

Consumer Responses to Corporate Social Responsibility Communications: Examining the Role of Company Rightful Initiatives versus Benevolent Motives

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Abstract

Corporate initiatives that address social and environmental impacts beyond any legal or regulatory requirement are often premised on a business case that sees consumers as key drivers. However, consumer reactions to corporate social responsibility (CSR) often differ notably from company expectations. In light of this challenge, we posit that the level of abstraction in CSR communications plays a key role in their success. Accordingly we explore the influence of *concrete* messages – specifying how the company is acting for social and environmental good – as compared to *abstract* messages – indicating why the company cares about social and environmental wellbeing – on the effectiveness of CSR communications. Two studies demonstrate that for companies within an industry with relatively negative reputation, *concrete* CSR information leads to more positive consumer responses than more *abstract* CSR communications. This impact can extend beyond CSR dimensions closely related to the industry (consumer protection and gambling) to more distant CSR dimensions (environmental protection and gambling). These studies also provide evidence for the mediating role of consumer skepticism in this effect. A third study suggests this *concrete* versus *abstract* differentiation dissipates in companies operating in positively viewed industries. These findings provide guidance for managers, across diverse industry settings, as they aim to effectively communicate on their CSR efforts to improve consumer responses toward their brands. The results also have implications for public policy makers and watchdog organizations to hinder deceptive CSR messages.

Keywords: CSR communications; CSR dimensions; Industry reputation; Message concreteness, Skepticism.