



# The role of message specificity in corporate social responsibility communication<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Companies vary in how they communicate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) endeavors, either reporting the specific causes supported (e.g., “We support the American Lung Association, Kidney Foundation, and Multiple Sclerosis Society”) or mentioning the issue in general (e.g., “We support advancing health”). This study investigates which message strategy (general or specific) is more effective and shows that when companies donate to a single issue (e.g., health), a specific rather than a general message strategy produces more positive evaluations. This is because consumers trust companies more when they communicate their cause support with more specificity. However, when a company donates to a diverse set of issues (e.g., health, environment, and education), a boundary condition to the effect occurs. This research has important implications for managers' decisions on how best to advertise their CSR efforts.

## 1. Introduction

Companies actively engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and often donate their resources—time, money, or products and services—to causes. In 2015, corporate donations to causes totaled \$17.8 billion (Double the Donation, 2016). Research shows that CSR, including donations to causes, can improve relationships between the company and various stakeholder groups such as consumers, employees, and investors (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Pelozo, 2006; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). To benefit from these donations, companies need to disseminate information about the donations to their stakeholders, who are often unaware of their efforts (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). In general, companies can communicate information about their CSR activities through websites, social media, press releases, and promotional material, among other outlets. Given that stakeholders are often skeptical of CSR efforts, due to the positive impact of CSR on the company's bottom line, companies must provide effective messages perceived as sincere and truthful to translate the CSR activities into firm benefits.

To communicate CSR, companies can choose to adopt a general or a specific message strategy. With a general message strategy, companies do not advertise the specific cause or causes supported but only convey

high-level information about their efforts, focusing on the overall issues they support (“We support the environment”).<sup>2</sup> For example, 34 Degrees advertises that “We support causes that fight hunger,” and Diet Coke advertises its support for “heart health programs.” By contrast, with a specific message strategy companies mention the individual cause or causes supported (e.g., “We support the Rainforest Alliance and Nature Conservancy”). For example, TJ Maxx advertises its support for Save the Children, and Hovis bread boasts support for the Royal British Legion's annual Poppy Appeal. Companies have also used both types of campaigns over time. CVS has used a general message promoting how it is helping advance health and also a more specific message detailing its partnership with the American Lung Association. Wendy's has used a general message promoting helping children in the community and has also run a specific message campaign featuring the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

Because consumers do not spend a great deal of time or effort processing CSR information, conveying simple, general messages may be effective to garner attention. Indeed, many companies use general messages as a means to appeal to a diverse set of stakeholders (Scandellius & Cohen, 2016) and for marketing sensitive topics (Dickinson-Delaporte, Beverland, & Lindgreen, 2010). However, research in advertising suggests that specific messages are also favorable.

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<sup>2</sup> We define a cause as the specific charity or non-profit organization supported, such as the American Heart Association, and an issue as the overall objective that an individual cause aims to achieve, such as improvements to health, education, or the environment.

For example, potential candidates found specific job placements ads more informative (Feldman, Bearden, & Hardesty, 2006), and consumers responded more favorably to specific nutrition information (Burton, Andrews, & Netemeyer, 2000). Therefore, both general and specific information can reach favorable outcomes. To our knowledge, however, our study is the first to investigate the best communication strategy (general vs. specific messages) when companies want to convey their support for charitable causes. We predict and provide evidence that consumers prefer specific CSR messages because they generate more trust than campaigns with general CSR messages.

With so many companies advertising both general and specific messages, are there instances when a company can be just as successful with a general message? To answer this question, we consider the number of issues supported in a CSR campaign. Companies indicate that they use a variety of methods, such as customer input, leadership discretion, employee interest, and historical partnerships (CECP, 2013), to determine which issues to support and therefore often support different issues at the same time. For example, Procter & Gamble specifies that it supports only causes tied to “Comforts of Home” and “Health and Hygiene,” while Wells Fargo supports many issues, including the environment, housing, community development, and others. Within each issue, firms may donate to any number of causes. We propose that the effectiveness of message specificity is dependent on the structure of the cause portfolio (i.e., the total number of issues a company supports). Specifically, when a company has a diverse cause portfolio and thus supports several different issues (e.g., health, education, and the environment), the current study tests and finds that consumers are less sensitive to the specificity of the CSR message strategy than when the company has a focused cause portfolio and supports one issue (e.g., health).

Our research makes several contributions. We add to the CSR communication literature (Andreu, Casado-Díaz, & Mattila, 2015; Chang, 2011; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Green & Peloza, 2014) by showing how the level of specificity of the CSR information influences consumers' evaluations of the company. Specifically, we extend theory on message specificity that has focused on CSR-related messages (Connors, Anderson-MacDonald, & Thomson, 2017; Yang, Lu, Zhu, & Su, 2015) and show that consumers perceive the company as more trustworthy when the CSR message is specific (i.e., the supported cause is stated) rather than general (i.e., the supported cause is not stated). We demonstrate that with a focused (but not a diverse) portfolio, consumers are more receptive to a specific than a general message.

Companies engage in a multitude of activities, often supporting a range of causes and issues. This research investigates how companies can communicate these activities in a way that enhances perceptions of trust in the company. Trust is at the core of managing relationships with stakeholders (e.g., Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and research in marketing highlights the importance of this construct in driving positive outcomes for companies, such as word of mouth, loyalty, and performance (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Particularly in CSR, trust in the company plays a central role in whether the company can improve stakeholder relationships through charitable efforts (e.g., Connors et al., 2017). Thus, this research adds to literature on trust and relationship marketing by underscoring the conditions under which consumers are more or less likely to infer that companies are trustworthy in the context of CSR (e.g., Marín, Cuestas, & Román, 2016).

Last, we extend theory on charitable giving by focusing on the cause portfolio that firms can use to garner positive responses from consumers (Robinson, Irmak, & Jayachandran, 2012; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). While many companies donate to more than one cause, to date research has mainly examined corporate partnerships with a single cause (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004) and has not considered different configurations of a cause portfolio. Here, we show the importance of considering a company's cause portfolio structure and explain how to communicate that portfolio effectively. As companies donate to a multitude of issues, managers must think strategically about

the effect of these efforts on their promotional materials, websites, and press releases.

Our findings suggest that companies should be mindful of their CSR messaging strategy. While many managers may prefer using a general strategy, which allows for more flexibility to determine and possibly change specific causes to donate to, consumers may prefer that companies commit explicitly to particular causes with a specific message strategy when focusing their activities on a single issue. Given that practitioners and researchers have called for companies to establish a clear focus for their CSR activities and to improve consumer perceptions (Bruch & Walter, 2005; Drumwright, 1996), our findings hold particular importance as they highlight that consumers are more sensitive to the message strategy for more focused cause portfolios.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. CSR as a relationship-building activity

When companies engage in CSR, their behavior is usually associated with positive outcomes, such as higher evaluations of the company and increased moral capital (Godfrey, Merrill, & Hansen, 2009; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Vanhamme & Grobbsen, 2009). Such outcomes increase their ability to be sustainable in the long run (Bansal & Roth, 2000). A McKinsey and Company (2006) survey finds that many executives engage in CSR because they believe that doing so will cause stakeholders to hold a positive image of the company, and indeed it does. CSR builds strong relationships between the company and consumers but also between the company and employees or shareholders (De Roeck & Delobbe, 2012; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006). Thus, CSR can be conceived as a relationship marketing activity because relationship marketing encompasses “all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22).

To build relationships with key stakeholders, companies can communicate CSR activities in many ways, including promotions on their website, press releases, and/or specific CSR activities (e.g., customer relationship management, sponsorships). Yet communicating CSR is a delicate matter (Du et al., 2010). Consumers like when companies engage in CSR (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) but often dislike when they brag about their good deeds (Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). Therefore, creating awareness and managing consumer reactions are imperative for a successful CSR campaign, and managers must understand what to communicate in particular about their CSR endeavors. One such factor is the message content. The content of the message has a strong influence on the credibility of the CSR message (Du et al., 2010) and is a crucial component for a successful message (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Thus, managers need to be mindful of the best message to communicate to consumers: a general or specific one. At first glance, a general CSR message strategy may seem to be the best choice for managers. Unlike a specific strategy, which requires a company to make an explicit commitment to the particular causes it donates to, a general strategy gives the company *flexible commitment*, in which it can support an overall issue (i.e., health) but make changes as necessary to the cause portfolio without drawing unnecessary attention to the change.

While managers may prefer a general message, consumers tend to respond more favorably to specific messages (Burton et al., 2000; Connors et al., 2017; Ganz & Grimes, 2018; Maronick & Andrews, 1999). Specific claims give more detailed information and are perceived as more verifiable (Darley & Smith, 1993). This type of message strategy is also easier to process (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998), is more attractive, and keeps consumers' attention longer than a general strategy (MacKenzie, 1986). By contrast, general claims tend to be perceived as more ambiguous and subjective, which can negatively influence the believability of the message.

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