

## ***CREATING CONSUMER CONFIDENCE IN CSR COMMUNICATIONS***

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A large number of studies have suggested that consumers in Western countries increasingly attach importance to corporate social responsibility (CSR), i.e., the social and environmental activities of the companies they buy from (e.g., Cone, 2005). This is paralleled by an increasing interest in CSR among businesses, particularly large companies. For example, a survey by the Center for Corporate Citizenship at Boston College (CCCBC, 2005) reported that 98% of the large companies surveyed in the U.S. were actively involved in at least some CSR activities, and that 53% were motivated in these activities by the belief that CSR is important to consumers. In 2009, a follow-up survey showed that most companies had not decreased their CSR activities in spite of the economic crisis (CCCBC, 2009). However, as several studies show, consumers often lack knowledge of specific companies' CSR activities, which creates a gap between their attitudes and actual behavior (Sen *et al.*, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2010).

The effectiveness of CSR activities may thus be improved by improving communication about CSR to consumers. However, it is not clear in what way this communication should take place. Over the last decades, several empirical studies have been devoted to some aspect of the effectiveness of CSR communication. However, these studies have been published in a wide variety of fields, such as consumer psychology, advertising, and consumer policy, and an overview of their results is lacking. Recently, Du *et al.* (2010) published a review of the CSR communication literature, but this review was very limited in scope, surveying only the key publications in the field.

In this paper, we provide a more comprehensive review of the literature dealing with the effectiveness of CSR communication in terms of changing consumer perceptions and potentially stimulating their buying behaviour. In addition, we look at the parties involved in construction and verification of the CSR message and the possible deontological (relating to the firm's motives and actions) and/or consequentialist (relating to the outcomes of these actions) perspectives used in this process. We follow a broad definition of CSR as "a company's commitment to minimizing or eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing its long-run beneficial impact on society (Mohr *et al.*, 2001, p. 47).

### ***CSR INFORMATION CONSTRUCTED AND VERIFIED BY THE FIRM***

CSR communication by firms can take on many forms: print or television advertisements focusing on a specific product, claims made on product packages, advertising focusing on the company as a whole (i.e., corporate advertising), claims made on company websites, and, more recently, communications with customers (and investors) through separate publications such as sustainability reports.

#### *Product Advertising and Packaging Claims*

Some product advertisements or product packages contain claims regarding CSR, most often regarding the environmental friendliness of the product. Since the 1960s, the number of environmental product claims has increased and decreased in waves, presumably as a result of consumer concern over environmental issues (Easterling *et al.*, 1996). Several opinion polls in the U.S. have suggested that a substantial number of consumers are skeptical of environmental claims (see Mayer *et al.* 1993). However, Mayer *et al.* (1993) found that this skepticism does not seem to be related to the amount of exposure to the claims, suggesting that it is more a

function of general skepticism regarding advertising than of the nature of the environmental claims by themselves. Indeed, Mohr *et al.* (1998) found that consumer skepticism towards environmental claims is strongly related to their general skepticism towards marketing. Mohr *et al.* (2001) found that some consumers actually prefer advertising as a source for CSR information, although other consumers are more skeptical. Similarly, a survey by Cone (2005) showed that while American consumers prefer third-party sources over company sources to obtain information about CSR, they regard advertising as the most preferred company source.

These findings suggest that while consumers are critical of environmental claims, they do not necessarily discount all environmental claims they encounter. However, research has also shown that when consumers do feel that an environmental claim is misleading, this is likely to lead to a decrease in their evaluations of the product and their purchase intentions (Chen, 2010; Newell *et al.*, 1998).

Which factors, then, determine the credibility of CSR-related claims? Davis (1994b) showed that specific claims regarding environmental product attributes (like “100% biodegradable”) lead to more favourable perceptions of the company’s commitment to the environment than general claims (like “Earth friendly”), and also to more favourable product evaluations and purchase intentions. On the other hand, Maronick and Andrews (1999) found that when general claims (e.g., “ozone friendly”) were coupled with specific qualifiers (e.g., “no CFCs”) this lead consumers to perceive a product as safer for the environment than when either only a general claim or only a specific claim was presented. While general claims may be perceived as puffery because they cannot be verified, specific claims may be hard to interpret by themselves. When used together, they may compensate each other’s weaknesses and increase consumer trust.

In addition to the format of the claims made in an ad or on a package, an important issue concerns the content of the claims. Some authors (Schaefer and Crane, 2005; Witkowski, 2005) have suggested that highlighting more traditional consumer benefits, like the quality and the symbolic value of the product, would be more successful than really focusing on CSR as such. For example, Szmigin *et al.* (2007) argue that consumers can use ethical product attributes to distinguish themselves from others, to experience pleasure, or to express concern for others, and that these values can be used to position ethical products on. The salience of motives related to social status has been confirmed in a study by Griskevicius *et al.* (2010). The recommendation to focus on traditional benefits is also consistent with research into the barriers for sustainable consumption, which include an unwillingness to trade off CSR against quality and other more traditional benefits (Biedermann, 2005; Carrigan *et al.*, 2004; Young *et al.*, 2010), and a fear of being labelled as “gullible” or “weird” by people in their environment (Schaefer and Crane, 2005). This implies, for example, that a brand aspiring to be a “CSR brand” first needs to convince consumers that it also provides good quality and other benefits. Chen’s (2010) study confirmed that satisfaction with a product’s performance has a substantial influence on consumer preferences for green products. In addition, some studies have shown that CSR claims can actually decrease perceived product quality (Luchs *et al.*, 2010, Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001, Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2011). For example, Luchs *et al.* (2010) showed that when consumers value product attributes related to ‘strength’ (e.g. power, effectiveness), CSR claims lower consumer product preferences because consumers see them as inconsistent with strength-related attributes.

Some CSR brands have clearly followed a strategy of de-emphasizing their socially responsible nature. For example, Cafédirect’s highly successful advertising campaign for its fair

trade coffees primarily focused on images of exotic cultures and the taste of the coffee, rather than on explaining its fair trade character (Wright, 2004). As Wright notes, there seems to be an inherent tension between the fair trade principle and the way it is advertised by Cafédirect, i.e., respecting farmers' rights on the one hand and making them into objects of consumption on the other hand. However, this might be a better way to get consumers interested in fair trade than only focusing on the fair trade aspect, which might appeal only to the niche market of consumers who place a very high value on the deontological side of CSR. On the other hand, Bezençon and Blili (2010) found that the perceived symbolic or hedonic value of fair trade coffee had no or only a weak relationship with consumer involvement with fair trade. Rather, the social and environmental benefits of fair trade were strong predictors of fair trade involvement. Therefore, focusing on quality or symbolism might not be the best solution in every case. In some cases, the primary barriers for consumers to buy sustainable products might not be doubts about product benefits, but a lack of conviction that their purchases will really make a difference (Biedermann, 2005, Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2007), or a lack of clarity over what kind of conduct can be called "sustainable" (Carrigan and Attala, 2001). In such cases, advertising that gives clear and detailed explanations of the CSR attributes would likely be most effective. In other cases, the problem might be that consumers don't see themselves as "socially responsible" or "environmentally friendly". Then, cueing socially responsible behaviours that they recognize in themselves seems to be a strategy that can change these perceptions (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2008). This would amount to a "social marketing" approach, which focuses on removing the barriers for people to engage in beneficial behaviours, rather than trying to sell a product (Golding and Peattie, 2005).

*Corporate Advertising*

Corporate advertising focuses on a company as a whole instead of specific products, and generally is aimed at improving the company's image among the general public. Corporate advertising by American companies seems to have increased steadily over the last decades (Cardona, 1998; Schumann *et al.*, 1991), although it also seems to be sensitive to economic recessions (Schumann *et al.*, 1991). Almost forty years ago, Grass *et al.* (1972) addressed the effectiveness of a corporate ad campaign by Du Pont that focused on the company's "interest in the welfare of society" and public safety. They found that this campaign positively affected people's opinion of the company's commitment to society. Similarly, Winters (1988) investigated the effectiveness of the "People do" corporate ad campaign by Chevron, which focused on environmental protection activities. He found that the campaign significantly improved not only attitudes but also actual purchase behaviours among socially conscious consumers. More recently, Sheinin and Biehal (1999) found that corporate advertising focusing both on a company's manufacturing capability and its activities regarding environmental protection positively influenced people's attitudes toward the company and to its product brands.

Which aspects of the content of the corporate advertising message may influence its effectiveness? As in the case of product advertising and packaging, the nature of the claims made in a corporate ad may be important. Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) argued that communicating about the actual impact of the company's CSR actions on society would be much more credible than communicating about programs or policies. Similarly, Berens and van Rekom (2008) found that a corporate ad highlighting specific environmental actions and performance was perceived as significantly more credible and diagnostic for the company's CSR than an ad discussing only general principles and values. These results mirror those in environmental product advertising (e.g., Davis, 1994a). They are also consistent with anecdotal

evidence such as the high effectiveness of Chevron's "People do" campaign, which focused on very concrete environmental actions like constructing wooden platforms above electricity wires to protect eagles (Winters 1988). In addition, Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) argued that in many cases, corporate ads ought to provide a clear explanation of the nature of the social issue(s) that the company is addressing. The reason is that thinking about social issues often requires more cognitive effort for consumers than, say, buying a product, and if this effort is too large, people will probably not be persuaded by the ad. On the other hand, in a study by Auger *et al.* (2008), providing information on CSR attributes did not change consumer preferences regarding CSR.

The context in which an ad is published, i.e., other information that consumers have about the company, may be also an important aspect. Keller and Aaker (1998) found that while corporate ads describing either a company's environmental or community-oriented actions enhanced the company's image, they did not produce more favourable purchase intentions when no product positioning was provided. However, when the product was also positioned as environmentally friendly or as helping the community, the corporate ads did increase purchase intentions. Apparently, the information about the company and the information about the product reinforced each other.

### ***CSR INFORMATION VERIFIED BY A THIRD PARTY***

Some types of CSR communication will depend on a third party in terms of the credibility of the information presented. Examples include charity partners in cause-related marketing schemes, labelling and certification partners such as Fair Trade or Max Havelaar, and finally certain government branches in disclosures to the market.

#### *Cause-Related Marketing*

Companies sometimes conduct product promotions which are linked to CSR. Generally, such a promotion consists of a direct link between product sales and philanthropic donations, e.g., when the company donates a fixed amount of money to a cause for every product sold (Pracejus and Olsen, 2004). While this type of promotion has been popular in North America for some time, companies have so far used it only sparingly in other continents (Lavack and Kropp, 2003). Studies comparing cause-related marketing to a “baseline” condition generally have found that the majority of consumers tend to react favourably to this type of communication (Nan and Heo, 2007; Webb and Mohr, 1998).

Many studies have investigated the role of the fit or similarity between the cause that benefits from the marketing campaign and the company’s core activities. For example, Ellen *et al.* (2006) found that when the cause fits well with the company’s core activities, this leads to more favourable attributions regarding the company’s motives for the campaign, and to higher purchase intentions. The positive roles of fit and perceived motives have been established by numerous other studies (e.g., Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006; Pracejus and Olsen; 2004). On the other hand, some more recent studies suggest that when both information on fit and information on company motives is present, fit does not seem to have much influence (Barone *et al.*, 2007; Lafferty, 2007). In addition, Zdravkovic *et al.* (2011) found that a company can create a perception of high fit not only by choosing a cause that is similar to it, but also by communicating about the partnership in the right way. Interestingly, results show that “self-serving” motives like image enhancement and generating sales are not necessarily perceived as bad, as long as they are not too blatantly egoistic. In fact, it may be best when consumers attribute both self-serving and other-serving motives to the company (Ellen *et al.*, 2006). These findings suggest that consumers generally are not extremely skeptical of cause-related

marketing efforts, but regard them as legitimate actions with a combined societal and business goal. In fact, Youn and Kim (2008) even found that the more skeptical consumers are about advertising in general, the more supportive they tend to be toward cause-related marketing. It seems that many consumers see this form of CSR as a refreshingly sincere type of marketing.

### *Labelling and certification*

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of labelling initiatives focusing on CSR attributes. For example, in 1996 the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) introduced the ISO 14000 standards, which focus on environmental aspects, and in 1997 Social Accountability International issued SA-8000, a standard for workplace conditions. In addition, a number of different labels have appeared that focus on fair trade (e.g., FairTrade, Max Havelaar) and biological products (e.g., the EU's label of organic products). An important motivation for companies to participate in such initiatives is that they are expected to create a favourable reputation among consumers (Fulponi, 2006). An independent organisation issuing an accreditation is thought to provide a credible signal that can establish such a reputation. However, it remains to be seen whether this really works in practice. Some conditions would need to be satisfied: first, consumers should recognize and trust the label; and second, they should attach importance to what the label represents. Some researchers and organisations have expressed concern over these conditions, particularly because of the proliferation of labels related to CSR and apparent consumer confusion over them (e.g., Giovannucci, 2003). Several empirical studies have examined to what degree consumers trust and use third-party certification labels related to labour conditions and environmentally friendly production. Loureiro *et al.* (2002) showed that the more importance consumers attached to food safety and the environment, the more they were willing to pay for apples with an eco-label. Similar results

were obtained by Royne *et al.* (2011) for environmentally friendly products in general, and by Dickson (2001) for a “no sweat” label on apparel. In a European setting, De Pelsmacker *et al.* (2005) showed that people who regarded themselves as idealistic and unconventional were willing to pay more for coffee carrying a “fair trade” label, while several studies (Sparks and Shepherd, 1992; Torjussen *et al.*, 2001) showed that people who care about ethical, environmental, and health issues are more likely to buy “organic” meat.

On the other hand, consumer surveys in the U.K. showed that consumers generally had favourable, but often erroneous, beliefs regarding organic meat (Brennan *et al.*, 2003). In a study by Rousu and Corrigan (2008), some consumers, after being presented with objective information about the concept of fair trade, switched their choice from fair trade to non-fair trade, or vice versa. This suggests that some consumers do not have an accurate idea about what fair trade actually is. Similarly, De Pelsmacker and Janssens (2007) found that the feeling of being informed about fair-trade is an important determinant of whether a consumer actually buys fair-trade products. Finally, a study among subscribers of the UK magazine *Ethical Consumer* (Shaw and Clarke, 1999) showed that these people regarded fair trade labels as highly reliable, although they regarded most other “ethical” labels as unsatisfactory. Together, these results suggest that some well-known labels do inspire confidence among most consumers that the labels actually represent what they claim to represent, although this does not hold for all labels or for all consumers.

One way to increase the credibility of third-party labels might be through the retailer. The market power of retailers has increased substantially over the last decades, and many retailers are very strong brands in the eyes of consumers. A study by Castaldo *et al.* (2009) showed that when consumers perceive a retailer as socially responsible, they are also more likely to trust the

“fair-trade” labelled products that the retailer carries. Therefore, the retailer could to some extent take over the role of the third-party endorser in providing the label with credibility.

Virtually all certification labels dealing with CSR focus on positive attributes. That is, they signal that a product carrying the label is better than a product not carrying the label. However, research by Grankvist *et al.* (2004) suggests that negative labels, which indicate that a product performs poorer than others, might be more effective for some groups of consumers.

Particularly, these authors found that consumers who attach a moderate importance to the environment are more influenced in their product preferences by negative labels than by positive labels. Presumably, this is because such consumers think the status quo regarding the environment is not so bad. Therefore, they may be willing to help the environment from getting worse (by avoiding environmentally “bad” products”), but less willing to help the environment to improve. This is also reflected in a study by (Folkes and Kamins, 1999), which showed that consumers are more influenced by negative information about CSR than by positive information. These studies suggest that labels should focus more on identifying the “bad” companies. A well-known example of such a label is the EU Energy Label, which was made mandatory for household appliances by the European Committee in 1995. This label seems to be quite effective in informing consumers (Sammer and Wüstenhagen, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2010). Young *et al.* (2010) therefore call for the establishment of similar labels for other environmental issues. However, a practical problem in implementing such negative labels might be that companies will be unlikely to adopt them voluntarily. Therefore, such labels would be more likely to take the form of *disclosures* of CSR attributes, either voluntary or mandated, than of overall labels signalling disapproval.

A potential disadvantage of third-party certification labels in general is that they only convey an overall assessment of whether a company or product meets some requirements, without providing details on company or product attributes. Therefore, more detailed disclosures may sometimes be needed instead of, or in addition to, overall labels. For example, when an environmental label would incorporate both the sustainability of the production process and the biodegradability of the product itself, it seems likely that interested consumers would want to know detailed information on both attributes, because products that carry the label might differ in the degree to which they are rated on each of these attributes.

### *Disclosures*

While companies have disclosed detailed information to their stockholders for a long time, disclosures to consumers are a relatively new phenomenon. Roe *et al.* (2001) investigated the effectiveness of detailed company disclosures regarding environmental attributes in an experimental setting. Their results suggest that disclosure by companies is generally more effective than third-party certification in producing consumer confidence in the information provided to them, and in attracting consumers to environmentally friendly companies. Similarly, in the context of nutrition information, several studies showed that consumers prefer the separate labelling of ingredients over one “overall” standardised label (FSA, 2005; Kozup *et al.*, 2003). The European Consumers’ Organisation BEUC’s Discussion Group on Simplified Labelling also concluded that while some overall nutrition labels, such as the Swedish “keyhole”, were received favourably by consumers, in general consumers prefer more detailed labelling (BEUC, 2006). On the other hand, providing detailed labels might be less beneficial for companies (at least in the short run), as consumers seem to perceive products with a detailed

label as less environmentally friendly than products with only a general label (Teisl *et al.*, 2008). Presumably, this difference in perceptions is caused by inaccurate consumer beliefs on the meaning of general labels, as discussed in the previous section.

Research in nutrition information disclosures has suggested that numerical information accompanied by colour codes (e.g., red for “high”, amber for “medium” and green for “low”) is perceived as more useful, and also used more, by consumers than numerical information alone (FSA, 2005). On the other hand, theories on attitude change and persuasion suggest that the degree to which detailed information is used in decision making is also a function of the level of involvement of the audience (e.g., Rucker and Petty, 2006). That is, the more involved consumers are with the message, the more effort they are willing to spend on processing it, and the less likely it is that interpretation problems will arise.

### ***CSR INFORMATION RECEIVED THROUGH A THIRD PARTY***

Even when not communicating directly to consumers, companies can convey information about their CSR practices through the news media and other means of publicity. Although the firm may not always be able to steer such information in the ideal way (through PR activities for instance) it is important to look at the effectiveness of such messages through third party media channels in terms of the perception of the consumer and possible effects on consumer behaviour.

#### *Independent consumer guides*

In recent years, several independent consumer magazines have started to focus partially or completely on providing information on CSR to consumers. For example, general consumer magazines like Consumer Guide (U.S.) now often pay attention to CSR related attributes, while magazines like Ethical Consumer (U.K.) focus specifically on CSR. Some experimental studies

have investigated the influence of CSR information provided through a consumer guide type of format. Brown and Dacin (1997) provided information on a (fictitious) company using a “company report card” which was ostensibly prepared by “impartial industry experts”. They found that the positive information regarding philanthropy and community involvement provided in this way increased respondents’ ratings of the company’s CSR, as well as their attitude towards the company and its product. Madrigal (2000) replicated this result for environmentally friendly production, while Mohr and Webb (2005) showed that information on environmentally friendly production, presented in this way, also impacted consumer purchase intentions. Yoon *et al.* (2006) found that independent source increased the perceived sincerity of CSR communication, and hence also the degree to which it had a positive effect on company attitude.

In a more naturalistic setting, Mohr *et al.* (2001) interviewed consumers regarding their information preferences with respect to CSR, and found that many consumers would prefer “objective” ratings available through the Internet over advertising and news stories. Similarly, in their study on older ethical consumers, Carrigan *et al.* (2004) found that the independent media seem to be the most important source of CSR information for these consumers. On the other hand, Shaw and Clarke (1999) and Shaw *et al.* (2006) found that although subscribers to *Ethical Consumer* magazine highly trusted this and other publications as a source of information on labour and environmental conditions, they often felt overwhelmed by the information, feeling unable to incorporate all of it into their purchase decisions.

Besides being used by consumers for their individual purchase decisions, consumer guides and other independent media publishing CSR behaviours might also lead to organised consumer action, i.e. boycotts or “buycotts”. For example, Sen *et al.* (2001) examined the

influence of a newspaper article describing a call for boycotting a company by a consumer organisation. They found that people's willingness to participate was mainly determined by the expected effectiveness of the boycott (e.g., how many people they expected to participate) and by the availability of substitutes to the to-be-boycotted product. Beyond such instrumental considerations, Klein *et al.* (2004) also found that people may participate in a boycott to feel good about themselves or to receive approval from others. On the other hand, Carrigan *et al.* (2004) showed that some older ethical consumers are turned off by the often one-sided and aggressive tone of calls for boycotts.

### *Publicity*

Sen *et al.* (2006) investigated the influence of publicity in the local news media regarding a company's campaign to support the local community. Their results showed that people who were aware of this publicity were more likely to believe that the company is socially responsible, had more favourable attitudes toward the company, and were more willing to buy the company's products, than people who were not aware of the campaign. However, even though the campaign was highlighted extensively in the local media, only 17% of their sample was actually aware of it.

Similarly, in an experimental setting Murray and Vogel (1997) found that a (fictitious) company's positive CSR actions regarding its employees (child care facilities), the environment, and communities, as communicated through a newspaper article, positively influenced consumer evaluations of the company's concern for employees, communities, and the environment. In addition, the information positively affected consumer purchase intentions.

Arnold *et al.* (1996) and Handelman and Arnold (1999) investigated the influence of visible community involvement actions of a retailer on consumer attitudes and support

intentions. Arnold *et al.* (1996) found that the perceived community involvement of the store increased actual purchase behaviour. However, they also found that this effect was much weaker for people who regarded the company as delivering the most value for money. On the other hand, Handelman and Arnold (1999) found that the effect of a retailer's community involvement on consumer support for the company was reduced when the company's quality, location, and assortment were perceived as unattractive. Together, these results suggest that when the quality or value of a company's products is either excellent or inferior compared to competitors, visible community involvement is not likely to increase consumer support or behaviour. This result is similar to that obtained by Lichtenstein *et al.* (2004) and Strahilevitz (2003) in the area of cause-related marketing: companies with an average reputation benefit more from CSR than companies with either an excellent or a poor reputation.

In addition, consumers may also be skeptical of news stories, sometimes taking them to be "merely" PR (Mohr *et al.*, 2001). Like corporate advertising, generating publicity regarding CSR may even have adverse effects in some cases. Wagner *et al.* (2009) showed that consumer attitudes toward a company after negative CSR information regarding were lower when that company had earlier emphasized its positive CSR actions through a press release than when the company had not emphasized such actions. This result is consistent with that of Davis (1994a) in a corporate advertising context. As noted above, the length of time over which a company has demonstrated its CSR activities may be an important determinant of the way in which consumers react to CSR communication when a crisis occurs. In fact, when consumers do believe that a company is truly socially responsible, such beliefs can actually protect a company from a crisis, even when that crisis concerns the company's CSR (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2011).

## *DISCUSSION*

What is the best way to communicate about CSR to consumers in order to build and strengthen the CSR profile of the firm and its products? Regarding the question, who should construct and verify a CSR message, the studies reviewed in this paper suggest that messages constructed and verified by the firm only (e.g., advertising) can be quite effective in persuading consumers, if they are communicated in a credible way. The latter can, for example, be done by including specific behaviors and/or outcomes in the message, and by specifying the benefits for consumers. Messages constructed by the firm, but verified by a third party (such as labels and disclosures) tend to have a higher credibility, but risk containing either too little information (as in the case of general labels) or too much information (as in the case of disclosures). Finally, messages constructed and verified by a third party can be seen as the most credible kind (as in the case of independent consumer guides), but can sometimes be seen as merely PR devices for a firm (e.g. news reports based on company press releases).

From an ethical perspective, we can make the broad distinction between deontological responsibility (as advocated by, e.g., Immanuel Kant) and consequentialist responsibility (as advocated by J.S. Mill and others). From a deontological perspective the firm has a moral obligation to operate in an ethical fashion. Exactly what “ethical” means in this context is a matter of debate, but the main focus here is on the operational nature of the deontological responsibility, which focuses on the firm’s behavior and its moral values. The consequentialist responsibility on the other hand relates to consequences of the firm’s behavior. This distinction is also apparent in Wood’s (1991) conceptualisation of CSR, which clearly separates CSR policies, programs, and outcomes. From the literature discussed in this paper, it seems not entirely clear to what extent the consumer is actually looking for a “good firm” (which would be

consistent with deontological responsibility), or for or a “good product” (which would correspond more to a consequentialist responsibility). For example, the literature shows that in terms of “good products”, it is sometimes difficult to position the CSR message into the offering in such a way that it’s not overshadowed by other attributes such as price and quality (e.g. Young *et al.*, 2010). As Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) argue, the actions of the firm are important to consumers, but the outcomes that result from those actions are perhaps even more important. Indeed, studies on the effectiveness of specific versus general claims (e.g., Davis 1994b, Berens & Van Rekom 2008) suggest that a combination of emphasis on both deontological and consequentialist responsibilities of the firm will be more effective in CSR communications. Future research should further address this distinction to find out which perspective has more weight in specific circumstances both from the view of the firm and the consumer.

In terms of third party verification of the CSR message, ongoing research in cause-related marketing seems particularly fertile in terms of introducing the distinction between deontological responsibility and consequentialist responsibility. Fit and perceived motives of the firm and the related charity positively affect purchase intentions (e.g., Ellen *et al.*, 2006), which points to the deontological perspective. At the same time, achieved results for the sponsored charity will often be the focus of the promotional campaign of the firm which points towards the consequentialist perspective. Clearly more research is needed to establish the balance between deontological responsibility and consequentialist responsibility as communicated to the consumer and its effect on consumer perception and purchase intentions.

In terms of labelling and certification, the literature shows that there is quite a lot of confusion in terms of the perception and understanding of labels by the consumer. By making a

clearer distinction between deontological responsibility (“company X has the following values, environmental policies and programs”) and the consequentialist responsibility of the firm (“company X’s products are good for you and the environment”), it may be possible to provide more clarity in the proliferation of CSR labels that has happened over the last few years.

From a managerial perspective, communicating that a firm is good and does good things seems natural. From an academic perspective this distinction clearly deserves much more attention.

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