

# How to move beyond the corporate responsibility report

*Producing a CR report can be expensive.  
A broader communications platform can help  
make the most of your investment.*

## **The corporate responsibility report is a beast.**

First of all, it's big. Virtually no area of your company is off limits. It often covers a year or more of activity. Some reports are well over 100 pages and packed with information.

Second, it's hairy. Most CR reports take on complex and controversial issues that don't have clear-cut solutions—dealing with climate change, designing products to be safe and environmentally responsible and protecting human rights in the supply chain, to name just a few.

And third, it's got a huge appetite. It takes a lot of time and effort to gather and vet information from every corner of the organization, write (and rewrite) and design the report, and navigate the maze of reviews and approvals. That's why managing the CR report can be the top to-do for one or more employees for months on end. It can also involve dozens of internal content providers as well as a stable of sustainability consultants, creative agencies and verification services.

Add it all up, and producing a CR report makes for a daunting—and costly—challenge. The tab can reach hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But make no mistake: It can also deliver tremendous value.



**The CR report ranks among your company's most important communications.** It assesses your performance on issues that are vital to the long-term success of your brand and business—and your customers. It's a platform to express your views, share ideas and advance your agenda. And it includes a host of information relevant to your diverse stakeholders, from investors to employees.

### You say tomato...

Some call it *corporate responsibility*. Some prefer *corporate social responsibility*. Others choose the broader notion of *sustainability*, while a few go with *global citizenship*. Each has its pros and cons. As a result, there's no universal term for a company's broad scope of environmental, social and philanthropic goals, initiatives and impact. We're using corporate responsibility (or CR for short) here because it's straightforward and arguably the most widely recognized option.

Yet all too often a company posts its CR report to its website, issues a press release, maybe updates its blog and sends out a tweet, and calls it good. At least for a few months, until planning for the next report begins.

It's understandable—after you've wrestled the beast into shape, you figure you've earned the right to take a breather. But it's not nearly enough. In fact, it's a surefire way to get as little as possible from your work.

Because here's the unvarnished truth: Despite the growing

interest in corporate responsibility, few people actually read CR reports.

Influential NGOs and activist organizations take note of CR reports, as do media and industry analysts. And more and more investors are poring over reports, considering issues such as carbon emissions, supply chain management and corporate governance when evaluating a company's risk profile and growth potential.

But those readers make up a tiny percentage of those who cross paths with your company. What about your customers and prospects? Channel partners? Employees and recruits? Odds are they're not reading the report you spent all that time and money to produce.

That's a huge missed opportunity. Think of the added mileage your company could be getting from its investment.

(And if the higher-ups haven't yet asked about your CR report's ROI, it's only a matter of time.)

You have a couple of options. You could ratchet up PR and marketing to boost awareness of your CR report and increase readership. More outreach, executive speaking engagements, industry awards—those sorts of tactics. You may get some short-lived traction, but in the end you're still counting on people coming to you on your terms.

Put another way, you haven't addressed the core communications challenge: CR reports are notoriously long and difficult to read. Much of the content is specialized, inward facing and cloaked in corporate-speak. The format is typically linear and static. And because it's a look back, most of the information is stale the moment the report is released. Not a formula for success.

**The better option? Move beyond a standalone, once-a-year report to an ongoing CR communications platform to connect with the people you most want to reach.**

This approach offers a couple of notable advantages. First, you can make the most of the goldmine of content your company's CR initiatives are constantly creating. And second, by shifting your emphasis from merely informing stakeholders to engaging with them, you're in a better position to widen your audience, open up dialogue, deepen understanding and build goodwill.

## What is a CR communications platform?

Think of it as an ongoing stream of content that translates goals, policies and data into human-sized stories of insight, action and impact that are customized for specific audiences. It's going beyond a static, meticulously controlled accounting of performance to create a forum for education and engagement.

A CR communications platform is dynamic, just like corporate responsibility. While your goals and values may be bedrock, how you go about fulfilling them is as variable and diverse as your company's countless touchpoints with its stakeholders. Your communications should reflect that breadth.

To be clear, this is not about churning out happy talk or PR spin. One of the core principles of CR reporting is transparency, and it holds true with a broader communications platform. Be strategic in what information you disclose and how you share it, but don't shy away from issues that present challenges to your company or that lack easy or obvious answers.

Taking this approach doesn't preclude publishing a CR report, by the way. While the CR report is largely a reference document that stakeholders don't so much read as consult, it does present the context for your commitment to CR and the data to assess your performance. Your CR communications platform should build on the foundation your report provides, enhancing its value by enriching its information and amplifying its messages.

### Moving from CR report to communications platform

Once you've decided to go from publishing a single report to managing a broader communications platform, how do you turn intent into action? Begin with these seven steps.

## 1 Set communication goals

This sounds like a no-brainer. But the twist is that the goals you set for CR communications need to link to your organization's brand and business goals. In contrast, many CR reports are treated as specialized documents, often with much narrower objectives—such as driving traffic to the report's website, seeding media stories and earning high ratings and rankings.

If your company is focused on increasing sales in a particular market, launching a new product line or streamlining its supply chain, examine how your CR communications platform can support those initiatives. For example, you may be able to link a new product that raises the bar for energy efficiency to your company's broader goal to reduce carbon emissions, strengthening your competitive position while underscoring your leadership in environmental stewardship.

## 2 Understand and prioritize your stakeholder audiences

Developing a CR communications platform is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. From customers to investors, NGOs to employees, the informational needs and expectations of your audiences will vary.

To get a handle on those different needs and expectations, develop a profile of each stakeholder group that:

- Describes their perception of your company's CR performance. Is it positive, neutral or negative? Is it firm or in flux? Does it accurately represent your desired position or actual performance?
- Summarizes the CR issues of greatest importance to them. Are they focused on water use or carbon emissions? Labor rights? Executive compensation? Privacy?
- Identifies the most effective ways to reach out to them. Via e-newsletters? Events? Social media?
- Assesses their importance to meeting your business and communication goals.

Use these profiles to refine your communication goals, determine which stakeholder groups to focus on and develop strategies for outreach. And remember: Audience perceptions aren't static. Return to the profiles periodically to measure progress and calibrate your work.

### ③ Develop a CR content strategy

Plan ahead and think like a publisher, identifying themes to explore throughout the year—such as managing the risks of climate change or protecting human rights in the global supply chain. Be judicious. It can be tempting to cover a lot of ground at the expense of depth. One of the advantages of a CR communications platform is the opportunity to represent and explore complex issues thoroughly over time.

Map the themes to your stakeholder groups, identifying where and how their interests intersect with—or are at odds with—your company's priorities. While your themes won't resonate with all audiences in the same way, focusing on themes that are relevant to all audiences can help create critical mass for your CR communications.

If your company hasn't developed messaging to guide your CR communications, now is the time to tackle that vital step. And even if it has, it's a good idea to review and refine your messages before diving into content development.

In the messaging process, be clear about how you want to represent each theme. For each stakeholder group, develop a succinct statement that expresses your company's position, approach and activities. Consider how the messages align with your company's business strategy and brand positioning, and get buy-in from content experts and decision makers in your organization.

Finally, develop an editorial calendar. This is your tactical roadmap for the year, plotting how your CR communications platform will unfold. It doesn't necessarily need to include every detail, but it should give you a bird's-eye view of what you want to say, to whom and by what means.

For instance, you might decide that in March you want to update NGOs on how your company is helping suppliers in China reduce their carbon emissions. Your best bet might be a speaking opportunity at an event, an article placed on an industry website or a video testimonial from a supplier. Or all three, but at different times. Identifying the right tactics well in advance will help you line up the content each requires. It also helps you precisely target your communications and ensure they build on each other for greatest effect.

Sound like a lot of work? It is. But fear not—it pays big dividends. By dedicating the time up front to create a strong CR content strategy, you'll have the foundation for an integrated communications platform with the power to shape how stakeholders view and interact with your company.

## ④ Keep the content pipeline full

If you've produced a CR report, you know gathering and updating content is easier said than done. But it's essential to sustaining a CR communications platform—and it should make developing your next CR report easier in the long run.

Because CR is so broad and often decentralized, it can involve dozens of internal leaders and subject matter experts. Most will be busy enough with their day-to-day responsibilities that your requests for information will be a lower priority. Others may not consider CR to be part of their domain, making them even harder to reach.

Every organization is different, so there's no single process or tool to make content gathering easy. However, there are some overarching tactics to keep in mind:

- Look beyond position titles. Valuable information can come from unexpected sources.
- Share your editorial calendar and provide long lead times. If the only time you reach out to your contacts is when you have an urgent need, you'll quickly strain their willingness and ability to help.
- Be specific about the type of content you're looking for. Open-ended requests are much harder to fill. If you want a customer case study or if you'd like to interview someone involved in a community outreach program, say so.
- Welcome story ideas from your content providers. They have their finger on the pulse of the people and programs that bring CR to life.
- Ask for, organize and flag content with your CR report in mind. By maintaining a library of resources, you'll be able to move more efficiently when the time comes to develop the report and verify its content.
- Most important, make a compelling case for why CR communications are in your content providers' best interests. In other words, what's in it for them? How will feeding you information help them meet their goals?

### Reuse and recycle content

Another tip for keeping the pipeline full: Make the most of what you have by managing your editorial calendar with an eye on repurposing content. For example, stories for NGOs about how your company is helping suppliers reduce their carbon footprint can be fodder for an item in a customer newsletter or a blog post.

The key is reframing the content in a way that resonates with your target audience. Enterprise customers might be most interested in knowing how reducing the environmental impact of your supply chain saves them money, while consumers might respond to a profile of a factory worker who has benefited from training in environmental best practices.

## ⑤ Think beyond words

Use a full palette of media to express your CR messages. Some stories are better told through video, for example. Others may lend themselves to a photo essay, an infographic or even an interactive mobile app. Look for ways to show rather than simply tell—CR offers rich opportunities to profile how your company's commitment shows up in people's lives in ways that a data table or policy statement just can't capture.

Consult your audience profiles when thinking about media. Some vehicles are better suited for specific audiences. Also consider how formats or distribution channels can influence your content. One of the chronic problems with CR reports is that they're presented online, but not written or designed for easy onscreen reading. Lengthy web pages of dense copy are guaranteed to discourage readers, not draw them in.

You can sidestep this trap by customizing your CR communications to take advantage of the strengths of the channel. For example, digital communications should be short, timely, compelling and to the point. Print pieces can be longer and more evergreen. It all goes back to your content strategy and understanding who your target audience is and where they get their information.

## ⑥ Tie into existing communications

You don't have to create everything from scratch or go it alone. Chances are your company already has internal and external communications that can be great platforms for publishing CR content. E-newsletters, sales tools, executive talking points—even simple things, such as HR posters—can all be effective, as long as you align your CR message, target audience and communications channel.

Often the best way to tap into these opportunities is simply to ask. The internal communications department is probably working from an editorial calendar when developing employee newsletters and updating the intranet. The corporate communications team might be managing a speaker's bureau for executives. The sales team is constantly customizing their presentations for customers. And so on.

Once you've identified potential outlets, propose developing CR content that complements their communication goals—as well as yours. For example, point out how an announcement about a new customer win in the health care industry could make a bigger impact when paired with a story about your company's collaboration with NGOs to increase access to medical services.

For some outlets, you might offer raw CR content—factoids, testimonials, profiles of impact—that others can incorporate into their communications. It's also a good idea to have prepackaged content ready to go for slots that open up at the last minute.

Your aim should be to integrate CR throughout your company's communications, positioning it not as a separate initiative but core to business strategy. Including CR across the spectrum of communications shows that it's embedded in how your company operates.

## 7 Embrace dialogue

Of the seven steps, this might be the most important to the ongoing success of your CR communications platform. Embracing dialogue requires a shift not just in how you develop and deliver content, but also in why you're developing and delivering it in the first place.

Don't be afraid of inviting criticism. You'll get more from a CR communications platform if you approach it as an opportunity to engage, listen and learn. Your company is grappling with issues that extend well beyond its walls and people. Bringing others into the mix is an acknowledgment that your actions have a ripple effect and that you alone don't have all the answers—an idea at the very heart of corporate responsibility.

Dialogue also represents a higher level of transparency, which strengthens your credibility and can open up more productive relationships with stakeholders, particularly those who may be critical of your company. Talking *with* each other rather than *at* each other is bound to yield better results.

So tackle issues and pose questions that affect your company and your stakeholders, leaving room for other views or alternative solutions. Take advantage of technology and social media to make it easy for people to speak their mind—and to share their views with others. Be prepared to respond without being defensive. Use natural language; resist the urge to use legalese or corporate-speak. And adapt as you go, refining your CR content stream to reflect the perspectives and feedback you receive from stakeholders.

### Make the most of your investment

It's time to expand our thinking from producing a CR report to managing a CR communications platform. While your CR report serves a vital purpose, a sustained and targeted communications campaign can deliver greater impact and better leverage your investment. Your report may still be a beast, but by repurposing and enriching its content throughout the year, you can more tightly link CR to your company's brand and business goals while deepening engagement with stakeholders.

### Less me, more us

Most CR reports are an exercise in navel-gazing. That makes sense—the report's purpose is to account for your company's performance and its impact on stakeholders, so naturally the content puts you at the center.

With a CR communications platform, you're free to step out of the spotlight. Look for ways to frame your CR initiatives in terms of your stakeholders' businesses, communities or lives. For example, if your employees have done a great job setting up a volunteer literacy program in local schools, translate their work into best practices that others can draw on. Or if you've revamped your data center to improve its energy efficiency, share your insights to help other companies understand the considerations, process and outcomes.

You can also invite others to participate in your CR communications. For example, you might take a 360-degree view of a hot topic such as climate change by inviting an array of views, including those who don't agree with your own.

Bringing other voices into the mix increases the relevance and value of your CR communications—for you and your audiences—while helping you demonstrate rather than assert CR leadership.



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**About AHA!**

AHA! is a creative communications firm that works with leaders to accelerate progress on their most important business strategies. With our expertise in writing, we bring clarity to the ideas and messages that connect companies with the people who matter most to their success. While writing is core to what we do, it's not all we do. We thrive on finding fresh approaches to communications that shift thinking, drive innovation, deepen loyalty and inspire action. That's why, when the stakes are high, forward-thinking organizations count on AHA! to help shape and share their social and environmental responsibility stories.

Learn more about us at [www.aha-writers.com](http://www.aha-writers.com).