

Make the People Hear You

Public Perception of CSR and Communication Strategies

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75 projects were submitted to win the 2017 More Than a Market Award, a joint initiative by the German Chamber of Commerce together with Bertelsmann Stiftung and the German Consulate General in Shanghai. An analysis of the 67 projects profiled in the booklet "More than a Market 2017" gives insights on the characteristics of these projects, the communication channels used, and the media coverage earned. What stories do companies tell? Which communication strategies are successful? Which storytelling principles help to gain interest?

A systematic content analysis of the 67 CSR-projects shows:

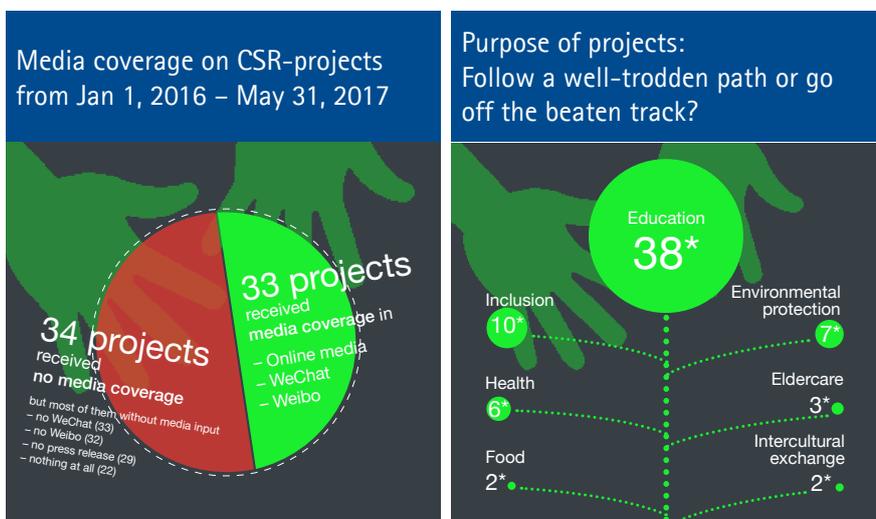
- 1) Target groups:** More than half of all projects were aimed at education, with kindergarten and school kids as the favorite target group. Students, trainees, and apprentices are less often the beneficiaries of CSR-projects. Only three projects targeted elderly people.
- 2) Purpose of the projects:** Besides education, all other areas receive much less attention: Inclusion, environmental protection, health, eldercare, intercultural exchange, and food.
- 3) Duration:** More than half of the projects had been set up in 2014 or before. German companies obviously aim at long-term engagement. The longest-running project, Henkel's "Make an Impact on Tomorrow" (MIT), was established in 1998. One reason for its success is its flexibility. It is a corporate volunteering program that addresses various social needs, including education, science, fitness,

health, arts, culture, and environmental protection. Employees can participate in ongoing projects or propose and lead new ones.

- 4) Involvement:** In two thirds of all projects, the involvement of the company was high. This is indicated by a high participation rate of employees and is typically the case in volunteer campaigns and regular or long-term events. Low involvement is characteristic for donations, one-time events, or projects that are managed by a small task-force only.
- 5) Relation between company and project purpose:** In half of the projects, a strong link between company and project purpose can be seen. A few examples: Adidas established a school football program, BASF teaches children in a kids' lab, ZEISS trains eye doctors, thyssenkrupp started an elevator safety campaign, and METRO initiated a food bank. Projects were related to the company's industry, company products are donated, employees or suppliers targeted. For other projects, the link between project purpose and company purpose was less obvious: MANN+HUMMEL is caring for sick children, Freudenberg has a bookworm program, Continental initiated a forest marathon. The analysis shows that projects for students, trainees/apprentices, employees, and senior citizens were typically related to the company, whereas projects for children were often not related to the company.

Companies who want to establish a new CSR project should ask themselves: Do we want to follow a well-trodden path and engage in an education project for children? Or shall we go off the beaten track? Do we want to present a new project each year, or do we want to tell an ongoing success story? How can we achieve high involvement? And while a strong link between company and project is not a must, it definitely helps the public and the media to recognize and remember.

Which channels are used to tell the story? Firstly, internal communication channels should be considered. These are crucial to communicate the outlines and the success of projects. Each employee should be aware of CSR-activities and should have the chance to participate. Intranet, employee magazines or newsletters, staff meetings, internal social media tools are good ways to keep everybody up to date.



External communication is important to spread the news to the public. An analysis of the external channels used by the participating companies came to astonishing results. About half of the projects did not use WeChat. About half did not use Weibo. And about half did not send out a press release. 22 of the 67 projects did not use any of these popular channels. But is silence really golden? Or wouldn't it be better to do good and talk about it?

Companies that decided to communicate their efforts most often used a dedicated CSR page on their company website, posted on their official Weibo and WeChat accounts, or sent out a press release. Less often found were mentions in other parts of the company website, CSR annual reports, public events, films, mentions in annual reports, or media partnerships.

As many companies did not or only scarcely use external communication channels, it is no wonder that some projects didn't receive any media attention. A systematic content analysis of media coverage about the 67 CSR projects for the period from January 2016 to May 2017 shows:

1. 33 projects received media coverage in online media, WeChat, and/or Weibo. 34 did not.
2. Two thirds of the 1,615 articles/posts published were on WeChat, one fourth in online news media, and one tenth on Weibo.
3. Big companies make big noise – their stories are more often found in the news. But there are exceptions. Projects from Kaercher, Vaillant, and Shanghai Harmony all made it to the top 10. This shows that successful media activities and good media relations can also be achieved by smaller companies and projects.

But how to attract media attention and engage people for a CSR project? Storytelling can give us some answers here.

What makes stories so powerful?

Stories have an enormous impact. Impact is what is needed to engage people in social projects. What makes stories so powerful? First, entertainment is a deeply rooted need of all humans. From the cave paintings in the Stone Age to the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm to Hollywood Block Busters, people want to be entertained. Second, stories create pictures in our heads and thus are easier to remember than pure facts. Third, stories create an emotional relationship. According to various findings from the field of neuropsychology, our brain is far more engaged by stories than by facts. Data only activate the language parts of our brains to decode the meaning. Stories activate the same parts of the brain that are active when we experience things. It is not the facts and figures that make people invest time and money into social projects, it is the feeling to do the right thing, because it feels right.

Five elements of a good story

Whether in novels or in movies: five elements of storytelling can be found in most good stories.

1) Reason

A good story starts with a reason why it should be told. The "why" moves people more than the "how". Why is it worth telling the story of a Hobbit trying hard to destroy a ring? Because the story told in the "Lord of the Rings" teaches us that even the supposedly smallest and weakest being can change the course of things. In this case, save the world, or at least Middle Earth. CSR projects cannot save the world. But they show us that we can make the world a better place. This is what Uwe Brutzer from Bach's Bakery tells us, when training and employing deaf

people, bringing them from isolation back to society. We can find this theme also in the E.G.O. Summer Camp, organized by the company so that parents (migrant workers) and their children can live together for six weeks, and not just for a few days over Spring Festival. The reason of CSR stories is to tell that we can make a difference.

2) Hero

A good story needs a hero. However, it is not a super hero with super powers. It is not Gandalf the mighty wizard in The Lord of the Rings. It is Frodo Baggins, an ordinary Hobbit. The charm of the story is that a normal human being becomes a hero. Heroes of CSR stories are the migrant children in the Kids Football Project, who experience not only fun in practicing, but solidarity and team spirit in a group. Heroes are the underprivileged children from rural areas, who with the help of the Rose Plastic online English-teaching program get access to knowledge and education which could spark their future. Companies telling CSR stories should understand: not the company is the hero, it is the people they help. The company should be the helper, not the hero.

3) Conflict

In a good story, there is a conflict that needs to be solved. In classical storytelling, the hero must face a challenge, goes on a journey, crosses obstacles and returns as a new person. Like Frodo, who leaves the Shire, fights his way to Mordor, destroys the ring and returns as a changed being. Parallels to the classic heroic journey in CSR projects are not easy to draw. Nonetheless: in all CSR projects, there are conflicts for the heroes that are solved. The handicapped workers at the Taicang Sino-German Handicapped Workshop, for example. Their conflict is that they struggle to be a part of the community. They start with a disadvantage in the job market, train hard, and emerge as skilled workers.

4) Emotions

Whether joy, anger, grief, surprise, disgust or fear. Emotions are a strong driving force for many of our actions. Compassion is crucial to a story. Compassion for children with cancer or blood diseases certainly was a decisive reason for the employees of MANN+HUMMEL to act as volunteers at the Shanghai Children's Medical Center. Emotions are not triggered by factual descriptions, but by emotions. Stories arouse emotions when they are visual, detailed and easy to grasp.

5) Viral

A good story is viral. It is shared. We retell a story when it has a reason to be told, when there is a hero we can identify with, when the story is about a conflict that needs to be solved, and finally when it touches us emotionally.

These are the ingredients of good storytelling. Applied to telling the stories of CSR projects, they will certainly help to engage people. Engagement is what CSR projects need.

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