



INFORMATION MODULE 4

Green, greener, greenest?

Biodiversity as a topic for credible corporate communications

The area of activity What this is all about

Increasing numbers of companies are committing themselves to conserve biodiversity, and can thus become important ambassadors for the natural world. A key role in this is played by corporate communications. This is responsible for preparing the complex topic in the proper way for different situations and target groups, and for formulating catchy messages. In addition to this though, there is also another challenging task involved: maintaining credibility. This short info-module provides a number of recommendations and ideas on this topic, as an initial introduction to this issue.

Credible corporate communication is a success factor as well as a risk factor for companies. This applies to all aspects of communication, but particularly to those areas where businesses are deliberately trying to present themselves as being aware of their responsibilities. The natural world and biodiversity have an emotional effect on us, and are therefore both effective and sensitive themes. There are very few other issues which can boast such impressive images and messages. This means that there is an associated particularly high risk of misuse and window dressing, in other words, greenwashing. It is well worthwhile to strengthen one's awareness of how credible communications can be put into practice properly in the context of biodiversity and nature conservation.

Why act?

Utilise opportunities, reduce risks

National and international biodiversity goals can only be achieved by implementing significant measures. The efforts made to date still lag well behind what is actually required. Businesses can make a major contribution to the protection and sustainable use of biodiversity, and play a part in raising awareness by carrying out "public relations work for the natural world".

- » Properly implemented, instead of only well-intended, communications is an opportunity for nature protection. Companies are important partners for intensifying the awareness of our natural life-support systems – not only in the eyes of consumers, but also decision makers in politics and industry. Protecting biodiversity and ecosystems means changing consumption patterns, conserving resources, and harmonising growth with the environmental capacity of the Earth.
- » Properly implemented, instead of only well-intended, communications is an opportunity for businesses. The profile of businesses acting along sustainable lines is strengthened, when they talk about their responsibility for our natural life-support systems. Larger companies in particular are exposed to increasing expectations and obligations regarding transparency, and should therefore make public their significant influences on biodiversity within their environmental and/or sustainability reporting. They should feel encouraged to tackle the subject of biodiversity in their corporate communications if they are actually implementing concrete measures.
- » Greenwashing puts a business's credibility and image at risk. And this applies whether or not it is being done deliberately, or unintentionally. It is therefore important for companies to know how to avoid or minimise this risk. This becomes particularly critical – also in legal terms – when PR, advertising and environmental labelling is involved, in other words, when there is a direct correlation with products and services. Advertising messages must be accurate, verifiable, and not be misleading. What this means in terms of "green" messages, will be more clearly defined in future.



AVOIDING GREENWASHING (ACCUSATIONS): YOU ARE WHAT YOU DO

Companies do not do business altruistically – they want to be successful in the market. In this context, they can do a great deal of good for society in many ways. This is why a company's communicative activities cannot be separated from its business objectives. Public relations work and communications have to be compatible with the core business activities in particular. The higher the discrepancies, the greater the risk of being accused of a lack of credibility, particularly when it comes to a company's "green" image.

Companies with a certain amount of public profile (e.g. by way of brands) and societal relevance, are especially at risk of being associated with greenwashing. No company likes to be exposed to accusations of this kind. But it is also true that there is no formula for completely protecting oneself from such charges. Communication is frequently a balancing act, and never black and white. Whether it is considered balanced and successful, or classified as greenwashing instead, can be a matter of perspective and values. Critical members of the public, politicians and NGOs ultimately assess businesses in terms of how sustainably they generate their sales and profits. Opinions differ here in what counts for the sustainability and the acceptance of business models. If a company is basically held to account because of the products and services it markets, it will not find it easy to dispel these criticisms.

Those who do all they can to take the principles of credible communication to heart, and do not attempt to pull the wool over the public's eyes, are at least in a favourable position to gain the broadest possible recognition for their commitment to biodiversity.

Principles of credible communications - guidelines for every occasion

Tried-and-tested principles for credible communications are nothing new. Companies should take them to heart as a matter of conviction, and for the sake of their reputations. Putting these principles rigorously into practice leads to transparency, coherency and proportionality in their conduct and in corporate communications.

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) for instance has contributed to the standardisation of key principles for the content and form of corporate reporting. The criteria serve as guidelines and benchmarks for all communications activities, even if they cannot always be implemented completely. A tried-and-tested rule of thumb here is: the more far-reaching the messages, the more they must be well grounded in fact. Better to check again once too often than not enough.

MATERIALITY

Raising the key issues, and not side tracking to loosely associated aspects without any validity. Relevant aspects are those directly involving the company which have a significant influence on biodiversity and ecosystems.

ACCURACY

Be specific instead of remaining vague. Qualitative statements must be precisely formulated; quantitative statements must contain the proper numbers, indicators and reference parameters.

COMPLETENESS

Don't sweep anything important under the carpet. Cover all significant aspects, and present them so that the scope, limits and time frames involved are all transparent.

UP-TO-DATEDNESS

Provide information on aspects which are of importance today and which are not totally out of date. This also means not passing off old for new.

PROPER BALANCE

Do not focus only on good news, but also openly discuss challenges and problems. This is the only way to enable the recipients to assess the information in an overall context.

RELIABILITY

Ensure that your statements and promises are verifiable. Those that issue statements must also have access to the data and evidence on which it is based.

COMPARABILITY

Select and present information so that the time frame involved in any changes, and in the results which have been achieved, can be properly understood. Communication needs continuity.

CLARITY

Make a point of presenting things clearly so that the target groups can digest the information without any guesswork. There must be no doubts about the precise context of any piece of information.

Credible communications in practice – recommendations for commitment on behalf of biodiversity



The critical aspect of even the best principles is that they can actually be applied under normal conditions. There are many different forms of communication: there are significant differences between various situations and objectives, as well as the possibilities and limits of each instrument or medium – and they are also subject to their own rules. Credibility only arises by implementing best practice in every individual area, as well as having a coherent overall picture.

What actually defines credibility, is also determined by the context. An essential aspect is therefore to classify the information correctly. Therefore, the first important thing is for communications to clearly highlight which of a company's activities or responsibilities is involved. Secondly, these are also linked to different communication instruments and media, which differ in terms of their possibilities and objectives, and therefore have to establish credibility in their own particular way.

Communications can be differentiated into three different areas:

- 1 Responsibility for biodiversity within a company's own business model
- 2 Promoting biodiversity as a social commitment
- 3 Advertising, marketing, information on products and services

Take a look at module 1 of this series: "Biodiversity and ecosystem services – this is the business of business", which reveals which of these aspects have a bearing on companies, and how they can exploit them.

1 RESPONSIBILITY FOR BIODIVERSITY WITHIN A COMPANY'S BUSINESS MODEL

This involves every aspect: strategy, management and the key business activities of the company, and the influence on biodiversity of the business activities at the locations and in the supply chain. The most important communication channels in this context are annual, environmental and sustainability reports, as well as websites and corporate presentations, etc.

Recommendations for credible communications on the core business activities:

- » For large multinational companies in particular, and those with strong influences on biodiversity, **reporting on the core business activities is a prerequisite for the credibility** of all activities concerning biodiversity, because companies are primarily responsible for the environmental consequences of their own business activities.
- » Corporate and sustainability reporting make it possible **to make detailed presentations of strategies and responsibilities**. They provide the necessary framework to observe the principles of credible communications, and present precise information. Other media and communication situations are more restricted in this context.
- » **Materiality** plays the most important role in the overall reporting on biological diversity: What are the relevant aspects where the core business activities have a bearing on biodiversity, and which measures are implemented? These must be explained convincingly and in proportion to their significance.
- » Concrete, comprehensible operative **goals, and information on achieving these goals**, are amongst the best evidence available for highlighting the integrity of the activities. Conflicts between the goals should also be discussed openly.
- » Businesses should take care to **deal separately with those actions which they are legally or otherwise obliged to implement, and those which are voluntary**. Obligatory activities could naturally also be presented to highlight them accordingly. This can be important information in an international context where standards for companies can be lower.



2

PROMOTION OF BIODIVERSITY AS A SOCIAL COMMITMENT

Companies have countless opportunities to support nature conservation and biodiversity protection projects as part of their social responsibility. They can highlight their commitment to protecting the natural environment by way of donations, and sponsoring or co-operation activities with environmental and nature conservation organisations. There is no shortage of sensible opportunities for involvement: whether on a long term or one-off basis, whether local as a “good neighbour”, or focused on topics which are most suitable for a specific company.

Protecting nature, biodiversity and ecosystem services, costs money and time. The support from private sector businesses, as an important source of financing, is often indispensable to enable the public sector or environmental and nature conservation organisations to get projects off the ground.

There is nothing wrong with profiting from this commitment. This can be achieved by newspaper articles in the local press, via the website and sustainability reports, and in a multitude of ways as part of project communications with partners – from flyers, all the way to billboards. By communicating their activities, companies can be role models, and motivate others to emulate their actions.

Recommendations for credible communications on social commitment:

- » **Social commitment does not replace corporate biodiversity protection within the company's own value chain**, but supplements it in an effective way. Communications must take this into consideration to enable the commitment to be seen in its proper light.
- » There should be **no flagrant contradictions between social commitment and the business activities** of the company.
- » When businesses make a contribution to projects aimed at conserving biodiversity, the **proportionality of the communications** is particularly important. Accusations of greenwashing are often initiated by an assessment or assumption that a measure has only been undertaken with the aim of diverting attention from the real responsibility. Proportionality is measured amongst other things by the scale of the involvement (in absolute terms, as well as in proportion to the size of the company and the means at its disposal) and to the relevance of the communicated activity in the light of the company's impact on biodiversity and ecosystems.
- » When the company **publicises and explains the reasons for its commitment**, this can be very helpful, and a sign of transparency. Why this project or this partner in particular? It is no problem if this reveals the direct benefits to the company and its specific interests – because in this way companies make it quite clear that industry itself also depends on protecting natural life-support systems.
- » Credibility in the case of projects is frequently also the **credibility of the partners**, who usually contribute crucial expertise (e.g. nature conservation organisations, authorities), and therefore technically safeguard the effectiveness of the activities. Co-operation of this kind should always be placed on a firm footing. This includes agreements on communications strategy.

3

ADVERTISING, MARKETING, INFORMATION ON PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Accusations of greenwashing are often aimed at statements involved in PR, marketing or advertising activities. These are special fields of communication because they operate within a legal framework. Consumers are confronted by an increasing number of “green claims”, and a flood of more or less reliable symbols and labels – from packaging, all the way to TV commercials. En route to a “green economy”, legislators are taking an increasingly closer look from the point of view of consumer protection and the EU directive covering unfair commercial practices (UCP Directive). Politics sees the need to implement more measures to strengthen the influence of consumers and fair play in competition, and to close the door on the manipulative use of environmental arguments.

The European Commission launched a multi-stakeholder dialogue on environmental claims (MDEC) in 2012 with the aim of safeguarding the reliability and utility of information. The criteria stipulated for statements on the environmentally-related benefits of products will probably become more stringent in future as a result. Many countries and the environmental standards have been concerned with this aspect for many years, with the associated regulations for environmental information covering products and services. For instance, the ISO standard 14.021, which formulates good practice for environmental labelling and environmental declarations, has been around since 1999.

Recommendations for credible communications concerning advertising and marketing:

» In making statements on the subject of nature and biodiversity it is especially tempting to let appealing pictures speak. This requires being **particularly diligent with respect to the mandatory stipulations defined in competition law** (UCP Directive, and the Unfair Competition Act forbidding unfair competition in Germany). Consumers can also be misled by the withholding of information, in other words, failure to disclose important information required to make an informed decision. Companies should actively keep an eye on current further developments with regard to “green claims”.



» Advertising can bring things to a point – this is its legitimate purpose.

It is not possible to be anything other than “short and simple” on packaging or in a short commercial – but this only increases the responsibility even more to **consider very carefully how a message is sharpened**. It has to be justifiable in the light of the principles discussed above.

- » Interdisciplinary **collaboration between communications/marketing departments, and the officers responsible for sustainability, environmental protection, nature conservation and purchasing** makes a major contribution to guaranteeing the creation of credible messages. An understanding of the larger picture is of great value for credible overall positioning.
- » **The highest standards of quality need to be imposed if a product as a whole is generally promoted as being “green”,** and placed in a positive context with the protection of nature and biodiversity.
- » Already guaranteed results and achieved objectives differ slightly from plans and future targets. **Statements about the future are only credible if they are underpinned by clear strategies.**
- » **Competence on the subject matter and the sensitivity of advertising agencies and consultants for the issues involved** can be important criteria for hiring with the aim of avoiding greenwashing.
- » Companies have an **obligation to provide additional information and evidence to interested stakeholders** to enable partial information to be assessed in an overall context. Company and sustainability reports can present overviews of strategies and responsibilities, and provide the necessary framework for comprehensively satisfying the principles of credible communications.

“Basic knowledge: companies and biodiversity” is a series of short, cross-industry information modules for companies interested in finding out more on this topic. The modules offer guidance, suggestions and advice, helpful not only for large, but also smaller businesses. The ‘Biodiversity in Good Company’ Initiative published the German version of these publications in the framework of a project promoted by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment. This is an English edition of the series, adapted for international use. **Available for downloading at www.business-and-biodiversity.de/en.**

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