

# **A Model for Integrating Management and Communications Theory in Sustainability/Corporate Responsibility Research**

Lisa Koep and Aidan O'Driscoll  
Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

## **The Research Question**

This research examines how firms should communicate their sustainability/corporate responsibility (sustainability/CR) claims in the most effective way. The research question is addressed by (i) comprehending in depth the interconnections and relationships between organising/managing sustainability efforts in the firm *and* the communications of these efforts to various stakeholders, and by (ii) understanding how different stages or levels of sustainability/CR adoption on the part of the firm best shape the type and intensity of communications.

## **Why Is It Important?**

This research addresses a dilemma that challenges practitioner and scholar alike. Put simply, how, to what extent, and to whom should firms and organisations promote their sustainability and corporate responsibility strategies and actions. Should there be a strident and broad promotion of aspirations or a more low key and focused approach to such claim making. Currently, scholarly insight and practitioner knowledge offer limited insight to this dilemma (Mejri & Wolf, 2012; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008; Signitzer & Prexl, 2008). Such decisions clearly impact on the fortunes of the firm or organisation. But they also impact on the 'reputation' of sustainability/CR itself. A signal failure to achieve certain outputs may prejudice stakeholders outside the firm against the broad project of sustainability/CR (Assadourian, 2010). In contradistinction, significant success on the part of the firm may provide a useful societal and educational endorsement.

The research takes place in the food and retailing sector where issues of sustainability/CR must address a multitude of issues, ranging from transport, packaging waste, farming practice, food traceability, ethical sourcing, and electricity consumption to worker's rights.

## **How Will It Be Carried Out?**

In order to address the research question, this research seeks to connect two important streams of literature on sustainability/CR: firstly, the management of sustainability/CR, in the sense of its evolution, organisation and delivery in the firm, and secondly, communications about these activities to various 'stakeholders' inside and outside the firm. While there is a substantial and growing body of knowledge within these two streams, there have been limited attempts to explore the interconnections and relationships between the two. A number of scholars have called for a more holistic and integrated approach in this regard (Dhanesh, 2012; McElhaney, 2008; Signitzer & Prexl, 2008).

The paper sets out an early stage, parsimonious model (Leonard-Barton, 1992) to analyse these interconnections drawing on current relevant literature. It will seek to comprehend the interrelationships between the firm's organisational readiness and particular configuration to sustainability/CR principles (the 'management theory' dimension) *and* the most effective way to communicate these intentions and actions to various stakeholders (the 'communications theory' dimension). For example, it may be hypothesised that where a firm has medium level of sustainability/CR adoption, allied to a strong motivation to become more sustainable, then a high internal and medium external intensity of communications to selected stakeholders may be expected to be effective.

Further, a number of stages, or levels of adoption, models have been developed in the sustainability/CR literature (Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010; Carroll, 1991; McElhaney, 2008; Shrivastava, 1995; van Marrewijk & Werre, 2003). There is a manifest need to further develop these models (McDonagh, 1998) and, in particular, discover how communications should be effectively executed at different stages in the adoption cycle.

The research methodology will embrace both qualitative (case study and interviews) and quantitative methodologies (survey, structural equation modelling). The paper will set out the proposed theoretical model and report on early stage qualitative research insights.

### **Authors**

Lisa Koep is a consultant and doctoral candidate in the school of marketing at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Aungier Street campus, Dublin 2, Ireland. [asilkoep@yahoo.com](mailto:asilkoep@yahoo.com)

Aidan O'Driscoll is a professor in the school of marketing at the Dublin Institute of Technology. [aidan.odriscoll@dit.ie](mailto:aidan.odriscoll@dit.ie)