



This is a repository copy of *Communicating sustainability practices and values: a case study approach of a micro-organisation in the UK.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/118902/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Alevizou, P.J., Henninger, C.E. and Spinks, C. (2019) Communicating sustainability practices and values: a case study approach of a micro-organisation in the UK. *International Journal of Business and Globalisation*, 22 (1). ISSN 1753-3627

<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJBG.2019.097388>

© 2019 Inderscience. This is an author produced version of a paper subsequently published in *International Journal of Business and Globalisation*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Authors:

Dr Panayiota J. Alevizou, (P.J.Alevizou@sheffield.ac.uk), University of Sheffield, Management School, Conduit Road, Sheffield, S10 1FL

Dr Panayiota J. Alevizou is a Lecturer in Marketing at the Sheffield University Management School, where she teaches Marketing Consultancy Challenge and Retail and Services Marketing. Her research focuses on sustainability labelling, eco-labelling and sustainability marketing in the context of FMCGs and apparel. Panayiota joined the School as a lecturer after several years of working as a marketing consultant. She has presented her work in various national and international conferences and has published in journals such as Journal of Marketing Management, European Journal of Marketing and Journal of Fashion Marketing Management.

Dr Claudia E Henninger, (Claudia.Henninger@manchester.ac.uk), University of Manchester, School of Materials, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

Claudia E Henninger is a Lecturer in Fashion Marketing Management at the University of Manchester. Her principle research focus is on aspects of sustainability in the fashion industry and corporate marketing. She is also the Deputy Chair of the Academy of Marketing Sustainability SIG.

Ms Chloe Spinks, (Chloe.Spinks@yahoo.co.uk), University of Sheffield, Management School, Conduit Road, Sheffield, S10 1FL

Chloe graduated from Sheffield University Management School with a Distinction in Marketing Management Practice, and was recipient of a CIM award for best performance on the taught programme. She now works in London and has a graduate position in stakeholder engagement and communication.

**Communicating Sustainability Practices and Values:
A case study approach of a micro-organisation in the UK**

Abstract

This article investigates sustainability communication through the lens of integrated marketing communication (IMC) by focusing on one case organisation that sees aspects of sustainability at the heart of its operations. This qualitative inquiry utilises a case study approach and a variety of methodological tools, including in-depth semi-structure interviews and semiotic analysis of online and offline media. Findings highlight although the case organisation seeks to use an IMC approach across their multiple communication channels the same message cannot always be conveyed as, especially social media channels, have restricted formatting settings. As a result the encoded message is confusing and leads to a loss of meaning. Although this research is based on a single case study, it allows for an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon and practical recommendations on how to overcome challenges with online platforms. This research is of value as it investigates IMC in and under researched context micro-organisations, as well as combines it with challenges of effectively broadcasting sustainability messages to an end-consumer.

Key words

Integrated marketing communications, IMC, micro-organisations, sustainability communication, sustainability

Introduction

This research investigates a 21st century challenge: communicating sustainability through an integrated marketing communications (IMC) approach to an international audience within the context of a UK micro-organisation, which are under researched (e.g. Kitchen & Burgmann 2015; Henninger et al. 2017). This article contributes to knowledge by clearly visualising the encoding-decoding process of sustainability messages through various communication channels and developing practical applications for the case organisation in this research.

The past decades have seen an increase of sustainability concerns with consumers becoming more aware of the environmental and social impacts different industries have on the natural environment. This has led to consumers demanding for measures to be taken by organisations to change their current practices and reduce their overall impact on the natural environment (Martin & Schouten 2011; Jones et al. 2013; Baker 2015).

Although sustainability communication had a negative connotation in the 1990s as it was associated with greenwashing, this has since changed. Greenwashing implies that companies were purposefully communicating misleading messages about their sustainability efforts to attracting more consumers, which resulted in mistrust and the loss of credibility (Ottman 2011). As a result organisations that want to portray a more sustainable image and have aspects of social, economic, and environmental sustainability at the core of their business need to carefully communicate their claims and back up their credentials, ideally, with 3rd party certifications or tangible evidence, such as transparency in the supply chain. Research (Signitzer & Prexl 2007; Wooster 2013) indicates that sustainability communication has seen a shift in that those companies that portray aspects of sustainability within their communication strategy are perceived in a positive manner to actively changing their current habits as well as being trustworthy. Kumar and Christodouloupoulou (2014) go even further by suggesting that by integrating sustainability values and practices into an organisation's brand and its communication strategies, organisations can gain a competitive advantage.

Past research concerning sustainability communication and IMC has predominantly focused on large organisations rather than micro-organisations (Sandbacka et al. 2013; Agostini et al. 2015), with the exception of a recent study (Henninger et al. 2017). Yet,

99.3% of businesses in the UK are classified as small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which contribute 47% of all private sector turnover. The number of micro-organisations in 2015 was estimated to make up a quarter of these small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which further highlights that they are significant in economic terms (DBIS 2015). Micro-organisations are defined as those companies that employ fewer than 10 employees, are financially dependent on the owner-manager and thus have a limited financial budget, and are sensitive to competition (Chironga et al 2012). Furthermore, extant research tends to centre on Business-to-Consumer (B2C) online communications, rather than having a Business-to-Business (B2B) focus, as well as large corporations (e.g. Virtsonis & Harridge-March 2008; Linder 2011; Siamagka et al. 2015). This research addresses these gaps in literature by contextualising the sustainability communication practices through the use of IMC in a particular micro-organisation, operating in a B2B context, by answering the following research questions:

1. How do SMEs communicate (encode) their sustainability values and practices to their clients?
2. How do business clients make sense (decode) the communicated messages from the SME?

Literature review

Sustainability Communication

Sustainability communication is the process of transmitting messages concerning sustainability to the respective audience that then decodes the message received (Godeman & Michelsen 2011). Sustainability is a fuzzy concept that is intuitively understood and thus, may vary in the meaning it portrays depending on the cultural context and the way individuals have been brought up. Elkington (2004) indicates that sustainability embraces three key aspects: environmental, social, and economic concerns that need to – ideally – overlap. Within this context sustainability is loosely used and predominantly focuses on environmental issues and communicating ‘green’ credentials, which include, but are not limited to the use of renewable energies and recycled materials, a transparent supply chain, and locally sourced raw materials.

With organisations no longer simply competing on a local or national level, but rather on an international stage sustainability communications becomes inherently complex in nature (Ackerstein & Lemon 1999; Reilly & Hynan 2014). To explain, brands that seek to communicate their ‘green’ credentials need to strategically utilise a variety of communication channels and carefully portray a consistent message that can be decoded by the target audience who ideally translate these messages in the manner they were intended. The owner-manager of a micro-organisation is the key driving force behind developing a communication strategy (Horan et al. 2011; Sandbacka et al. 2013; Henninger et al. 2017), which can either make or break an organisation. To explain, due to a lack of marketing experience and/or expertise within micro-organisations, developing a coherent and consistent communication strategy that channels its (organisation’s) sustainability credentials can be challenging and lead to message fragmentation and consumer scepticism (Rettie et al. 2012; Font & Villarino 2015; Henninger et al 2017).

Although sustainability communication is not a new phenomenon per se, the literature surrounding sustainability communication and the role of the owner-manager of a micro-organisation within a B2B context is currently under researched. Authors (e.g. Birth et al. 2008; Moreno & Capriotti 2009; Siano et al. 2015; Font & Villarino 2015) highlight that in a B2C market place communicating sustainability values can have a positive impact on the organisation as a whole as it can lead to an enhanced brand image and reputation, increased trustworthiness, as well as a competitive edge and increased profit margins. A question that arises is whether this remains true within a B2B context and how the owner-manager can effectively communicate sustainability values to their business clients, which is addressed in this research.

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)

Although IMC has no clear-cut definition, it is agreed that the underpinning aim is to align the messages broadcasted and symbolisms used within various communication channels in order to send a coherent image to the receiver (target audience) (Christensen et al 2008; Kitchen et al 2008; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). Early literature on IMC centres on more practitioner oriented writing that focuses on enhancing intra-organisational relationships, reduces overall costs of implementing communication

strategies by streamlining communication channels, and enhancing efficiency of encoding messages (e.g. Eagle et al 2007; Niemann-Struweg 2014). Thus, IMC can be described as a strategic approach to integrating a multitude of channels and broadcasting one coherent image, which is even more important with the emergence of social media and online communication channels as this has changed the traditional communication landscape (Kietzmann et al 2011). Creating a dialogue between the consumer and the organisation is becoming increasingly important, whereby consumers should be the starting point for any communication strategy developed (Eagle et al 2007; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). Yet Henninger et al (2017) indicate that in micro-organisations there is a communication gap, which sees a disconnect between the micro-organisation transmitting a message and stakeholders engaging in dialogic communication. In addition, the authors emphasise that IMC is an accidental occurrence in micro-organisations, which is of utmost importance, as it is an effective and cost efficient way to promote the company's values to their audience.

Social media are seen as key communication channels that not only broadcast messages, but also enhance organisation-consumer interactions and thus, facilitate dialogic communication and empowerment of the customer (Mangold & Faulds 2009; Kimmel & Kitchen 2014; Niemann-Struweg 2014). Especially within the B2B customer, where face-to-face communication and direct selling are the main methods of interacting with consumers, social media platforms can enhance relationship building and gaining a wider audience by communicating in real time (Lynch & de Chernatony 2007; Fischer et al. 2008; Smith 2012; Habibi et al. 2015). The fact that social media platforms are free to use for micro-organisations further enhances their attractiveness. Although social media and IMC have received increased attention through a special issue published in the European Journal of Marketing in 2017, it remains under researched within the context of micro-organisations and IMC (Schultz & Peltier 2013; Henninger et al 2017).

Methods

This research investigates a 21st century challenge: communicating sustainability through an integrate marketing communications approach to an international audience. Our exploratory inquiry follows an in-depth single case study approach, which allowed investigating sustainability communication within its natural boundaries (Yin 2004; Grimstad & Burgess 2014). Dana and Dana (2005) support the use of a case study

approach, highlighting that within entrepreneurial businesses, which include micro-organisations, it is important to also take their environment into account to be able to gain a holistic approach and understanding of any underlying issues and/or drivers affecting the organisations. Immersing into the micro-organisation and its environment further implies gaining richer data sets that allow for typologies and redefined concepts to emerge (Dana & Dumez 2015).

The case organisation was selected purposive to fulfil the following criteria: 1) classified as a micro-organisation (fewer than 10 employees), 2) promotes sustainable ('green') credentials within its corporate communication, 3) is based in the North of England for ease of access, and 4) attracts national and international Business-to-Business (B2B) customers. A database with potential organisations was compiled in accordance with the criteria and owner-managers (O/Ms) contacted. Those who responded positively were invited to partake in this research project and provided with an extensive brief. Due to time constraints and aspects of availability only one organisation was selected, which, for anonymity reasons, is referred to as City Skylight. City Skylight is situated in a prime destination, as the city location is the host of a variety of internationally renowned music and sports events, known for being one of the 'greenest cities' in the UK, as well as the home of key industrial players and thus, attracting national and international organisations. City Skylight is a service-based micro-sized enterprise that predominantly operates in the B2B market, by offering facilities that can be hired for conferences and other events. City Skylight prides itself as a 'sustainable' company that has created a competitive edge through creating a sustainable/green business model. The organisation generates its own power through two on-site wind turbines, offering only locally sourced produce, and provides recycled conference stationary.

Data collected for this research is qualitative in nature and derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews with the owner-manager, and existing and potential customers, analysis of online and offline communication channels (e.g. social media, flyers, and leaflets), company documents, as well as photographs of the physical environment of the organisation (Table 1). Research was conducted over a 3 months period and led to the collection of rich data sets.

Table 1: Data collection summary

Semi-structured interviews		
	No. of Interviews	Duration of Interviews
Owner-manager (O/M)	3	58:00-120:00min
Existing client (E/C)	5	45:00-70:00min
Potential client (P/C)	6	45:00-70:00min
Semiotics		
	Type	Amount and/or data collected
Social media	Twitter	✓
	Facebook	
	LinkedIn	
	Blog (Wordpress)	
Website	Company	✓
Offline Media	Leaflets	2
	Flyers	1
	Postcards	3
Photographs	Company	✓
	Premises	

Open-ended interview questions were based on themes surrounding sustainability communication, IMC, visualisation (semiotic meaning) of sustainability, and decoding/encoding of information (Table 2).

Table 2: Example of interview questions divided by category and audience

Themes	Owner-manager	Current/potential client
Sustainability values (decoding/encoding of messages)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does being sustainable entail? • How is sustainability communicated? • Why have you chosen to be 'sustainable'? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you looking for in a venue? • What role does being 'sustainable' play in venue selection?
Communication channels (IMC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is your target audience? • How is targeted by the individual channels? • How and what are you communicating through the individual channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What communication channels do you use? • What makes 'good' communication for you?
Visualisation of sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you visually portray sustainability? • Why utilise 3rd party certification? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you identify 'sustainable' venues? • What does the company logo mean to you?

Information search (decoding/encoding of messages)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you feel is essential information that needs to be communicated to consumers? • What are key terms? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What information do you look for? • How is the ideal message communicated?
---	--	---

The rich data sets were coded following Easterby-Smith et al's (2008) seven-step framework of familiarisation, reflection, conceptualisation, cataloguing, re-coding, linking, and re-evaluation. This loose coding guide allows for patterns and themes to emerge organically. With multiple researchers coding and re-coding the data sets the seven-step framework allows drawing comparisons as multiple stages of the coding process. In order to guarantee rigour, NVivo was utilised. Any discrepancies in the analysis stage were carefully reviewed and discussed. Results were presented to the research participants for validation.

Although the sample size of this research is limited, it provides an insight into challenges of communicating sustainability to a national and international audience. Since completion of the research project the City Skylight has implemented changes to its IMC strategy, resulting in more business, which demonstrates that this research had impact.

Findings and discussion

Encoding sustainability values

Prior to investigating how sustainability is communicated within City Skylight, it was vital to understand the owner-manager's decision to implementing green credential in their business practices and how these are conveyed to the target audience. The owner-manager insists "*I'm very much interested in sustainability especially from a home food production angle, so it was a very logical fit*" (Interview 1). This supports extant literature that suggests the owner-manager transmits parts of their own personality to the organisation (e.g. Henninger et al. 2017), as they are the sole and key decision makers thereby developing a core identity that is underpinned by sustainability values (Spence & Essoussi 2008). The owner-manager states that the idea of having wind turbines generating their own electricity developed out of survival need, as the cost per Kwh from the previous supplier was too expensive for keeping the business afloat.

Although extant research (Miller 2010) suggests that especially owner-managers of small-sized enterprises lack motivation to implement sustainability practices, as these are seen to be too costly, City Skylight thought this innovation a necessity and long-term investment to keeping the business alive and cutting their overhead costs.

The owner-manager highlights that it is vital to communicate their sustainability practices to their target audience, as being a ‘green’ conference venue is City Skylight’s key unique selling proposition (USP). Yet, communicating sustainability is a complex and challenging task, especially since City Skylight seeks to attract both national and international customers (Ackerstein & Lemon 1999; Reilly & Hynan 2014). The owner-manager highlights that they increasingly use symbolism as a way of communicating their green credentials. The wind turbines powering the conference venue are only one of a variety of visualisations used to stress the fact that City Skylight actively promotes and ‘lives’ its green credentials. A further example is owner-manager’s electric car, which not only shows the venues logo and thus, may be seen as an advertising vehicle, but also is more environmentally friendly than its counterparts, as it can be charged through the wind turbines. Both examples are made clearly visible to any visitor coming to the conference venue. The owner-manager explains that the reason for making ‘sustainability’ visible is to avoid aspects of greenwashing (Rettie et al. 2012). Although consumer attitude has changed and ‘green’ products have received a more positive connotation, the owner-manager believes that greenwashing can still be an issue especially for service organisations. Our semiotic analysis further highlights that the owner-manager is thorough with their communication channels in that aspects of sustainability and green credentials are holistically broadcasted and form a consistent message. To explain, City Skylight’s Twitter account features regular retweets on sustainability matters, as well as tweets about their involvement in the local community initiatives. The company now also holds a Green Tourism award, which showcases a 3rd party recognition of sustainability efforts that further enhances their credibility and trustworthiness, whilst at the same time overcomes any aspect of consumer scepticism. The owner-manager highlights that *“having the gold standard on Green Tourism, I’m very proud of that, and we hit it by miles. We don’t scrape into it, we smash it”* (Interview 2). This further shows the commitment and passion of the owner-manager to sustainability values and their continuous thrive to enhancing their USP.

Further, our semiotic analysis highlights that sustainability is communicated in four dominant ways throughout the online and offline communication channels. Table 3 provides a summary of the key findings of how City Skylight’s green credentials are broadcasted.

Table 3: Communicating sustainability values

Communicating sustainability values	
Photographs (online/offline communication)	Awards and recognitions, wind turbines and energy generation, site and spaces (indoors and outdoors), gardens and allotments, logos, handmade products.
Logo+ design	Green vocabulary on main logo, word ‘Green’ part of the logo, white curved arrows part of the logo
Colour scheme	Green colour, green logo, green literature, green website tabs, green website background and pages, green fonts
Language	Sustainability, Green, Green technologies, Innovation, Growth, Carbon reduction, Home-made, Creativity, Recycling, Conference, Environment, Footprint, Emissions, Solar, Hydro, Renewables, Communities, Localised, Future

All communication channels used by City Skylight heavily feature a plethora of photographs, which enhances their visibility on social media accounts. The images broadcasted provide the current and potential customers with an idea of conference venue space, as well as visualise aspects of sustainability. To reiterate this point further, images feature the two wind turbines that generate the electricity for the venue, whilst others hone in on the wildflower garden and City Skylight’s own allotment, which provides the source for some of the locally sourced food offered in the venue. The photographs are broadcasted throughout all communication channels, thereby fostering an integrated marketing approach (e.g. Kitchen & Burgmann 2015).

From our semiotic analysis it became apparent that City Skylight uses ‘green’ as its overarching colour scheme to further portray its sustainability values and practices. The green colour scheme was chosen purposefully by the owner-manager (Interview 2/3), as it encodes a variety of meanings and messages that enhance City Skylight’s core sustainable practices. The colour green is nationally and internationally associated with aspects of nature, healthy living, and environmental consciousness, which not only fosters the sustainability communication process, but also enhances consistency across

the various communication channels geared towards a varied target audience (Aslam 2006; Harris 2007; Lucks et al. 2010). Thus, the use of the green colour scheme portrays both: City Skylight's countryside location and its sustainability business values.

City Skylight's logo consists of two green geometrical shapes, each linked through two white arrows that have a resemblance with the official recycling logo used in the UK. The owner-manager explains that the logo was carefully designed to have subtle visual cues that communicate the company's sustainability values to current and potential customers. City Skylight's actual name is a combination of two terms, one being 'green'. Interestingly, the term 'green' is written in white lettering, whilst the second part of the word has a green colour scheme.

Focusing on an IMC approach, City Skylight provides current and potential customers with easy access to all its social media accounts, whilst offline communication can be picked up from within the conference venue. City Skylight's logo is featured clearly on the company's own website, its Twitter and Facebook account, as well as the offline material, which provides brand consistency and continuity across the various communication media used. Offline communication mirrors the company's colour scheme in that green borders frame the promotional material and parts of the printed text is also in green. Interestingly the 'green colour scheme' cannot be found within all online communication - only the Facebook and Twitter account feature the logo and green colour scheme within the online remit. A possible explanation is that the LinkedIn page as well as the company's blog, which is hosted through Wordpress, imposed restrictions on formatting. The LinkedIn page is the owner-manager's personal profile, which may not necessarily need the company's logo, as LinkedIn is predominantly used to establish relationships and connect with other professionals. The inconsistent branding approach on Wordpress however can lead to confusion, as although the blog features a 'natural' design template the logo has been changed (both in colour and design) and the blog page does not have a strong resemblance with the sustainability communication engrained in all other communication channels. Our semiotic analysis further highlighted that some variations to the logo exist in that the Facebook logo is of a slightly brighter shade of green and the geometric forms are not fully visible, due to resizing the image to fit the dimensions of the Facebook profile picture. It can be argued

that these variations in the logo design are disruptive in terms of portraying a coherent brand image.

Aside from the visual cues provided that symbolise and represent City Skylight’s sustainability practices, the owner-manager has carefully selected ‘green’ communication terms that further enhance their sustainability practices (Table 4).

Table 4: Examples of the company’s use of sustainability-related vocabulary

Communication medium	Key words
Website (homepage)	Green, conference, growth, sustainability, inspiring, views, technologies, carbon reduction, home made, venue, innovative, creative.
Facebook	Environment, low carbon, energy, community, sustainable, green, renewable, innovation, footprint.
Twitter	Climate change, carbon, footprint, emissions, solar, sustainability, hydro, renewables, energy.
Blog (Wordpress)	Sustainable, innovation, re-cycling, energy, creating, growth, low carbon, future, communities.
LinkedIn	Community, green, low carbon, localised, energy, innovate, sustainability, boutique, business
A5 postcard	Inspirational, conference, green, unique, creative, home-produced, technologies, carbon reduction.
A5 leaflet	Vibrant, stimulating, local, spectacular, innovative, green, technologies, unique, sustainable.

Table 4 highlights that vocabulary used across the various platforms are associated with the company’s sustainability values. It becomes apparent that the sustainability theme features in all channels with terms such as ‘green’, ‘low carbon’, or ‘local’ utilised throughout.

However a discrepancy emerges when focusing less on the sustainability angle and more on the aspect of providing a service to customers. To explain, whilst the LinkedIn profile, City Skylight’s website, and its offline material (leaflets, postcards) feature the company’s offerings and clearly convey a promotional message of offering a conference/event venue for hire, the Facebook account, the Twitter page, and the Wordpress blog are seemingly used solely to highlight City Skylight’s sustainability

practices and values. An implication that emerges here is the fact that the company does not effectively communicate what it is they are offering to potential and current customers, which suggests that this may lead to confusing messages and a fragmented communication strategy. Although City Skylight attempts to portray holistically communicated sustainability message through a combination of images, the green colour scheme, the logo, and the vocabulary used, this is not fully executed. Polonsky and Rosenberg (2011) emphasise however that this consistency across the various communication channels is of vital importance as it overcomes the fear of greenwashing and consumer scepticism.

This finding is not surprising, Reilly and Hynan (2014) found that organisations tend to use the internet and social media platforms to transmit sustainability messages to potential and current customers. In a volatile market environment establishing a USP is part of the survival process. With sustainability emerging as a megatrend and increasingly becoming a top priority, conveying and broadcasting a sustainability message to a national and international audience can not only create a competitive advantage, but also increase brand reputation and image. Similar to Henninger et al. (2017) this research found that this micro-organisation is utilising a broad range of communication channels, which are overall well maintained and in a way streamlined. The owner-manager highlights that using this mix of online and offline tools, but especially social media, is a good way to keeping in touch with potential and current customers and promoting the business on an international stage. For City Skylight social media tools have proven to be effective in gaging interest and converting this into actual business opportunities. This finding contradicts a study undertaken by Lacka and Chong (2016), who found that social media tools are considered irrelevant in a B2B context, as they are too time consuming. However, as the research was conducted with B2B professionals of large organisations, it could be suggested that there is a difference between large and micro-sized organisations. Due to social media tools being free to use, it may fit more with a micro-sized organisations financial budget and overall communication strategy in terms of disseminating their brand to the broadest audience possible.

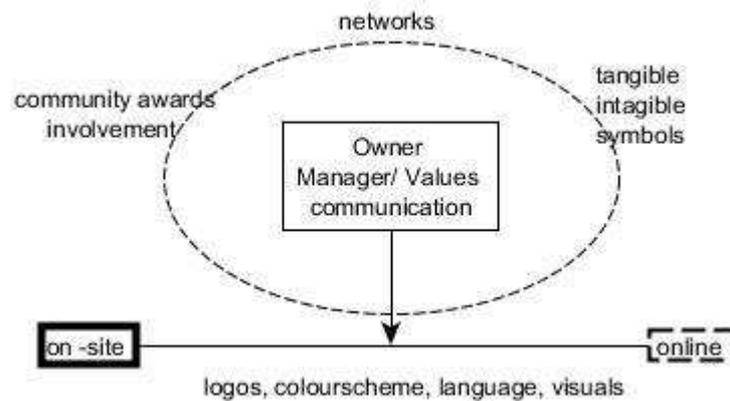
The previous section has focused on the organisational side and the underlying aspects of why and how different aspects of sustainability are communicated. This section centres on the consumer side and investigates in how far the sustainability messages are received and decoded by potential and current clients. All interview participants highlight that they have interacted with at least one medium (online and/or offline). Interestingly, when asked what the key aspects were the company is broadcasting, those who interacted with offline material, the company website, or the LinkedIn page mentioned sustainability values and practices in relation to offering a conference venue. Existing Client 1 highlights that they look on social media and states: *“I have absolutely no idea”*. This suggests that although social media is a valuable tool in gaining business, City Skylight currently does not communicate its core message effectively through these channels.

Analysis highlights that potential and current clients decoding sustainability values in the way anticipated by the owner-manager in that they break them down in the same four categories stated in Table 3: photographs, the logo, the green colour scheme, and the choice of sustainable vocabulary. To reiterate this point further, the green colour scheme and the choice of sustainability vocabulary was mentioned on several occasions, for example Potential Client 1 states: *“I think the colour scheme is indicative of a green company”*, whilst Potential Client 2 picked up on the vocabulary used: *“I see words like ‘sustainability’ and ‘environment’”*. This implies that the message conveyed by City Skylight is not only decoded in the way the owner-manager intended it to be, but also consistent across a variety of platforms, which implies that the overarching aim of communicating sustainability practices and values is well executed. This finding is significant, as it shows that communication channels are well linked and coherent, which reduces the risk of consumer scepticism and enhances trust in the sustainability claims communicated.

Data indicate that those clients that have visited the physical premises of City Skylight are those that can recall their sustainability values and practices. Figure 1 provides a visualisation of the communicated values as they are encoded and decoded by the owner-manager and clients. Third party awards (Green Tourism), being part of the local network and joining in initiatives, as well as using tangible and intangible symbols (e.g. electric car, wind turbines, green colour scheme) are broken down into the four

dimensions of sustainability communication: photographs, the logo, the green colour scheme, and the choice of sustainable vocabulary. Whilst some clients were able to decode the sustainability practices online, after visiting the physical site sustainability practices become part of the ‘customer experience’.

Figure 1 Communicating values – encoding and decoding of messages



A existing client (E/C 3) remembers their first encounter: *“all of the refreshments were homemade or locally sourced, organic etc”*, which was one of the aspects they could immediately recall from their visit. E/C3 insist that this has been a memorable experience that clearly distinguished City Skylight from other conference venues as they not only claim to be sustainable, but ‘live’ their sustainable practices. Thus, it can be suggested that sustainability communication is further enhanced through consumer experiences.

As previously alluded to however, not all communication channels clearly state the purpose of the business and that they only convey the sustainability message, but do not highlight that the main business of City Skylight is to rent rooms for conferences and other events. Those potential clients that came across City Skylight on Facebook, Wordpress, or Twitter were initially confused of what the company does. Potential Client 4 states: *“I think they provide away days in a specific location”*. Other potential clients insist that it was difficult to uncover all the offerings, especially since time differences not only allow to call up the venue. Potential Client 3 explains, *“I did have*

to search quite hard through the website to find out what they're about". Whilst Potential Client 1 "wouldn't be able to tell you what the focus of the company is", as the social media sites do not clearly highlight key offerings. Whilst some of the potential clients were willing to dig deeper for information and find out more about City Skylight as the images of wind turbines and the idyllic setting of the premises intrigued them, others felt that accessing key information should not be as challenging, but rather clearly stated.

Figure 2: Communicating company offerings

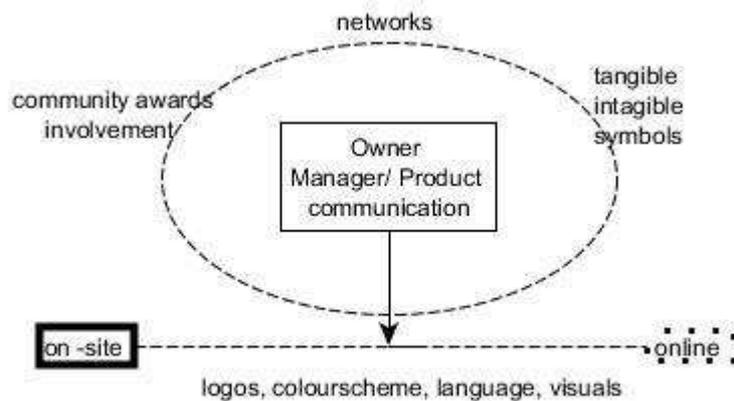


Figure 2 highlights that whilst existing and potential clients may be able to decode the sustainability messages, online communication channels fail to clearly highlight the company's product offerings and services. It could thus be suggested that the sustainability messages are overpowering the key organisational trade of providing a hiring service for conference premises. This can affect City Skylight negatively as potential clients may not select the company premises due to focusing too much on advocating their sustainability practices not paying enough attention to promoting their company offerings.

Implications and conclusion

This research contributes to knowledge by investigating IMC and sustainability communication within City Skylight, a micro-organisation operating in the B2B sector. Although Henninger et al (2017) found that IMC emerged accidentally in their micro-organisations, we had contrary results, in that the owner-manager carefully monitored

all communication channels and purposefully broadcasts the same messages across all online and offline channels. Yet, we found that sustainability communication can overpower the actual meaning of broadcasted messages and take away from key information necessary to convert potential clients into new ones. In accordance with Ottman's (2011) research we found that although sustainability is an important factor within the selection process of a B2B conference venue, it is not the main reason, which implies that it needs to be embedded with the communication process, but not be the sole message communicated. Peattie and Crane (2005) warned of the tendency of companies with a sustainability agenda to focus too much on the environmental and social benefits rather than on the actual offerings, which was observed in this research. A practical recommendation for the conference venue is to increase the business offering messages across their social media platforms. Rather than retweeting often similar messages, it is suggested to include posts about the conference venue, information about events that are happening at the venue (if publicly advertised), and providing information on how to get there and make the most out of the day. It was further recommended that all social media accounts need to be used in the same manner and updated posted on a regular basis in order to increase visibility. Social media management tools, such as Hootsuite, could be utilised for the purpose of managing posts, time saving and efficiency.

As indicated, social media channels had variations in logos, which could lead to confusion and can lead to distrust (e.g. Polonsky & Rosenberger 2001). The owner-manager was advised to rescale the logo used on Facebook and incorporate the logo on the Wordpress blog. Both suggestions have since been implemented by City Skyline and according to the owner-manager led to an increase in enquires.

References

- Ackerstein, D.S., & Lemon, K.A. (1999). Greening the Brand: Environmental Marketing Strategies and the American Consumer. In Charter, M., & Polonsky, M.J. (Eds.). *Greener Marketing: A Global Perspective on Greening Marketing Practice*, Greenleaf Publishing Ltd.: Sheffield, UK
- Agostini, L., Filippini, R., & Nosella, A. (2015). Brand-building efforts and their association with SME sales performance. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 53(S1): 161-173.

- Aslam, M.M. (2006). Are you selling the right colour? A cross-cultural review of colour as a marketing clue. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 12(1): 15-30.
- Baker, J. (2015). The rise of the conscious consumer: why businesses need to open up. *The Guardian* (online), retrieved: <https://www.theguardian.com/women-in-leadership/2015/apr/02/the-rise-of-the-conscious-consumer-why-businesses-need-to-open-up>, accessed: 26/02/2017.
- Birth, G., Illia, L., Lurati, F., & Zamparini, A. (2008). Communicating CSR: The practice in the top 300 companies in Switzerland. *Corporate Communication: An International Journal*, 13(2): 182-196.
- Chironga, M., Dhal, J., Goland, T. Pinshaw, G., & Sonnekus, M. (2012). Micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in emerging markets: how banks can grasp a \$350 billion opportunity. McKinsey & Company (online), retrieved from: http://www.eflglobal.com/sites/default/files/knowledge_center/MSME-Emerging-Market-Banking-report.pdf, accessed: 25/01/15.
- Christensen, L.T., Firat, A.F., & Torp, S. (2008). The organisation of the integrated communications: toward flexible integration. *European Journal of Marketing*, 42(3/4): 423-452.
- Dana, L.P., & Dana, T.E. (2005). Expanding the scope of methodologies used in entrepreneurship research. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, 2(1): 79-88.
- Dana, L.P., & Dumez, H. (2015). Qualitative research revisited: epistemology of a comprehensive approach. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, 26(2): 154-170.
- DBIS (Department for Business Innovation & Skills) (2015). Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2015, DBIS (online), retrieved: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/467443/bpe_2015_statistical_release.pdf, accessed: 26/02/2017.
- Eagle, L., Kitchen, P.J., & Bulmer, S. (2007). Insights into interpreting integrated marketing communications. *European Journal of Marketing*, 41(7/8): 956-970.
- Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., & Jackson, P. 2008. *Management Research*. 3rd edition. SAGE Publications Ltd.: London, UK.
- Elkington, J. (2004) Enter the Triple Bottom Line, Chapter 1, in Henriques, A. and Richardson, J. (eds) *The Triple Bottom Line, Does it all add up?*, Earthscan: London, UK, pp. 1-16
- Fischer, C., Bavorova, M., Dybowski, G. Hartmann, M., Henschion, M., Hockmann, H., Kobuszynska, M., Leat, P., McGee, C., Revoredo-Giha, C., Suvanto, H., & Viitaharju, L. (2008). Business relationships and B2B communication in selected European agri-food chains – First empirical evidence. *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*, 11(2). 73-100.
- Font, X., & Villarino, J. (2015). Sustainability marketing myopia: The lack of persuasiveness in sustainability communication. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 21(4). 326-335.
- Godeman, J., & Michelsen, G. (2011). *Sustainability Communications: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Theoretical Foundations*, Springer: London.
- Grimstad, S., & Burgess, J. (2014). Environmental sustainability and competitive advantage in a wine tourism micro-cluster. *Management Research Review*, 37(6): 553 - 573.

- Habibi, F., Hamilton, C.A., & Valos, M.J. (2015). E-marketing orientation and social media implementation in B2B marketing. *European Business Review*, 27(6). 638-655.
- Harris, S.M. (2007). Does sustainability sell? Market responses to sustainability certification. *Management of Environmental Quality: An International Journal*, 18(1):50-60.
- Henninger, C.E., Alevizou, P.J., & Oates, C.J. (2017). IMC, social media, and UK fashion micro-organizations, *European Journal of Marketing*, 51(3): 668-691.
- Horan, G., O'Dwyer, M., & Tiernan, S. (2011). Exploring management perspectives of branding in service SMEs. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 25(2): 114-121.
- Jones, P., Comfort, D., & Hillier, D. (2013). Crowdsourcing corporate sustainability strategies. *International Journal of Business and Globalization*, 10(3): 345-355
- Kitchen, P.J., Kim, I., & Schultz, D.E. (2008). Integrated marketing communications: Practice leads theory. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 48(4): 531-546.
- Kitchen, P.J., & Burgmann, I. (2015). Integrated marketing communication: making it work at a strategic level. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 36(4): 34-39.
- Kietzmann, J.H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I.P., & Silvestre, B.S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3): 241-251.
- Kimmel, A.J., & Kitchen, P.J. (2014). WOM and social media: Presaging future directions for research and practice. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 20(1/2): 5-20.
- Kumar, V., & Christodouloupoulou, A. (2014). Sustainability and branding: An integrated perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(1): 6-15.
- Lacka, E., & Chong, A. (2016). Usability perspective on social media sites' adoption in the B2B context. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 54: 80- 91.
- Linder, C. (2011). Ingredient branding in sports markets: the case Makrolon and UVEX. *International Journal of Business and Globalisation*, 7(4): 485-496.
- Luchs, M.G., Walker Naylor, R., Irwin, J.R., & Raghunathan, R. (2010) The sustainability liability: potential negative effects of ethicality on product preferences. *Journal of Marketing*, 74: 18-31.
- Lynch, J., & De Chernatony, L. (2004). The power of emotion: Brand communication in business-to-business markets. *Brand Management*, 11(5): 403-419.
- Mangold, W., & Faulds, D. (2009). Social media: the new hybrid element of the promotion mix. *Business Horizon*, 52(4): 357-365.
- Martin, D., & Schouten, J. (2011). *Sustainable Marketing*, Pearson Education: Harlow, UK.
- Moreno, A., & Capriotti, P. (2009). Communicating CSR, citizenship and sustainability on the web. *Journal of Communication Management*, 13(2): 157-175.
- Niemann-Struweg, I. (2014). An integrated communication implementation model for the post-2000 business environment. *Public Relations Review*, 40(2): 184-192.
- Ottman, J.A. (2011). *The New Rules of Green Marketing: Strategies, Tools, and Inspiration for Sustainable Branding*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers: San Francisco, CA.
- Peattie, K., & Crane, A. (2005). Green Marketing: legend, myth, farce or prophesy? *Qualitative Market Research*, 8(4): 357-370

- Pickton, D.W., & Broderick, A. (2005). *Integrated marketing communications*. Pearson Education: Harlow, UK.
- Reilly, A.H., & Hynan, K.A. (2014). Corporate communication, sustainability, and social media: It's not easy (really) being green. *Business Horizon*, 57(6): 747-758.
- Rettie, R., Burchell, K., & Riley, D. (2012). Normalising green behaviours: A new approach to sustainability marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 28(3/4). 420-444.
- Sandbacka, J., Nätti, S., & Tähtinen, J. (2013). Branding activities of a micro industrial services company. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 27(2): 166-177.
- Schultz, D.E., & Peltier, J.J. (2013). Social media's slippery slope: challenges, opportunities and future research directions. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 7(2): 86-99.
- Siamagka, N-T., Christodoulides, G., Michaelidou, N., & Valvi, A. (2015). Determinants of social media adoption by B2B organizations. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 51. 89-99.
- Siano, A., & Vollero, A. (2015). Developing a framework for measuring effectiveness of sustainability communications through corporate websites. *Procedia Manufacturing*, 3: 3615-3620.
- Signitzer, B., & Prexl, A. (2007). Corporate sustainability communications: Aspects of theory and professionalization. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20(1): 1-19.
- Smith, B.G. (2012). Communication integration: an analysis of context and conditions. *Public Relations Review*, 38(4): 600-608.
- Spence, M., & Essoussi, L.H. (2008). SME brand building and management: an exploratory study. *European Journal of Marketing*, 44(7/8). 1037-1054
- Virtsonis, N., & Harridge-March, S. (2008). Website elements in B2B online communications: A case from the UK print industry. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 26(7). 699-718.
- Wooster, J. (2013). The business advantage of sustainability. *Plastics Technology*, 59(3): 36-41.
- Yin, R.K. (2004). *The Case Study Anthology*, SAGE Publications Ltd.: London, UK.^[1]_{SEP}