



Sustainability as a marketing tool: To be or to appear to be?

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Abstract While sustainability is an ethical issue, it is also becoming relevant from a marketing standpoint and can be particularly decisive in stakeholder relationships. Companies can approach this issue in different ways, choosing whether to publicize their good conduct or to project a responsible attitude that does not reflect what they effectively achieve. In this context, the authors propose a self-assessment matrix that identifies a better way to make sustainability a source of competitive advantage through a transparency-based approach. By way of a geological metaphor, four types of companies are presented that are distinctive based on two variables: sustainable commitment and communication. Costs and benefits are analyzed for each quadrant, as well as problems resulting from a lack of transparency. In the final section of the article, the authors discuss whether the choice to communicate sustainability can be considered ethical or whether it is only a question of business. Reflections are reported.

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1. Do companies reap what they sow?

The interconnection between sustainability and marketing is closer than it appears. According to one school of thought, the two concepts are incompatible because sustainability is attainable through the reduction of consumption while the objective of marketing is to increase it (Jones, Clarke-Hill, Comfort, & Hillier, 2008). However, this incompatibility is not entirely correct because sustainability

has emerged as a new marketing paradigm in the last few decades (Kumar, Rahman, Kazmi, & Goyal, 2012).

If a company conducts itself well, what are the effects from a marketing perspective? What if the conduct is poor? The real-life example of the Volkswagen automobile company may help to explain this relationship. The company was recently overwhelmed by an emissions scandal (Barrett et al., 2015) raised by the American Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA has accused Volkswagen of having installed a defeat device to falsify pollution emissions tests in a large number of its light-duty diesel vehicles in order to conceal a negative impact on the environment. The

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automaker's poor sustainability behavior directly reduced its sales and profits; indeed, as reported in the *New York Times*, Volkswagen recently registered its first quarterly loss in at least 15 years (Ewing, 2015). The company's transparency in the matter is still the subject of open investigation. This example clearly shows how communication represents the cornerstone of sustainable marketing, whether or not it is oriented to transparency.

Given the aforementioned considerations, this article aims to describe the different types of approaches to sustainability communication, specifically highlighting the relative costs and benefits. If companies are responsible, do they choose to communicate their commitment, or do they prefer to be more discreet? Do companies regard their sustainable behavior as part of a more general marketing strategy or purely as an ethical issue? Can they take a risk (i.e., greenwashing) or completely ignore the need to be sustainable? Companies have a variety of options. In this study, we explore the characteristics and analyze opportunities or threats distinguishing each one. The big question is: Can sustainability be a marketing tool?

2. To be or to appear? A proposal for a management tool

To enable top managers and entrepreneurs to self-assess their degree of corporate sustainability in terms of commitment to sustainable initiatives and the ability to communicate these to different stakeholders, we propose using a matrix that combines these variables to define four different dynamic states of sustainable initiative transparency. The Y (vertical) axis represents how much a company is doing, and the X (horizontal) axis represents how much it is communicating. To characterize the concept of transparency between an organization and its stakeholders, we have employed a geological metaphor that has previously been used in a different context by several scholars (Lamming, Caldwell, & Phillips, 2006): the ability of minerals to transmit light (see Table 1).

This is our initial device for arranging and discussing the concept of transparency in terms of

sustainable initiatives. We suggest that transparency is a dynamic, and thus manageable, property of a communication relationship between a company and any stakeholders interested in staying informed about its sustainable activities. Transparency is thus not a mere characteristic or attribute.

In our geological example, light is analogous to information or knowledge of the sustainable initiatives implemented (or not implemented) as provided by the company to its various stakeholders via all available media. The matrix breaks down the dynamic states into the four quadrants explained in Figure 1.

Rather than being solely *opaque*, *translucent*, or *transparent*, a commitment to sustainability and a commensurate approach to communication is apt to include elements of all three features. These elements are likely to be distributed over the range of interface processes through marketing channels and communication media in line with different categories of stakeholders. One example might be how territorial differences influence the approach to communication. Consider the fact that, unlike manufacturing facilities in the Far East, European factories are often ISO 14001, OHSAS 18001, or SA8000 certified. Luxottica, among other firms, lists on its website (<http://www.luxottica.com>) the ISO 14001 and OHSAS 18001 certifications achieved by its Italian factories, but makes no mention of such relating to its Indian manufacturing facility—despite Asia being an important market in terms of retail sales. This difference effectively means that the degree of communication and of sustainable performance could differ depending on variables (e.g., national legislation, corporate culture of sustainability, internal alignment on sustainability, cost of certifications, financial resources) that can induce companies to adopt different marketing strategies, which are not always classifiable in a single quadrant of the matrix.

In fact, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for achieving internal alignment on sustainability; each company faces a unique set of challenges and constraints. We do see that companies leading the way are proactively looking to align their sustainability actions across departments by beginning with self-reflection. How can executives evaluate

Table 1. The metaphor of transparency: The behavior of light as an analogy for communication of sustainable operational activities to stakeholders

	Opaque	Translucent	Transparent
<i>Geological case (light shining through a mineral)</i>	Light cannot penetrate the surface of the substance	Light can enter and exit the surface of the substance, but with distortion	Light enters and exits the surface relatively undisturbed

Source: Adapted from Lamming et al. (2006)

Figure 1. A self-assessment tool for sustainable initiative transparency

		Translucent companies		Transparent companies	
Being sustainable	High commitment	<p>Sustainability is <i>de facto</i> realized, but is not exploited as a marketing opportunity. Sensitivity toward sustainable issues is demonstrated by definite actions, but the company is not completely aware of the strategic importance of communication. There is a gap between the sustainable performance and the perception of customers.</p> <p><i>“We should communicate better what we are. We are doing the hard work—why not celebrate it?”</i></p>	<p>Sustainability is an important topic of the overall corporate strategy. Consequently, the marketing and communication approach to sustainable initiatives is consistent with what the company actually does. ‘Sustainable value’ is made up of definite activities, well-communicated to stakeholders, and the reputation of the company is supported by facts and figures. Sustainability is a competitive advantage.</p> <p><i>“We communicate what we are”</i></p>		
	Low commitment	<p>Companies are not at all aware of the relevance of sustainability as a strategic topic. There is no company website on sustainability and no possibility for stakeholders to know anything about the organization’s mission, values, etc. Sustainability is not a concern.</p> <p><i>“What are you talking about?”</i></p>	<p>Sustainability is used as opportunistic leverage. Management overpromises and underdelivers on sustainability, and this could put the company’s reputation at risk. ‘To appear’ is more important than ‘to be’: the marketing and communication strategy regarding sustainable initiatives is emphasized, but is inconsistent with what the company actually does.</p> <p><i>“We are (we pretend to be) what we communicate”</i></p>		
		Dark companies		Opaque companies	
		Low-profile communication		High-profile communication	
Appearing sustainable					

the alignment of commitment to and communication of sustainability? How can this be performed in-house? A simple checklist composed of direct questions (Table 2) could be useful in self-determining position of the company in the matrix and in deciding future strategy: whether to stay in the same position or to evolve toward a more consistent (commitment vs. communication) and effective sustainable status—hopefully to the quadrant of transparency.

In drawing a continuum from opaque companies (i.e., information is inconsistent with actual activities) to transparent relationships (i.e., full consistency between information and activities), we are not suggesting that there is a defined path for a communication strategy of sustainable operational activities. We acknowledge that in practice, the matter is much more complex and less iterative.

We have also identified one peripheral state that appears unmanageable: *darkness*, wherein the factors are so deeply buried or complex that it is not possible to explain or share them. In a state of darkness, there is so little information regarding the company as a whole that it is impossible to presume any commitment toward sustainability.

This is a frequent approach to micro or small-sized enterprises that have no type of accountability.

2.1. Opaque companies: All that glitters is not gold

Opaque companies celebrate the triumph of appearance. Hyperbole is their preferred figure of speech and these firms represent the actualization of greenwashing: the tendency of a company to beautify its image through communication that emphasizes positive achievements and conceals negative conduct.

Opaque companies are aware of the role of sustainability in a more general marketing strategy, but prefer to *appear* responsible rather than actually apply sustainability principles to their activities. Here, detailed attention to communication corresponds to an absence or a low level of sustainability performance (e.g., high carbon dioxide emissions, exploitation of child labor). Companies that occupy this quadrant disclose emphasized information for several reasons, compelled particularly by market external drivers (e.g., consumer demand, investor demand, competitive pressure) and non-market

Table 2. A possible self-assessment checklist of commitment and communication for sustainability

How does your company define sustainability? What's in and what's out? Is there a separate group working on corporate citizenship initiatives? How do social, environmental, and philanthropic initiatives and strategies interact?
Do you have an inventory of all the sustainability actions going on at your company? You might be surprised who is talking about sustainability or pursuing sustainability initiatives on your company's behalf. Are there unknown unknowns?
Do you have a sustainability strategy and goals? What is your overall corporate strategy? Are your sustainability initiatives integrated with this wider corporate strategy and directly relevant to your business priorities?
Who's accountable and who's empowered? Many companies have sustainability teams, but not all employees know who is empowered to make decisions about sustainability and to enforce them. Is it your CEO, CMO, a strategy officer, the EH&S department, or perhaps your sustainability team itself? Who is responsible for facilitating cross-departmental sustainability action and communication?
Is there a forum at your company for aligning and cross-pollinating ideas on sustainability? How is sustainability coordinated throughout the organization? Is there a sustainability team that convenes cross-functional groups? If someone at your company has an idea related to sustainability, to whom do they take it?
Do you have systems in place for incorporating sustainability in decision-making? Is sustainability a criterion for purchasing decisions? Do you have a project gating system? Do you have a system for vetting green marketing claims? Does sustainability factor into your acquisition due-diligence process? Do you consider sustainability in your R&D and tech investments? Ensuring that <i>all</i> relevant decisions made across your business align with your green intentions can cut risk and reinforce your existing sustainability initiatives.
Can everyone at your company articulate your company's point of view on sustainability? Do you have a program to educate employees regarding your sustainability standpoint? All of your employees should be aware of your company's position and activities, especially in the event of an environmental crisis.
Do you think that communicating your initiatives is important? Are you implementing a clear communication strategy regarding your sustainability through different media? Do you have a section of your website, or perhaps a dedicated website, to promote your sustainable actions? Do you also communicate your initiatives with your customers through direct interfaces (e.g., the packaging of your product)?
What is the CEO's relationship to sustainability? What has your chief executive said about sustainability? How, if at all, has his or her message changed across the years? Is this message aligned with actual performance and future plans?

external drivers (e.g., activists, NGOs, media pressure). Other factors can also influence a company's tendency to greenwash; specifically, the ethical climate within the firm. From this point of view, the likelihood of not communicating transparently is higher in egoistic contexts, where the satisfaction of self-interest prevails. Additionally, an extremely low level—or even complete lack—of communication among the different departments within a company could impair the search for transparency.

Sustainability is definitely considered a marketing tool by opaque companies, which is why they manipulate their data or adopt a hyperbolic style of communication. The information is superficial; it is something to talk about rather than to realize because these companies do not embody responsible values and principles. Opaque companies want to exploit the issue of sustainability, almost as if it were merely a fleeting trend. This attitude can be considered a form of business myopia, particularly when customers are aware of sustainability issues. Any benefits of greenwashing are, in fact, temporary and are limited to transient image improvement.

Eventually, the benefits are counterbalanced by a series of disadvantages that place the company in a highly risky position. As stated by [Newell, Goldsmith, and Banzhaf \(1998\)](#), once deception is perceived, it has direct negative consequences such as low corporate credibility; creates skepticism toward company advertisements; and effects negative purchase intentions toward the advertised product. Moreover, [Lewis \(2003\)](#) highlights that responsibility is increasingly a criterion by which stakeholders judge companies, and if not correctly managed, could represent a threat to the reputation and prosperity of a company. Effectively, communication based on falsity can weaken stakeholders' trust in a company, as it creates a gap between stakeholder values/expectations and the perception stakeholders have of the company. This is particularly true in cases of consumer attitude toward the firm ([Folkes & Kamins, 1999](#)). This should serve as a warning to opaque companies because positive reputation is closely correlated with such factors as the possibility of new investments, favorable media coverage, and improvements in the workplace vis-à-vis increased motivation for

workers, attraction of employee talent, and job satisfaction (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2003).

Because sustainability is not their real objective, opaque companies do not aim to educate employees or otherwise involve personnel in the issue. These companies do not consider sustainability as part of a more general strategy; therefore, it is not a fundamental point for which they account. Research and development (R&D), innovation, and investment in new technologies are based on different criteria, which are not completely inspired by social and environmental development. Communication represents the cornerstone of opaque companies' presumed sustainable marketing because they pretend to be socially and environmentally friendly. These companies use different means of disclosing their manipulated data, including the Internet. Reports, videos, and pages dedicated to sustainability litter opaque companies' official websites.

Some companies—many of them quite large—have been accused of exploiting the sustainability issue, divulging information that is inconsistent with their real conduct. Take the case of Vale, a Brazilian mining firm. On its company website (<http://www.vale.com>), Vale stresses the importance of people and planet, and claims that transparent communication is fundamental to its relationship with stakeholders. It highlights and makes available the company's self-drafted sustainability report, which emphasizes the firm's investments in sustainability efforts (US \$1.1 billion in 2014, largely in environmental projects), its care for workers' safety, its respect for human rights, and its improvements in the appropriate management of water and environmental resources resulting from investments in R&D. Despite this report, the group *International Movement of People Affected by Vale* (2012) published online its *Unsustainability Report*, a document directly refuting the Brazilian company's proffered information and data. The *International Movement of People Affected by Vale* details human rights violations and environmental damage in terms of waste generated, carbon dioxide emissions, and water pollution. Further, it points out that in terms of social and environmental impact, Vale was declared the worst corporation by popular vote via the Public Eye Awards. Other examples of companies suspected of deceit can be found in the oil sector. For example, American company Chevron is the 2015 'winner' of the same award, based on several accusations ranging from human rights violations to environmental disasters. One of the thorniest issues concerns Chevron's activities in Ecuador (*Public Eye Awards, 2015*).

The long-term survival of opaque companies is at risk if they remain stuck in this quadrant. Problems

of image and reputation, relationships with increasingly sensitive stakeholders, and the expansion of stricter rules/laws regulating sustainability could prove a fatal downfall. Opaque companies must strive to evolve. No pain, no gain.

2.2. Translucent companies: Silence is silver, but speech would be golden

Translucent companies are conscious of the contribution they can make to sustainable development. They are very responsible and do not view their commitment to sustainability from a strategic perspective, but rather as a moral duty. Two possible rationales motivate the adoption of this position. Under the first of these, sustainability and marketing are intentionally kept separate because the former is considered more pertinent to the moral sphere. In this case, translucency could simply be a stage of development until the company becomes more aware that communicating its social commitment is not unethical; if and when this occurs, translucency could turn into transparency. Alternatively, as suggested by Tixier (2003), translucent companies could consider it too hazardous to build their reputation on commitment to sustainability, especially for fear of being accused of manipulation. In this case, remaining translucent is a conscious decision and is likely to be definitive.

In translucent companies, there is an integration of sustainability into the decision-making process. These firms concretize high sustainability performances, coordinating different activities within the company in a responsible way. Unlike transparent companies (see Section 2.3.), translucent companies avoid disclosing their social commitment either because they are not aware of its relevance from a marketing standpoint or they believe it is unnecessary to exploit. Hence, they do not publish sustainability information on their websites or make such information public. Tixier (2003) noted that this approach was more typical of Latin contexts than Anglo-Saxon ones, due to cultural reasons. In Latin countries communicating responsibility was not considered a value but instead a risk, whereas Anglo-Saxon countries perceived it as a marketing opportunity. Interestingly, some French luxury companies (e.g., Chanel, Christian Dior) do not communicate information about their social commitment, so it is difficult to interpret whether or not their conduct is responsible.

Companies that offer fair-trade certified products can belong to this quadrant when they do not communicate their sustainability intentions/efforts. Consider Italian biscuit company Scapigliati.

Despite being cited by the Italian Ministry of Labor ([Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, n.d.](#)) for its efforts amongst responsible companies and being bestowed with the 2004 Ethics Award by the Italian periodical *GDO Week*, Scapigliati makes no mention of its sustainability efforts or fair-trade product on the company website. Translucent companies run the following risks from lack of sustainability communication:

- Opportunities may be lost, including sales, if the non-differentiated company is perceived by consumers as being similar to other competing firms. The most sensitive customers will only reward companies that are well-known for their responsible behavior. In this sense, if a company does not communicate, it does not exist.
- Silence can be an obstacle to creating or strengthening relationships with industrial customers.
- Investors cannot be encouraged when no information is available.
- Translucent companies can appear inactive compared to opaque companies. The latter—as long as they are able to conceal their poor conduct—could be perceived as more sustainable than translucent companies and could attract more customers.
- The cost of unpublicized sustainability efforts may not be recoupable, given lost economic opportunities.
- Fear of being accused of greenwashing may limit the company's development and can be negative for long-term survival.

2.3. Transparent companies: Actions speak as loudly as words

Transparent companies could claim the motto: "Seeing is believing." They perceive the need to be sustainable as an important issue, recognizing—firstly but not only—its ethical nature. They embody complete awareness of the potential role of sustainability in marketing. Through their communications, transparent companies simply describe what they really do: behaviors that are consistent with their vision. Such communication does not merely emphasize, but rather traces the company's true actions. Reaching this quadrant should be the objective of every company, either by committing wholly to sustainability or by improving the firm's communication strategies.

Transparent companies consider the achievement of sustainability not mainly as a cost, but rather as an opportunity. Sustainability becomes a competitive advantage. From this point of view, [Porter and van der Linde \(1995\)](#) affirm the competitiveness that follows adoption of eco-friendly behaviors through a focus on the environmental dimension of sustainability. After highlighting the existence of costs hidden behind bad environmental behavior—costs that are transferred to customers (e.g., those deriving from pollution produced, synonymous with inefficiency and waste)—the researchers specify the benefits generated by the application of green principles. Among these, they recognize the decrease in costs connected to waste-handling activities: lower net costs of product distribution to customers, packaging costs, and higher product resale. Furthermore, the increasing demand for products produced ethically, both from the social and environmental perspective, should be underlined ([Frenkel & Scott, 2002](#)).

Transparent companies do not view sustainability primarily as a matter of communication but perceive it as an objective to reach, involving all of the departments within the firm. The departments know their efforts will be compensated, both inside and outside of the company. [Miles and Covin \(2000\)](#) demonstrated the benefits in terms of reputation, but also noted that most of the scientific literature has highlighted a positive association between environmental and financial performances. The involvement of all the areas of an enterprise implies that sustainability is a shared value among the employees with a high level of empowerment facilitated by profound cross-departmental communication. Sustainability is also aimed at stimulating participation and the exchange of ideas/proposals in the spirit of teamwork. It becomes a fundamental criterion of the decision-making process, ensuring consistency between a company's intentions and its actions at every level. Decisions, therefore, are driven by principles of responsibility according to the area involved. For example:

- Suppliers are selected on the basis of their responsible conduct, both in terms of green behavior and respect for human rights (a thorny issue in the clothing industry).
- Production is inspired by environmentally and socially friendly criteria.
- Transportation emissions and pollution must be controlled in order to reach superior green performance (this is relative to the logistics area).

- Human rights are respected, in terms of workers' rights and secure and safe working conditions.
- Human resources are managed and valued for their essential roles within the company.
- R&D investments take sustainability and new sustainable technologies into consideration.

Finally, a transparent company, responsible in all its activities, organizes its communication by selecting the most appropriate means (e.g., reports, website, product packaging) and using sustainability as a marketing tool.

One company globally acknowledged for its business model based on sustainable growth is Italian luxury fashion house Cucinelli. Defined by its founder as a humanistic corporate entity, Cucinelli views sustainability—based essentially on the concept of the centrality of human beings—as not something to exploit opportunistically, but rather something that represents the essence of the company as identified by its own responsible conduct. Information imparted on the Cucinelli website is not ostentatious or filled with emphasized data, but simply a vehicle for stakeholders to comprehend how sustainability responsibility pivots and embodies the company's business model. Inspired by a humanistic vision of capitalism, Cucinelli's conception of responsibility is translated into excellent working conditions, a participatory climate that encourages socialization among workers, and higher-than-average wages. Moreover, this company greatly invests in its own local territory. The results are excellent: there is increased competition and economic growth in spite of the economic crisis (<http://www.brunellocucinelli.com>). Not coincidentally, company founder Brunello Cucinelli was declared Best Entrepreneur by Ernst & Young in 2009 (Mead, 2010).

2.4. Dark companies: When the going gets tough, they do not get going

Dark companies are characterized by low sustainability performance and low communication profile. Essentially, they suffer from business inertia. Dark companies are largely unaware of the issue of sustainability; it simply is not on their radar. Just as darkness represents the absence of light, dark companies' ideas about sustainability are completely obscured, and consequently they cannot strategically conceive of it.

In this context, dark companies risk being invisible in the market, or at least not easily noticed; thus, they can play only a marginal role. Where stakeholders are well-informed about the relevance

of sustainability and regulators ensure corporate responsibility, being dark could lead to a lack of competitiveness. In order to fill this gap, it is necessary to approach the issue of sustainability and increase dark companies' knowledge.

Knowledge is a fundamental asset on which to build competitive advantage, and should be created, researched, acquired, and shared within the organization. Dark companies do not possess the characteristics of the firm Nonaka (1991) calls "a knowledge-creating company": one which understands that knowledge in an ever-competitive environment, characterized by fast-developing new technologies and a rapid obsolescence of products, is a key factor in surviving market changes. Understanding the importance of sustainability from an economic perspective could also be an incentive to invest in the knowledge and innovation essential for modern companies.

Firms that occupy this quadrant can be typified as high-risk based on their ignorance of, or indifference to, knowledge of the sustainability issue. In fact, poor knowledge generates poor innovation. Products of dark companies can be inappropriate for the market, with a high risk of being noncompetitive. Further, more-sensitive consumers could be perplexed by a lack of information, and thus focus on other competitors and their offerings. It is reasonable to assume that the dark approach could be more typical of small and inexperienced companies that are less conscious of the importance of integrating responsibility into their operations. It is unlikely, however, that large companies are unaware of sustainability. If not irresponsible, these firms would likely be positioned in the opaque companies quadrant.

3. Doing the right thing: Ethics or business?

"Good is something you do, not something you talk about. Some medals are pinned to your soul, not to your jacket," said famous cyclist Gino Bartali (Cycling News, 2012). It is important to note that sustainability as a marketing tool can be a target of disapproval, resulting in accusations of unethical behavior via sustainability being 'exploited' to make profits. This approach is a simplistic way of conceiving of economic activity. Companies are in fact part of society and as such have duties toward it, beginning with respect for man and nature. The business objective cannot solely be to gain profit, but also to achieve it ethically. Ethics and economics must go hand-in-hand within a modern company that is aware of its role in society.

However, is it sufficient to achieve sustainability without disclosing the good things done? This is a thorny question because doing good should be an end in itself, characteristic of disinterested giving. In this case, it is important to consider again that the objective of a company must be to combine quantitative (i.e., profit) and qualitative results (i.e., contribution to the well-being of the planet), so its sustainable behavior has to serve this purpose. From this point of view, a difference can be highlighted between translucent and transparent companies. While the former pay meticulous attention to being socially responsible—and this undoubtedly allows them to reach the qualitative aim—without communication they cannot inform their stakeholders, thereby sacrificing business opportunities. On the other hand, by means of authentic communication, transparent companies can fully reach the objective. As a matter of fact, communication of sustainability can also be considered a means of business because it allows the company to reach new customers and have more market appeal, potentially attracting new investors. Involving stakeholders through communication cannot be considered an immoral act; on the contrary, it makes customers conscious of their choices (e.g., rewarding/boycotting a company) and creates a positive inclination in the market and a culture of sustainability.

To justify the choice of communicating, it is sufficient to believe that being responsible is a duty toward the society to which a company belongs. It is not charity, it is good action; but it is not generosity. Regarding objectives, it is possible to observe the different approaches adopted by the four company types described in the matrix:

- *Opaque companies*: These companies consider only the quantitative purpose, treating the qualitative as a façade, even though this risks compromising profit achievement in the long term. The mistake of opaque companies is believing their role in society is limited to business.
- *Translucent companies*: These companies, the opposite of opaque companies, focus solely on the qualitative purpose and thus overlook the potential of sustainability in quantitative terms.
- *Transparent companies*: These companies are aware of their responsibility toward society and what this means in terms of economic opportunity: distinction in the competitive arena and the possibility to grow financial indicators.
- *Dark companies*: These companies are indeterminate in terms of strategic vision, and this

jeopardizes the achievement of the quantitative purpose. Here, qualitative aims are either absolutely not contemplated or are simply ignored.

4. If a company is doing the hard work, why not celebrate it?

Communication plays a vital part in any sustainability strategy. If a company does not communicate internally, it will not be able to implement the changes necessary to make the whole organization more sustainable. Its employees are part of the very environmentally and socially conscious public, eager to participate in and advocate the company's sustainability efforts. If a firm fails to communicate its own strategies and activities externally—to customers, partners, and the public—it could lose the sales of the increasing number of socially and environmentally conscious consumers. It could also miss out on major contracts to supply global firms if its sustainability policies are not comprehensible.

It is not always clear why communication is an afterthought for certain companies; it can be likened to planning a large party but forgetting to send the invitations. If a company is doing the hard work, why not celebrate it? Many firms are afraid of being accused of greenwashing, while others have a culture of 'green-muting': they simply do not think that it would be appropriate to boast about their good work. There is also concern that communication gives competitors too much information, or that making sustainability goals public essentially hands over brand control to consumers and other influencers who are active on social media channels.

Sustainability can represent a marketing tool for companies, but on one condition: they must believe in its realization. The company has to have strong ethical values to successfully make the transition from the moral level to the quantitative level harmonious. That is not all. Sharing these values with stakeholders is fundamental. Customers—and investors, in particular—have to be informed regarding the true sustainability performances of the company because they have the right to discriminate based on their own sense of responsibility, rewarding those companies that are good citizens and punishing (e.g., boycott) those that are not.

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