

Lundquist CSR Online Awards Survey 2011

Building trust in online audiences



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The Lundquist CSR Online Awards Survey 2011 was conducted to understand how CSR professionals and stakeholders – people who work regularly on corporate responsibility and sustainability issues – use the internet to get information and exchange views. Following last year’s focus on stakeholder engagement and social media, the 2011 study examined what elements help build trust and confidence in online audiences.

A total of 312 people responded to the 2011 survey, up 22% from 2010 and bringing to more than 800 the answers received over four years of surveys. The questionnaire, launched on 23 May 2011, drew responses from 37 countries. A full 71% of respondents worked outside of corporations, being journalists, sustainability consultants and sustainability rating analysts as well as people working in academia, think tanks, industry associations and NGOs.

While previous surveys have captured the scepticism and mistrust with which many people treat companies’ social and environmental claims, this year’s study sought to identify aspects that make online content more authoritative, credible and reliable in the eyes of users.

The survey forms the foundation for the CSR Online Awards, which evaluates companies in terms of the CSR or sustainability section of their corporate website. Survey responses (excluding CSR staff and other corporate “insiders”) are analysed to revise the criteria used to evaluate sites, create new ones and calibrate the allocation of points so as to reward companies that best respond to user needs.

Key findings

>> Half of respondents check corporate websites for CSR-related information **at least several times a week**, more than one in six doing so **on a daily basis**

>> The main reason for going to a corporate website remains that of accessing the CSR report; but this motive is rapidly declining in importance in favour of **summaries, data, case studies and news**

>> The most important aspects for establishing trust and confidence in users is **adoption of international guidelines and frameworks, performance data** and information about **external assurance**

>> There is widespread interest in **stakeholder dialogue**, how it influences **decision-making** and in **stakeholder points of view**

>> Although the survey shows how online audiences are diverse with differing preferences, users repeatedly indicated the importance of **data, targets, case studies, governance and policies**, as well as information about the **environmental impact** of products or services

>> Almost half of respondents are very keen to have an **ongoing flow of information** from companies: they want to see **responses to issues in the media, updated environmental data, press releases, case studies** and for companies to be active in **social media**

>> **YouTube** is emerging to become one of the most used social media channels for CSR – second after **LinkedIn** – although **Twitter** is widely used by the most intense social media users; use of Facebook for CSR is growing too

About survey respondents and their online habits

The study covered a wide range of job types, which can be broadly split between non-corporate and corporate roles, in other words between “consumers” and “producers” of CSR information (although corporate people do their fair share of information-gathering on the web as well).

For some of the survey questions, responses from both of these categories can be taken as valid. But for those more directly focused on the expectations and demands of stakeholders, non-corporate responses were analysed separately. In some cases, interesting divergences emerge between how the two groups understand CSR communications, for example in the use of social media or the importance attributed to the CSR report.

Non-corporate respondents included mostly **CSR and sustainability consultants** (16% of total responses), **communications experts** (9%), **journalists** (7%), **researchers** or people working in **think tanks** (6%), people at **NGOs** or **non-profit organisations** (6%), **students** (6%) and **university teachers** (3%) as well as **financial and non-financial analysts** (5%). Together with other non-corporate categories, these responses represented **71% of the survey** (220 responses).

The bulk of corporate responses came from **CSR managers and directors** (14% of all responses) and others working in **the CSR team** (6%).

More than two-thirds of respondents had worked in CSR or sustainability for **at least three years**, with one in five boasting **over 10 years of experience**.

Just over a quarter of respondents were aged 18 to 30 and about a third were aged between 31 and 40. Another third were between 41 and 55 with the rest older than 55. In general, corporate respondents

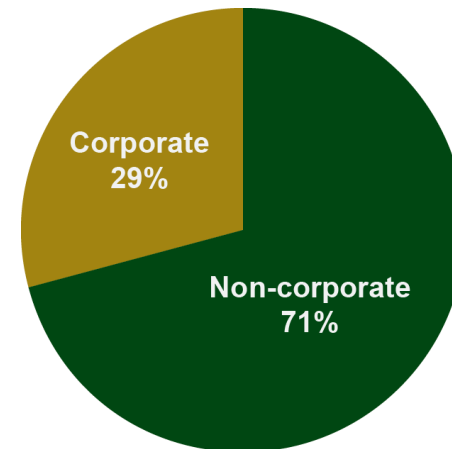
were older and had been working for longer on CSR issues as compared with non-corporate respondents, where for example **30% of respondents were aged between 18 and 30**.

Just over half of respondents came from continental Europe, with a substantial representation from Italy. For this reason, Italian results were analysed separately from the rest when revising the evaluation criteria to avoid cases where those responses varied from the general trend.

Other countries that were well represented in the survey were the U.S. (11%), U.K. (10%), Germany (8%), Sweden and France (4% each). Around 11% came from regions other than Europe and North America.

Respondents reported they were using the internet regularly to search for information about corporate responsibility, including on

Chart 3: Breakdown of survey respondents by type (% of 312 responses)



Source: Lundquist CSR Online Awards 2011

corporate websites. Almost half (46%) are **going online for this reason on a daily basis** and almost three quarters several times a week.

Half consult corporate websites for CSR information every day or several times a week with **seven in 10 non-corporate respondents going to company websites on at least a weekly basis**. This goes to show how much of a reference point they have become when searching for information about CSR or sustainability.

Ensuring credibility of online communications

The theme of this year's survey was **building trust in online audiences**. While many companies are adept at building an online CSR presence constructed around the content of their CSR reporting, our previous studies have shown that stakeholders remain sceptical about what they read on corporate websites (which is not to say they have great faith in what they read in reports either). They remain suspicious of green- or white-washing or at least that the information is selective or only presents one side of the story.

We therefore sought to understand better what kind of information and features help to restore credibility. For those companies that are really committed to responsibility and sustainability, how can they convey their aims, approach and achievements in a convincing way?

One question addressed this issue head-on. When asked what gave **greatest confidence when assessing' online CSR information**, non-corporate respondents picked out adherence to international **principles and guidelines** such as the Global Compact and Global Reporting Initiative as their top choice. This was followed by **performance data** and **external assurance**. Other popular responses were **perspectives from external experts, partnerships with NGOs** and **quantitative targets** (see chart 4).

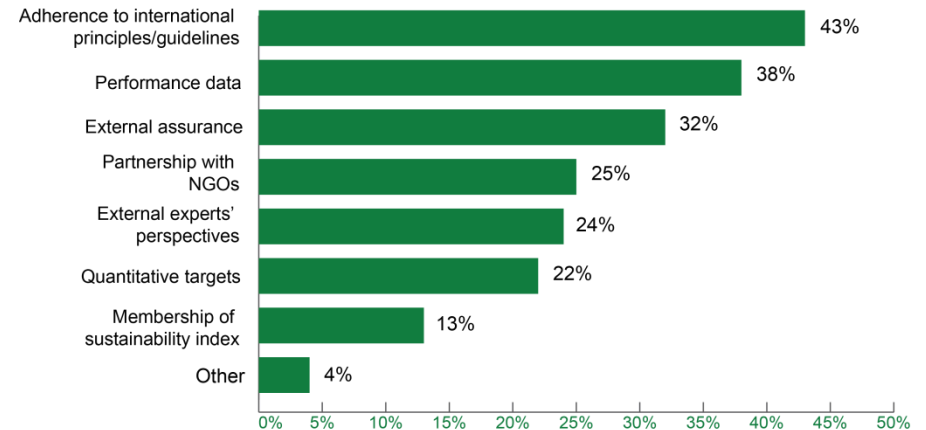
It's telling that many of these choices reflect the input of **external**

people or organisations, indicating that users are more wary if they detect a self-referential approach to CSR, closed off to outside influence. External opinions, partnerships, guides and checks help to put a company's CSR programme into context and mean it is generally aligned with international standards and comparable to other firms.

Many respondents, for example, stated they distinguish **different types and levels of external assurance** when reading CSR information, a sign of the importance attributed to this aspect. Almost a third of non-corporate respondents said they always check this.

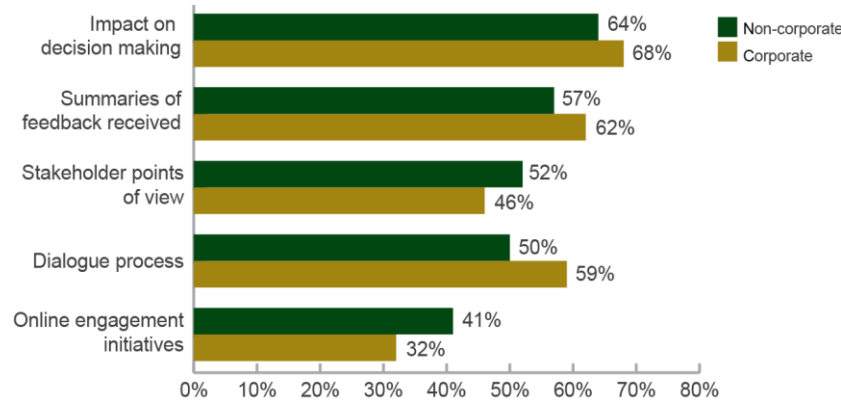
The importance of external influences was supported by the strong interest shown in **stakeholder engagement**. Non-corporate respondents indicated they want more than a simple description of

Chart 4: What gives greatest confidence when assessing online CSR information? (% of 166 non-corporate responses, two choices allowed)



Source: Lundquist CSR Online Awards 2011

Chart 5: Most popular information about stakeholder engagement
(% of 249 responses, multiple choices allowed)



Source: Lundquist CSR Online Awards 2011

the dialogue process so they can understand above all **how engagement influences decision-making** and to read, hear or **view stakeholder points of view or actual feedback**.

It appears that users are not so concerned about the potentially partial nature of this content (assuming most companies will choose to put forward favourable opinions rather than critical voices) but instead want to see evidence that the company is open to external “influence” and not only working based on an inward-looking agenda.

Priority content: breaking down the boundaries between website and report

When it comes to actual corporate responsibility information, the company website offers an excellent place to provide a clear picture to stakeholders. When asked what kind of content they consider most

critical, non-corporate users repeatedly stressed the importance of

- **data**
- **targets**
- **case studies**
- **governance**
- **policies** and
- information about the **environmental impact** of a company’s products or services.

For example, when asked to choose the most vital pieces of social information, 51% of non-corporate respondents picked **supply-chain management**, followed by a **human rights policy or declaration** (34%), **case studies** (33%) and **data on community investment and employees** (32% and 29% respectively).

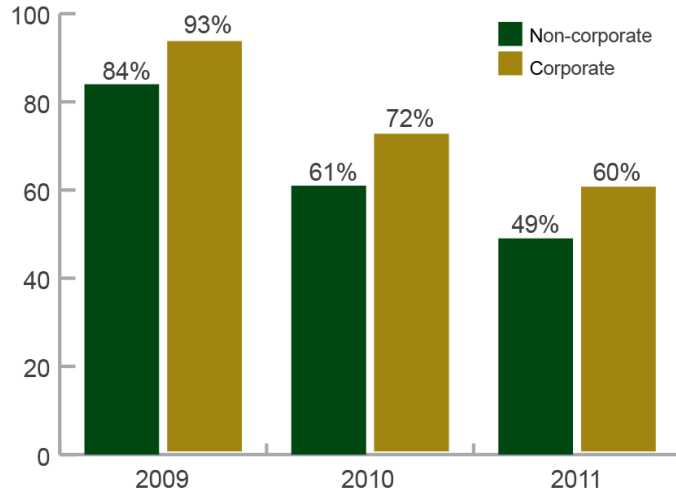
As for environmental information, the most popular choices went to:

- **performance data (52%)**
- information on the **environmental impact of the company’s products or services (52%)**
- **environmental targets (37%)**
- **case studies (36%)**
- an explanation of **climate change strategy (34%)** and
- a presentation of its **environmental management system (34%)**.

It is striking again this year how the survey suggests a company’s non-financial report is **losing its importance** as the principal reference point for CSR information. When non-corporate users were asked what were the three main uses they’d like to make of a corporate website’s CSR section, **only 49% stated that it would be to consult the CSR report** (or integrated report). That compares with 61% in 2010 and 84% in 2009. For corporate respondents, the figure stood at 60% in 2011, down from 72% a year earlier and 93% in 2009.

For sure, the report remains the No. 1 reason for going to a company’s CSR section, but only just.

Chart 6: Proportion of respondents citing CSR report as one of top three reasons for visiting corporate website (% of all respondents, 2009-2011)



Source: Lundquist CSR Online Awards 2011

Many stakeholders would rather read an overview of the company's CSR programme and its objectives (47%), access key performance data and case studies (40% each) or find latest news announcements (37%). Indeed, companies must be aware their websites and reports have to "compete" for these users' attention with other online resources and information providers.

This trend will only increase with the development of a data provision industry around sustainability and CSR. Of our survey respondents, just over half said they regularly consult **NGO websites** (56%) and other **websites aggregating information** on CSR topics such as [CSRHub](#), [CorporateRegister.com](#) or the [Business & Human Rights Resource Centre](#) (51%) for non-financial data or reports. Other

sources such as sustainability ratings, the Carbon Disclosure Project and Bloomberg are also frequently used.

We are therefore seeing a shift in the concept of non-financial information from a **disclosure-centred model** – based on the report as a discrete document and the only "official" source – towards a **hybrid model** that spans both reporting and communications and covers a multiplicity of online and offline channels. As the traditional boundary between reporting and communicating gets increasingly blurred and the focus turns more to the web, it becomes critical to ensure every effort is made to **ensure the credibility of information published online**.

In fact, many users would prefer a unification of report and corporate website: 44% of non-corporate respondents said it's "very" or "quite" useful if companies report principally online **through web-based reporting**, which involves reporting directly in the pages of the CSR section of the corporate website.

To be sure, about a quarter stated they'd **prefer a PDF or hard copy** of the document, which is an important minority. The lesson here is that companies must cater to both of these requirements by publishing report content in a variety of formats.

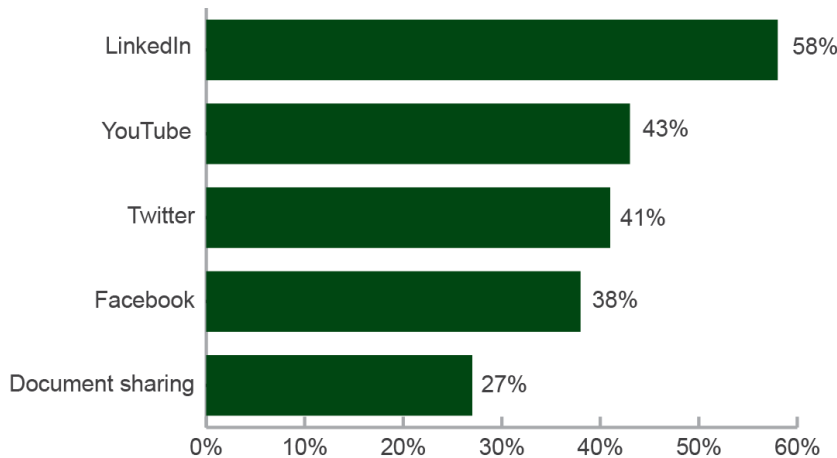
Ongoing engagement and mapping use of social media for CSR

Digital communications is also vastly different from reporting because of the need to build relationships with online audiences through an **ongoing flow of information**.

A large majority of respondents (72%) expressed a preference for **regular updates on environmental, social and governance developments** between one report and another, with one in 10 non-corporate respondent saying this was of “critical” importance. Users were particularly interested in getting **companies’ response to issues in the media or public debate, key environmental data, press releases and case studies**.

Almost a third said they’d like to see ongoing engagement through **social media**. In this regard, however, less than half of survey respondents indicated they were using social media in relation to

Chart 7: Social media channels used for CSR (% of 236 responses stating daily, weekly or monthly use for CSR)



Source: Lundquist CSR Online Awards 2011

corporate responsibility or sustainability. With the exception of **LinkedIn**, the majority of respondents use social networks entirely or almost exclusively for purposes not related to CSR or else are not familiar with them.

Of those people that are using social media for CSR at least monthly, **LinkedIn remains the most popular** (58% of all respondents), although the most assiduous, regular social media users are **equally split between LinkedIn and Twitter**: both of these networks are used on a daily basis by a fifth of respondents.

Perhaps surprisingly, **YouTube** was the No.2 social media channel with 43% of respondents using it at least monthly for CSR. This was ahead of Twitter (41%), Facebook (38%) and document-sharing services like **SlideShare** (30%). So, although YouTube is used less frequently than Twitter or Facebook, overall it **reaches a greater proportion of CSR professionals and stakeholders**.

But what do these users expect of companies in social media? Given that it is an environment conceived more for individuals than organisations, how can companies (or their representatives) build bridges with stakeholders through social media? About a third of non-corporate respondents felt the answer lies in **answering stakeholders’ questions** (twice as many as those suggesting social networks be used to ask for feedback and comment). Other popular choices were to **publish case studies** (31%) and **share third-party news, research and opinion on CSR topics** (23%).

Once again, we’re back to trust. Social networks are successful because they keep us in touch with people we know (to a greater or lesser degree) and trust (to a greater or lesser degree), whether they be friends and family, business contacts or mere “online acquaintances” with a shared interest. When it comes to corporations in social media, people want them to behave like they do: What are you up to today? What do you think about the latest trend or topic? What are you reading of interest?

In a straw poll in mid-2011, Lundquist asked a few dozen users why they use Twitter for CSR and sustainability. The top answers included both active and passive uses (indicating that the poll was answered above all by passionate Twitter users):

- 81% said it was to share articles, blog posts and other content
- 76% said it was to network with people interested in these topics
- 73% said it was to read discussions on relevant issues and
- 70% to keep updated on news and announcements.

A much lower proportion stated they were using Twitter out of pure self promotion, to post questions or contribute directly to discussions.

Although the results of this small poll are only indicative, it's telling how the findings match up with the larger survey: social media channels such as Twitter are used to keep updated on the "buzz" in corporate responsibility and sustainability, **to be part of that community** (some more actively, some more passively). It's understandable that **people expect companies to behave like all other members of the community** and not simply to use social media as just another channel for their corporate message.

It is clear then that social media and the online environment generally are presenting companies with a particular set of challenges when it comes to corporate responsibility. In this field, a traditional disclosure-based approach is a necessary foundation but can only go so far. Firms need to reach out to a broader audience than they're used to and be accountable to all stakeholders. But at the same time they have to show they are open to outside voices, comment and criticism in a variety of communications channels. Only in this way can companies convincingly build trust in online audiences.

Most admired companies for online CSR communications

Having analysed what the "perfect" ingredients are for online CSR communications, it's interesting to hear what respondents replied when asked to identify which companies they look to as models of best practice.

One interesting point to note was the great range of companies mentioned: only about a quarter of respondents identified a company they admired for online CSR communications, but these people named about 70 different corporations between them (multiple responses were allowed). The most frequently mentioned companies were as follows:

- **Intel** (6 mentions)
- **Timberland** (6)
- **SAP** (4)
- **Starbuck's** (3)
- **Marks & Spencer** (3)

A number of other companies got a couple of mentions each: **BP, Campbell's Soup, Enel, Gap, IKEA, Novo Nordisk, Philips, Unilever** and **Volkswagen**.

About Lundquist & the CSR Online Awards

>> The **CSR Online Awards** is an annual project that evaluates how corporate websites are used as a platform for CSR communication and stakeholder engagement. With the aim of stimulating debate about the importance of the web as a strategic tool for corporate responsibility, it measures not only the quality of information, but also the user experience and aspects of ongoing engagement. Executive summaries of all rankings and surveys are published on the [Research](#) section of our website.

>> The CSR Online Awards is a project of [Lundquist Srl](#), a corporate communications consultancy based in Milan, specialising in online financial communications, corporate websites, CSR and employer branding. The research is undertaken as part of Lundquist's activity as an Organizational Stakeholder of the Global Reporting Initiative.

>> Lundquist has supported leading European companies in various industries on their corporate responsibility and online communications, providing services from CSR-specific benchmarking to action plans for website architecture and content strategy.



CSR Online Awards Report

The complete findings of the CSR Online Awards 2011 are presented in a report (150+ pages) analysing the latest trends in online CSR communications, illustrated with 250 best practice examples. The report explains the evaluation protocol's 79 criteria and provides the results of the 2011 rankings plus complete survey answers.

Developing your CSR website towards best practice

Our tailored analysis draws on the 79 criteria to provide concrete suggestions for improvement, even for companies not included in our 2011 rankings. In-depth reports are available on critical aspects such as online reporting, ongoing engagement and social media. The wealth of data generated by the research allows for detailed benchmarking by industry or country.

Feedback & contact

>> The **CSR Online Awards** can continue to improve and flourish thanks to the input of CSR experts and professionals and all those working in related fields. **We welcome your feedback.**

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