

Credible CSR Communication: Seven Obstacles in Practice

Gabriele Faber-Wiener,
Founder of the Center for Responsible Management,
Chair of the Austrian PR Ethics Council

After more than **10 years of working** with companies as well as NGOs in CSR and CSR Communication and after many discussions both in the Austrian PR Ethics Council and with my **master students**

I have come to **eight challenges** that CSR Communication and those working in practice that area are facing.

I would like to present them here as a **trigger for the discussion** we will have afterwards with a very distinguished and experienced panel.

Therefore – and please **do excuse me** – I did not send these thoughts to my panel participants, I did not want to take the heat out of the discussion, and knowing how experienced they are, I am sure this will not be a problem.

So what are these eight challenges, these eight reasons why I think CSR Communication – and very often CSR itself is struggling?

1. ...is very often a desert island in a company
 - It is driven by **intrinsically** motivated people who are very often very lonely;
 - Using the image of an island - It is **far away** from the “mainland”, ie the management and board decisions; Peter Ulrich calls it the two world concept,
 - It is surrounded by an ocean of opposing conditions and opposing business **incentives**. I know many CSR Managers who gave up because of these contradictions – or who moved to other areas in the company where they thought they could have a higher impact such as the HR Department.

2. It is in contradiction with marketing goals – and often with marketing departments
 - CSR Communication is about **values** and foresight, about long term effects and a **broader view** that is supposed to include many different factors.
 - Marketing on the other hand has a very clear focus – it is driven and motivated by **sales figures**.
 - This contradiction between **intrinsic and extrinsic** motivations we have discussed yesterday in the keynote by Sangkar Sen. In addition, CSR departments usually have a tiny budget compared to marketing, and much less influence.

3. It is driven by PR thinking and PR language
 - PR focuses mostly on **positive communication**:
 - Always talk about solutions, never about problems,
 - Always talk about “challenges”, never about “failures”
 - Always use positive formulations
 - Reduce complexity, simplify, make things easier to understand, Use

- methods such as storytelling
etc.

- This focus on positive messages is seen in **all** CSR Communication tools, even in sustainability reporting (eg Wording of G4 Materiality Matrix, CEO Statement etc.)
- But it is in contradiction to the very often serious issue of CSR.

4. It is limited to Communication **about CSR (projects),**

- CSR Communication is mostly **outside** communication of a **limited** action range of a company, ie communicating **to** its Stakeholders what a company is doing in CSR (**not in real life**)
- It does not challenge and change “normal” communication
- The bigger a company is, the bigger this divide, the less influence to “normal” Communication incl. Brand PR and Marketing (silo thinking),

5. It is not taking on its important internal **corrective role**

- Communication people are a **bridge** – they have to bring in the outside world into the company and vice versa. Having worked as Press Spokesperson for many years, I always felt like a **spinning top** – sometimes I had my back to the public and sometimes towards my board and tell them to change decisions because we would get a credibility problem.
- So Communicators are on one hand Spokespeople which means in-out „*self description*“ but also an
- **Internal Corrective** how Hoffjann called it – a “*flash point, conflict raiser, credibility gatekeeper*”
- This is a hard job, it requires challenging the role and decisions of top management - it needs power, it needs reflection and persistence from Communication people ☺ I know many in the Austrian PR industry that gave up and focus mainly on the in-out-part – it was just too much for them.
- In CSR Communication: No. 2 counts.
- In reality: No. 1 rules.
- In order to be **credible**, you need to do both.

6. It is being instrumentalized from all sides

- On one hand, companies very often use the concept of CSR for **profit reasons** (which is in my opinion legitimate to some extent), but often they communicate that it is based purely on **intrinsic motivations** – and that's where the problems start – we see that very often in the **PR Ethics Council**, because that's where we get the cases on the table.
- Stakeholders on the other hand use CSR and CSR Communication for their **own purposes**, for example NGOs that instrumentalize companies for their own purposes such as Fundraising.
- As a result, I could provocatively say it keeps stakeholders busy and it makes them less challenging – and I have seen that in quite some Stakeholder Meetings, where the companies afterwards came up to us as consultants and asked why they should we do more on CO2 reduction when even the environmental NGOs did not challenge them?

7. It is a no-win issue for communicators alone

- In my opinion, companies have **promised too much** in the past.
- They are **taking on** too much when it comes to their role in society (eg Shared Value concept).
- At the same time they are **cherry picking** (eg with SDGs) but very often not tackling their core problems and dilemmas (external effects, ethical dilemmas in core business, conflict of profit maximization and its side effects etc.)
- And Communication is only a **sub-system**, it cannot solve these fundamental problems but is expected to – so an impossible task for communicators alone.

As a result:

CSR Communication – and CSR itself - is facing credibility problems.

- Externally: **Raising expectations** by stakeholders, mixed with **contradicting personal experiences** and information, leads to the perception of CSR Communication as window dressing.
- Internally: Mistrust by employees who see “**their own real world**” or who even experience misguided CSR resp. CSR Communication such as **mismanaged Corporate Volunteering** Activities.
- This is **increased by Social Media** and its dynamics such as simplification or bashing-tendencies as well as phenomena like the asymmetry of trust between individuals and institutions, which makes **organisations always less credible** than individual people.

I know these are huge challenges and a lot of food for thought. Please **do not see it as bashing** of CSR or CSR Communication. On the contrary, there are many great and motivated people working in that field. But they have a hard time, very often theirs is a **very lonely job** – and they **have hardly any forum** – at least in Austria – where they can really talk about their challenges.

Let's do exactly that – let us discuss these issues for the next 50 minutes with this panel of very experienced people. I know we have a short time slot, but most of us will stay on and we can continue individual discussions during the break.

Thank you.