading pharmaceutical company with a proven track record in CSR and a long tradition of stakeholder engagement faces by implementing a social media strategy. Interestingly, with one exception, the identified constraints are mainly rooted in the organisation. The CSR communication is restricted by a lack of resources, managerial scepticism, unfamiliarity with social media, internal guidelines and culture, and external regulation. Nevertheless, Twitter and social media in general are to certain extends valued and intended as feasible instruments for an online dialogue and therefore constitute, even if limited,

new interactive forms which complement the dialogical ideals of symmetric relationships as proposed by communication scholars (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Huang, 2001).

However, unfamiliarity with twitter or social media in general is prevalent and expressed in many ways ranging from outspoken uncertainty of long time effects, inappropriate formal tone of voice, to uncertainty of how to handle negative feedbacks. Not surprisingly the unfamiliarity is seen as an internal risk, from a financial as well as reputational perspective, as for example publicly expressed concerns about the company on an official corporate communication channel might damage the image of a company, preventing extensive interaction. The inappropriate tone of voice in social media also roots in another constraint preventing dialogical exchange: Historically, internal guidelines and the culture have prescribed a rather formal tone of voice for external communication, as for press releases, the website and other documents. Furthermore, external regulations, typical for the pharmaceutical industry, have a negative impact on interaction with external stakeholders. Strict laws and the concern of law suits result in a cautious approach to interaction diminishing a major part of interaction. Corresponding with the uncertainty of outcomes and effectiveness, there exists a profound amount of managerial scepticism towards CSR communication in Twitter. Despite the formulated strategy, Twitter is not seen by the CSR managers as a strategic tool, by some not even considered as a tool for dialogue. Given the uncertainty of outcomes and managerial scepticism, it is not surprising that resources dedicated to the communication channel Twitter - human, financial and temporal – are not outspoken high. However, the lack of resources not only is due to the company, but to a similar part by the characteristics of the medium twitter, demanding a permanent monitoring because of global reach.

Furthermore, we show that these constraints hinder or prevent adapting main principles of relationship building. The selection and allocation of useful information, regular updates, the ease of use through conventional enhancement, the strive to keep publics interested, the communication of real commitment and the establishment of a conversational human voice are impeded by mainly organisational rooted barriers. We therefore argue that corporate communications, be it in research or practice, has to increasingly emphasis organisational aspects. For the communication and relationship building with external stakeholders, scholars and practitioners are advised to examine the inside of the organisation, where formulated communication strategies are implemented and face various barriers. In particular, for practitioners the development of new organisational capabilities is important to adapt to a changing communication environment triggered by the Web 2.0.

## **Limitations and future research**

Even though the findings may be significant in a practical and a theoretical sense, there are limitations that need to be considered. As a study of one pharmaceutical company the findings are specific to this company and a particular industry. However, the results give valuable insights into the challenges and concerns management members face by implementing CSR communication strategy in social media. To further extend this study, we hope to derive interviews with other companies using social media to interact with external stakeholders.

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