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BUSINESS SCHOOL

Bachelor Thesis

**Involving Customers in  
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Activities:  
A review of existing approaches  
in academia and business practice**

University of Mannheim  
Business School

Chair of Corporate Social Responsibility

Submitted by:  
Myriam Céline Rapior

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### Abstract

An increasing number of companies have realised the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), thus the initiation of activities in matters of social and ecological sustainability reveal the need for effective communication and customer involvement. In order to gain a deeper comprehension for corporate intentions and effects on behalf of the customer, the paper at hand applies several research theories to underlying engagement processes.

Moreover, current business practice is analysed for the occurring degree of customer involvement and compared to firms' perceptions of public communication ideals. After juxtaposing the results of the theoretical and practical assessment, the thesis reveals knowledge gaps in understanding the relation between customer involvement in CSR and corporate outcomes and makes suggestions for further research projects.

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## List of Abbreviations

CRM	Cause-Related Marketing
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PR	Public Relations
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations

Involving Customer in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Activities:  
A review of existing approaches in academia and business practice

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The pertinence of customer communication in CSR activities

The popularity and prestige of sustainability events, such as the annual conference of the “German Council for Sustainable Development” or the “National German Sustainability Award” ceremony, witness the expanding public attention and corporate action in the fields of CSR (Stiftung Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitspreis e.V., n.d.).

Rising ethical consumerism, which is performed by over 20% of all consumers through the insistence on fair and environment-friendly products, triggers a corporate concern for the constancy of trust among key stakeholders (McKinsey & Company, 2008). Hence, corporate strategy in social and ecological matters are frequently recalibrated in order to comply with public expectations, thus communication links serves an instrument to reach customers.

In an advisory guide for aligning CSR policies with the United Nation’s (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), published by the UN Global Compact, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and the Global Reporting Initiative in 2015, the engagement in partnerships and communicating with stakeholders are depicted as key steps within the CSR positioning process. The trend of exchanging, instead of exclusively displaying information in CSR, becomes evident through the characterization of external communication by the German “Centre for Sustainable Management” (2013), which describes the ideal publicly and transparently initiating dialogue with critical stakeholders on controversial subjects.

The “Sustainable Marketing Guide” (CSR Europe, 2008) convincingly suggests that CSR messages are an integral part of marketing, hence it adjusts the regular marketing mix to criteria of ethical conduct. In addition to the philanthropic consideration of contributing to sustainable development, the business network’s guide argues that marketing departments are bound to shift towards advertising sustainability if they want to win the favour of buyers and ensure brand differentiation.

The overall content of CSR communication is of public and political concern due to the potential of misleading customers, thus the Federal Ministry for the

Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (2014) released nine principles for product-related environmental claims to prevent public manipulation.

When it comes to communication methods, about 70% of 4100 examined companies use reporting for CSR communication, although the reports show major quality defects, especially on stakeholder engagement. Thus, firms move from the question of whether or not to address sustainability publicly to the problematics of how to build confidence among targeted groups (KPMG, 2013).

Performing CSR bears opportunities, such as market position improvement, product innovation and corporate reputation enhancement, and major risks when applied faultily (KPMG International, 2013). Reputation risk, being the most damaging risk to a company, is predominantly affected by customers as stakeholders (Deloitte, 2014).

### 1.2 Current state of research and study objective

Customer involvement in CSR activities has a multitude of fundamentals in management, marketing and communication theory as researchers approach the relatively new field of CSR with various theoretical concepts (Orlitzky, Siegel, & Waldman, 2011). Despite the versatility of the subject, this study is limited to applying four theoretical approaches and only hints potential determinants and effects of customer involvement on behalf of the company and consumers.

The study's objective is to assess the occurrence of customer involvement in CSR undertakings and related methods, and practices stand in the foreground of this research. Moreover, the link between corporate intentions and motives underlying CSR engagement initiatives and customer perceptions and reactions are examined.

The hypothesis is that customers are involved in CSR activities and are enabled to actively take part in CSR strategy building and decision making by companies, which estimate customer perspectives and participation.

### 1.3 Method and course of the study

The first part of this study consists of a research review of customer involvement in CSR activities, focusing on the perspectives of stakeholder theory, public relations theory and marketing theory, and on an integrated theoretical approach. In the second part, a qualitative data collection from current business practice, stemming from dialogues with company representatives and publicly available information from sustainability reports and corporate websites, is summarized. In conclusion, findings

from research and current business practice on customer involvement strategies are contrasted and suggestions for further research are deduced.

## 2 Academic evidence of customer involvement in CSR activities

### 2.1 Basic theoretic approaches fathoming Customer Involvement in CSR activities

#### 2.1.1 Stakeholder Theory as a Basis for Customer Involvement

##### 2.1.1.1 Introduction to the Stakeholder Theory

Although a multitude of theories from disciplines such as communications, sociology or management address and partially cover the communication process between companies and their customers on questions of corporate ethics, the stakeholder concept by Freeman is frequently used as a fundament for further theoretical constructs (Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016).

In his approach, Freeman (1984, p.53) describes stakeholders as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s purpose”, thus they are legitimised to influence the company’s direction and activities.

In contrast to the traditional and corporate-centric stockholder focus, the stakeholder view of a firm introduces a relational and interactional model, in which companies integrate and cooperate with stakeholders. Hence, firms work towards a network-based and relational engagement of different stakeholder groups, recognizing their relative power and stressing the aspects of mutuality, interdependency and transparency (Andriof & Waddock, 2002; Crane & Liversey, 2003).

Freeman’s (1984) ‘transactional’ level is one of the fundamental pillars of stakeholder management and depicts a company-wide adopted set of behaviours, which determines the manner and style of establishing and maintaining organizational interactions and relationships with the external environment.

##### 2.1.1.2 Coherence of CSR and Stakeholder Theory

The interrelated nature of three theoretical areas, namely stakeholder theory, corporate responsibility and strategic relationships, is shown by Andriof and Waddock (2002), who argue that firms strategically develop trust-based collaborations with stakeholders to fulfil societal expectations to act as moral agents.

Raupp (2011) supports this claim stating that the stakeholder concept permits firms to comply business and ethical perspectives and may lead to an operationalization of social responsibility to meet corporate goals. The broad and diverse movement of CSR theorization in stakeholder theory is dominated by concepts emphasizing external

drivers of corporate activities, in which “CSR is conceived as the outcome of social relationships and societal norms” (Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016, p. 261).

#### 2.1.1.3 Stakeholder Interaction: Dialogue and Engagement

The above-mentioned shift from stockholder to stakeholder focus triggered a change in relationship management and communication strategies. In order to successfully conduct proactive and cooperative stakeholder interaction, companies necessitate a profound comprehension of underlying relationships and interdependencies (Andriof & Waddock, 2002). Furthermore, as companies increase the frequency and intensity in stakeholder communication, new methods in stakeholder engagement and dialogue become relevant (Crane & Liversey, 2003).

On the issue of stakeholder engagement, Freeman (1984) describes explicit negotiations on critical subjects and the intention to anticipate stakeholder concerns as indicators for high managerial competencies. Additionally, he distinguishes between four stakeholder transaction types based on the degree of involvement and integrity, ranging from ignoring to explicitly negotiating with stakeholders. Notable prerequisites for achieving meaningful results from intense negotiation are the necessity of two-way communication processes, proposal-response-compromise cycles and drawing attention to win-win solutions (Freeman, 1984).

Hund, Engel-Cox, Fowler and Klee (2002) note on the mutual responsibility of firms and stakeholders to thoughtfully participate the other party in processes of sustainable development and the authors perceive stakeholder input as specifically influential to company decision-making. Strategic management actions and communication tools need to reflect corporate commitment to receiving stakeholder feedback, thus collaborative approaches include stakeholder dialogue, stakeholder interviews performed by third parties, open discussion roundtables, partnerships with educational institutions and community support projects. Furthermore, different communication types are categorized upon their level of stakeholder involvement and level of information exchange, illustrated in figure 1 in the appendix.

Bendell (2003) draws attention to great variations in corporate intention in company-stakeholder dialogue by contemplating the stakeholder theory from a sociological perspective. Among the eight “dialogue intention levels”, “dialogue as information” is noteworthy for it describes the inexistence of corporate expectations to learning from stakeholders, thus social and ecological reports can be classified under this label (Bendell, 2003, p.57). In contrast, “dialogue as a partnership” stands for its high

level of involvement and equality between interlocutors, implying a redistribution of power through negotiation and shared responsibilities in decision-making (Bendell, 2003, p.57). However, Bendell notes that the nature of stakeholder dialogues and corporate intentions are frequently manifold and diverse in practice.

Moreover, Golob and Podnar (2011) devalue the influence of information dissemination by stating that symmetrical relations with key stakeholders are indispensable in the implementation of CSR, especially in the form of dialogue.

Scholars also consider a time-dependent stage model, in which companies firstly identify, then pursue to manage and finally engage with stakeholders over time. In this sense, stakeholder engagement is performed through “a stance of mutual responsibility, information-sharing, open and respectful dialogue, and an ongoing commitment to joint problem-solving” (Lawrence, 2002, p.186).

#### 2.1.1.4 Customer stance

The stake of an individual or a group in a company can be positioned within a two-dimensional grid, measuring a stakeholder’s interest and power in a company, thus customers and customer advocacy groups evidently qualify as such (Freeman, 1984). Moreover, customers are ranked as being the most important stakeholder group by corporate executives (Mattingly & Greening, 2002).

Raupp (2011) states that the involvement of different stakeholder groups in CSR activities vary in line with their perceived influence, rendering companies susceptible for labelling customers as important and intending to engage in communication.

Consequently, pressures from empowered interest groups on CSR matters directly translate into corporate actions, as anticipated by the stakeholder theory (Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016). Bhattacharya and Sen (2004, p.9) note that particularly customers’ opinions are minded in CSR activities due to the “positive relationship between a company’s CSR actions and consumers’ reactions to that company and its product”.

Crane and Liversey (2003) develop this argument by emphasizing the need to identify intra-stakeholder differences and to acknowledge their relative power and influence on various issues. Thus, the key stakeholder group of customers should stand in the centre of CSR strategy formation processes (Miles, Munilla, & Darroch, 2006).

## 2.1.2 Public Relations Theory as a Basis for Customer involvement

### 2.1.2.1 Introduction to public relation theory

Another important basis for explaining the correlation between CSR and customer involvement is the Public Relations (PR) Theory. Relying on the idea that there is not a universal general public, every individual is allocated into one of numerous, definable groups of people, who are united in facing similar problems (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Relying on three key aspects, namely problem recognition, involvement and constraint recognition, these so-called publics are categorized into four types, i.e. nonpublics, latent publics, aware publics and active publics (Grunig, 1979). Customers are classified as active publics, who are functionally linked to the organization and thus are essential to the maintenance of the firm's functions by consuming its outputs (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

### 2.1.2.2 Similarities and discrepancies in CSR and PR Theory

The management of CSR presents a prominent topic in PR literature because the link between concerns of publics, firm relations to affected parties and corporate strategy development is often made (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Raupp, 2011). In addition to the theoretical link, studies show that the overall activity in corporate PR departments is the alignment of public and business expectations, thus the frequency of ethical and sustainability issues in PR work is predominant (Bartlett, 2011).

Clark (2000) points out the similarities in the main processes, the content and evaluation of both disciplines, yet she detects discrepancies in acknowledging the influences of communication, as communicative capabilities are addressed frequently in PR, but are scarcely touched upon in the field of CSR.

Manheim and Pratt (1986) note the lack of societal recognition of performed CSR activities and juxtapose the traditional approach of merely increasing promotional PR communication with Grunig's elaborate approach of targeting various publics by sending differentiated messages to meet specific needs and expectations (Grunig, 1979).

In describing PR practice as relationship-centred and dominated by communication challenges, Bartlett (2011) draws attention to blurred lines between PR and communication management. Along with the increasing relevance of authenticity in practical PR communication, research tendencies head towards more inclusive forms of communication in CSR-related issues, notably information exchange and dialogue. "Multiple organizational purposes", such as "informing, persuading, engaging,

defending and advocating” are considered by corporations when developing the corporate communication strategy (Bartlett, 2011, p.76).

Companies focusing on information disclosure, performed through information release and publicity, prove to have various intentions ranging from strategic manipulation to achieving conformity with social and legal norms. When enhancing the interaction between organisations and stakeholders, the role of community, the construction of meaning and the exchange of ideas are crucial to the mode of engagement and dialogue.

Thus, with the rapid augmentation in the use of internet as an integral communication tool, numerous researchers have analysed the nature of interaction and potential for improving online information display and exchange (Bartlett, 2011). Characteristics, such as the process speed and the possibility for personalised contact with influential stakeholders, especially customers, contribute to the image building and agenda shaping potential of proactive internet use (Esrock & Leichty, 1998).

#### 2.1.2.3 Relationships and Communication Activity Models in CSR Theory

PR scholars have designed numerous communication models, advising companies on finding the balance between corporate interests and meeting expectations of publics and consequently managing relationships effectively (Raupp, 2011).

Based on the mode of communication, the intention, the use of scientific methods and the domain of application, Grunig (1979) developed four types of PR communication activities, namely the press agency model, the information model, the two-sided asymmetrical model and the two-sided symmetrical model, which will be further explained in section 2.1.3. Active publics are best addressed with the two-sided symmetrical model, as one-sided communication methods may awaken public mistrust or aggravate customers’ antagonism. Consumer Relation Programs are becoming more common among practitioners, the customer complaint system being considered as most valuable, as it raises awareness on negative impressions of campaigns and products.

With Grunig’s model in mind, Manheim and Pratt (1986) suggested a more generic strategy to corporate communication of CSR activities, emphasizing three underlying agendas of interest, namely the media, the public and the makers of public policy. Instead of sending messages to satisfy customers’ needs, the model foresees a dynamic interaction between all agendas, which can be influenced for example by targeting the public agenda by improving corporate overall responsiveness to consumers

and by achieving a large number of public contacts. CSR initiatives can create direct bonds between the corporation and the public if the activities are marketed in a traditional manner, in a way that objectives and target groups are identified and programs, intended to reach the envisaged public and its interests, are pursued.

In an attempt to combine corporate Public Relations with CSR, Clark (2000) introduces the tripartite Communication-Management Approach, which aims at optimizing organizational effectiveness. In a first step, a firm identifies expectations, concerns and attitudes of relevant stakeholder groups, minding the external context of historical, social and political dimensions. Secondly, present and past communication forms are evaluated by an analysis of the quality of relationship and company perception of each group which result in a communication profile. Finally, the firm gathers the insights from the two prior steps to decide whether to “establish, inform, mitigate, or maintain his or her relation with key stakeholders”, bundling all information into an integrated communication-management strategy (Clark, 2000, p.375).

#### 2.1.2.4 Current Landscape of CSR involvement in PR Literature

In their study on CSR engagement in Chinese companies, Wang and Chaudhri (2009) found a consensus among the examined firms on the importance of stakeholder relationships for CSR and PR and a corporate will for communicating CSR matters externally, which translates into a preference for online media.

However, Capriotti and Moreno (2007, p.89) discovered that most companies mainly use “expositive” information techniques, such as graphics and audio-visuals, rather than “interactive” information resources on CSR subjects. Thus, the public is discouraged to reflect on companies’ CSR initiatives as the predominant feedback resource on the internet consists of the indication of an email address as a passive invitation for comments, rather than of interactive evaluation and feedback functions, such as opinion forms, polls, forums or chat rooms. The authors describe the current landscape of online CSR communication as scarcely interactive and limited as it is in its initial phase of dialogic and bidirectional interaction with publics.

Consequently, the challenge in business practice remains to transform corporate awareness and determination for transparency imperatives in CSR into realising adequate methods for engaging external stakeholders and identifying customer-oriented channels on the web (Birth, Illia, Lurati, & Zamparini, 2008; Wang & Chaudhri, 2009).

### 2.1.3 An Integrated Approach to Customer Involvement

#### 2.1.3.1 Sensegiving and Sensemaking in Grunig's communication model

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p.435) coined the terms 'sensegiving' and 'sensemaking' in their study about the process of strategic change initiation and related features of communication "in the face of possible indifference or resistance by stakeholders and constituencies". Hence, the notion of sensemaking describes a long-term and ongoing form of using language and communication between involved parties, seeking the exchange of perspectives, the construction of meaning and the development of environments, events and organizations (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

In contrast, sensegiving depicts the "process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others" by providing a preordained perception and interpretation of organizational reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p.442). In sum, while sensegiving stands for the "influence of evaluation on choice", sensemaking is understood as the "interplay of action and interpretation" (Weick et al., 2005, p.409). Also, Cramer, Jonker and van der Heijden (2004) provide evidence for the fundamental interrelatedness of CSR activities and processes of sensemaking.

#### 2.1.3.2 Stakeholder Information, response and Involvement Strategy

The complexity of sender – receiver relationships in CSR messaging is reflected through Morsing and Schultz's (2006) integrated approach, which reflects strategies in corporate communication processes on CSR topics between stakeholders and companies. In addition to Gioia and Chittipeddi's internal focus (1991), Morsing and Schultz add an external view to their model by combining it with the stakeholder concept, as they identify the importance of external stakeholder relations in the sense making process and in raising awareness of mutual expectations.

The integrated approach divides corporate stakeholder communication into three strategies, namely the stakeholder information, response and involvement strategy. The stakeholder information strategy describes a one-way communication from the corporation to the stakeholder and the corporate aim is to disseminate information through a sense giving process. Communication activities of this transaction based strategy include the production of information and news for the media, publishing of brochures and pamphlets and press relation programmes. Stakeholders are perceived as

influential as they can either support or oppose to CSR policies, thus companies concentrate on presenting the prior determined CSR messages in an appealing way.

Both the stakeholder response and the stakeholder involvement strategy incorporate a two-way flow of communication between the parties, however the communicative exchange in the stakeholder response model is characterized as asymmetric because of an imbalance in favour of the company. Although the company engages stakeholders in conversations through opinion polls, dialogues, networks and partnerships, it has no intention in adjusting its CSR attitudes and course after receiving the feedback. The CSR strategy development is performed by the top management during the sense making process, who then foresees to change public attitudes through effective communication. Corporate stakeholder interaction basically depicts a one-sided approach, as the target of reinforcing the initiatives and identity of a company relies on learning how to communicate properly with stakeholders to gain their acceptance and tolerance.

In contrast, the two-way symmetric communication model, termed stakeholder involvement strategy, enables mutual persuasion attempts through concurrent negotiation and systematic dialogue. When both parties involved accept the potential for changes, the frequent engagement and interaction, will lead to “progressive iterations of sensemaking and sensegiving processes” (Morsing & Schultz, p.328). Managerial challenge lies within the creation of a durable and interactive communication system involving organizational members as much as external stakeholders, to establish their loyalty and support.

Morsing and Schulz argue in favour of the stakeholder involvement strategy when comparing the effectivity of all three strategies and point out the uprising need for sophisticated two-way communication due to complex company-stakeholder relationships in CSR settings. The authors advise firms to continuously and proactively involve stakeholders in sensegiving and sensemaking processes, as they draw attention to the dynamics in public concerns and to legitimacy risks.

However, the model shows no differentiation between various stakeholder groups, thus there is no indication for the need of customer prioritisation.

#### 2.1.4 CSR Customer Involvement as a Marketing Strategy

Numerous studies on the link between CSR and marketing over the past 50 years have been gathered by Eteokleous, Leonidou and Katsikeas (2016), who sorted the research by thematic areas and analysed the frequency of examined issues. Research frequently examines consumer related topics, focussing on consumer perceptions and sensitivity towards CSR, for example on effects of loyalty, cultural differences and demographics on the willingness to pay a price premium. CSR Communication is another popular research field in marketing, with popular investigations on corporate intentions behind communication, communicative intensity, external triggers and methods such as online branding.

When aiming at raising public awareness on CSR activities in times of exponentially rising competition in brand and product differentiation, Sen, Bhattacharya and Korschun (2006) note the importance of surpassing a conventional marketing mix.

Fuller (1999) argues that sustainable marketing incorporates tripartite advantages as three levels of criteria determine corporate development, pricing, promotion and distribution strategies. Therefore, when minding the compatibility of customer needs with corporate goals and with the social and ecological environment, customer satisfaction and support translate into increased sales, corporate social efficiency and presumably improvements in environmental issues.

However, studies find that companies fail to successfully send CSR messages to raise customer awareness and are incapable of proving aspects of differentiation to consumers. Companies face the difficulty of choosing appropriate marketing means which guarantee credibility, authenticity and trustworthiness. Transparent and sincere relational marketing, in terms of establishing interpersonal relationships with customers and maintaining systematic dialogue, is growing in popularity because of the increasing possibilities on social media and corporate websites (Brønn, 2011).

Customer confidence in the brand is essential to a firm's social capital, thus firms take advantage of trust raising effects of philanthropic activities relating to consumers, workers or the environment, all three areas being equally effective in raising integrity and believability (Ben Ammar, Ben Naoui, & Zaiem, 2015).

Vallaster, Lindgreen and Maon's (2012, p.48) strategic CSR brand framework, illustrated in the appendix, categorizes companies into four major CSR brand strategies "according to the objectives, level of integration, and key initiator and drivers of the CSR brand-building activities". Hence, adopting a suitable strategy and evaluating

appropriate channels to reach customers is a key ingredient for generating or protecting economic and social value. A decisive point in strategy allocation is the level of CSR involvement, so the “degree to which companies respond reactively to demands for CSR or engage proactively in CSR initiatives” (Vallaster et al., 2012, p.48).

With the increased consumer attention to the moral dimension of companies and its products, CSR may be instrumentalized as a marketing strategy or a form of brand management through the alignment of corporate values to those of customers, who incorporate multiple stakeholders at once through their citizenship. The attention is drawn to a special form of marketing, namely stakeholder marketing, which carries along new monitoring methods, target groups, prerequisites for customer involvement, conflict potentials and functional and psychosocial stakeholder needs. The trend of ethical consumerism may bear considerable outcomes to stakeholder-firm relationships and stakeholder identification, as customers can either ban or prefer certain products, brands or companies due to circumstances of production and marketing (Smith, Palazzo, & Bhattacharya, 2010).

Cause-related Marketing (CRM) as a promotional tool is gaining in popularity among companies, as they benefit from reputation and image improvement by demonstrating social commitment and responsiveness to society’s demands for corporate responsibility. Also, synergies and alliances with stakeholders lead to new and long-lasting relationships when interests of the addressed community and corporate values are in line with the supported cause or cooperating organization. The strength of gained competitive advantage is underlined by findings which indicate that customers are drawn to companies with a strong CRM and are likely to change brand for this distinctive feature (Demetriou, Papasolomou, & Vrontis, 2010).

Robinson, Irmak and Jayachandran (2012) analyzed increased involvement in CRM by giving consumers the choice of the charity cause, finding that it enhances customers’ personal role perception and individual benefit from the good deed, which in turn leads to a higher purchase likelihood and a greater willingness to pay.

## 2.2 Determinants and consequences of customer involvement in CSR

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of CSR, academic approaches to conditions and consequences of customer communication are multifaceted. Johnson-Cramer, Berman and Post (2003) establish a link between the sophistication of stakeholder

participation channels and corporate performance, therefore companies are advised to engage customers actively.

However, the possibility for domains and diversity in CSR activities is broad, therefore, given financial constraints, companies need to allocate financial and intellectual capital in a consumer-centric manner. Essential prerequisites to customer conformity are the awareness of CSR activities and the fit between the company reputation and the cause, both can be influenced through communication policies (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Servaes & Tamayo, 2013).

Other conditional factors include attributions, that is the customer perception of underlying corporate motives, which is favourable when consumers believe in value-driven actions rather than stakeholder-driven approaches. The latter case leads to negative outcomes on customer trust and loyalty as consumers accuse firms to act under pressure to avoid reputational harm (Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009). CSR messages can be considered as successful, when they elicit that consumers think a company considers societal and ecological problems. In order to evoke these beliefs and to prevent the formation of CSR scepticism, corporations need a profound knowledge on public expectations (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

Hence, CSR communication has to be performed with consideration and caution, as backlash effects may occur once customers grow suspicious (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Customer involvement in CSR activities can be considered as a double-edged sword, which may either lead to increased profitability and positive effects on stakeholder relationships and perceived brand image, or it may achieve the opposite when it is perceived as so-called green-washing (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990).

### 3 Approaches to Customer Involvement in CSR Communication currently utilized in Business Practice

#### 3.1 Method and process of analysis

The qualitative data collection is based on information directly acquired from nine companies through personal communication via face-to-face meetings, phone interviews and mail contact. The gathered information, supported by sustainability reports and corporate websites, is listed in the following and is subject to interpretation of perceived corporate behaviour and intention.

The aspects of customer integration, communication techniques, ranging from low to high customer involvement, and corporate awareness of customer influence were critically analysed and tabularly summarized in the appendix.

## 3.2 Research Findings

### 3.2.1 Tendencies in disseminating CSR information

Some companies appear to be using a customer information strategy and neglect customer interaction for various reasons. For example, although the emphasis on sustainability within the large drug store chain [REDACTED] appears to be above average, customer interaction is low and there is no public evidence of customer dialogue.

A common method of simple information display is the indication of various labels, for example on fair trade, biological cultivation or regionality, on consumer products. Labelling is employed in customer oriented companies, such as [REDACTED] [REDACTED], and aims at facilitating sustainable purchase decisions and promoting ethical consumerism and production.

[REDACTED] recognizes the lack of a strategic customer information on CSR activities and the need for building customer relationships rather than one-sided promotional measures, as the firm currently only dedicates a web section to CSR, not even mentioning related issues in the annual report. Hence, the marketing department, which is responsible for reporting on sustainable and social topics, decided to give little information on performed CSR initiatives, accessible to the public, leaving the reporting, for [REDACTED] to local press agencies. CSR activities are decided upon internally by the top management, which may receive ideas and inspirations from employees. [REDACTED]

Despite a company culture of sustainability and employee fairness, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]) only communication approach to customers is the creation of a detailed sustainability report, which may be traced back to the corporate size and constitution.

When asked about the decision process of CSR initiatives and customer consent with past and ongoing activities, the CSR Manager at [REDACTED] stresses the reliance on knowhow and relations of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and admits the fragmentary measurement of customer compliance, which indicates a reactive communication approach [REDACTED]. Similarly, [REDACTED] states that instead of the company reaching out, customers take the initiative and bring forward ideas and wishes concerning CSR. On the topic of conflicting customer views, the corporation tries to satisfy as many customers as possible and notes the importance of intensive dialogue with them [REDACTED].

[REDACTED] and [REDACTED] both developed a personal online carbon dioxide emission calculator, foreseeing customer involvement, in a way that the company initiates customers to rethink and reflect their consumption habits and behaviour.

[REDACTED] emphasizes the corporate need for intrinsic evolution of CSR strategies within the initiation phase, which relies on the competence and decisiveness of the performing team. After the setup of relevant activities as perceived by the management, [REDACTED] considers stakeholder engagement, but rather to get inspired on further social and sustainable ideas for action instead of assessing stakeholder conformity with past, award-winning CSR activities. The firm also pronounces that attempts to convince stakeholders through active promotion is irrelevant when transparency and honesty are fundamentals to social and ecological conduct [REDACTED].

[REDACTED] mainly uses information display techniques to reach customers and assigns a secondary role to customer involvement in CSR strategy building. In order to guarantee sincerity in all activities and to forward societal change, the firm engages in partnerships and thus ensure an equal voice of all parties. [REDACTED].

### 3.2.2 Realizing Customer Involvement in CSR activities

The trend of engaging customers into CSR initiatives and systematically exchanging body of thought in strategy development processes is growing popular among companies. The perception of communication at [REDACTED] is noteworthy as the firm acknowledges stakeholder dialogue effects:

[REDACTED]

While in some companies, CSR customer interaction is separated from common company communication policy, other firms attempt to form an integrated customer engagement approach by extending the sustainability segment. [REDACTED] realises direct dialogue with multiple stakeholders, especially with the key customer group parents, in an accessible and responsive customer service, providing customers with expert information on all matters, including sustainability.

A similar approach is used by [REDACTED] which increasingly includes social and ecological matters in corporate activities to increase overall customer trust and involvement. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] supports the introduction of stakeholder engagement as one of ten sustainability goals and the initiation of the number of reached customers through sustainability communication, by referring to the 17<sup>th</sup> SDG by the UN. Sustainability goals at [REDACTED] are based on three aspects, namely the materiality analysis from a stakeholder perspective, ecological profit and loss calculation and longterm stakeholder dialogue. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The sustainability report at [REDACTED] is perceived as a by-product to the firm's main activities, thus the number of reached customers are not measured. [REDACTED] assumes that the main readership of sustainability reports consists of academics, analysts and activists, who play a key role in forming public and customer opinions. At [REDACTED], CSR communication is perceived as a business opportunity, brand building measure and competitive advantage at once. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] future is determined by the strength of customer trust and product quality, thus compatibility with the environment and the facilitation of sustainable purchase decisions are indispensable for a company relying mainly on resources such as coffee, cotton, wood and cellulose. Next to extensive CSR information giving on products, in

depots and branches, on the website and in [REDACTED] magazines, the firm's customer involvement and outreach is performed through various channels [REDACTED]

The active and frequent addressing of CSR on social media and the corporate blog enables direct and fast customer feedback on products and corporate activities through comment sections and direct messaging and mailing. Sustainability issues are part of the [REDACTED] product innovation platform, which engage consumers in the product development process through an integrated use of surveys, workshops, tests, votes and polls, emphasizing the need for close contact [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] presents another company which involves customers in a way that they establish a link between the company and its brand and products with sustainability and ethical conduct. For example, the company plans to launch a customer competition for designing creative recycling solutions for empty packages while attracting public attention to the product [REDACTED]

When it comes to donation activities, customers are often involved in choosing the cause or in influencing the sum of the donation. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Long-term customer engagement in donation programs is illustrated [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Other charity activities attribute more decision power to customers related to the address of the cause, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Firms have realised the importance of customer-vendor interaction and related personal contact and the request for instore sustainability expertise. Within the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. Trainings for apprentices and

employees within the framework of sustainability seminars are also substantial at [REDACTED], aiming at an authentic communication of ethical conduct as a core organizational value [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The gained knowledge from vast stakeholder interaction at [REDACTED] is used to detect potential fields of action and to enhance corporate performance [REDACTED]

With the mission of solely selling products of controlled biological cultivation, [REDACTED] aims at involving customers within the purchase process by directly linking products with donation programs. Moreover, [REDACTED] invites commentaries, questions and ratings within the online shop directly below every product in order to gather customer suggestions for improvement

Fighting for a common cause on a political cause may result in bonding participants with initiating companies, [REDACTED]

“PREMIUM” places collective decision making in the centre of corporate activities by granting every interested individual an equal right to vote and veto over upcoming actions. The ultimate level of disclosure and transparency signifies a full customer involvement as each voice is minded in online forum discussions, in which all corporate matters are decided upon within a consensual democratic process (U.Lübbermann, personal communication, May 22, 2017).

### 3.3 Evaluation of findings and indication of trends

After evaluating the data collection, it has to be noted that there are major differences in corporate perceptions and awareness of the distinctiveness of customer relationships on CSR matters, hence an overall trend, applying to the majority of the firms, is not identifiable.

Some companies appear to be lacking a strategy on handling customer communication or even CSR activities in general, as decisions are made without systematic approaches, profound reasoning or broad consideration of possible outcomes. Activities are mostly internally driven by employees or management, thus the involvement of customers or other stakeholders is relatively low or even inexistent.

Other companies are determined to proactively seek customer discussions and permit the adjustment of the CSR strategy as a result of negotiations.

The findings suggest that being active in the field of CSR does not automatically translate into stakeholder communication initiatives and corporate actions frequently does not follow a clear system or strategy.

#### 4 Assessment of the current state of science as opposed to current business practice

##### 4.1 Contrasting theoretical and practical approaches

Finding parallels between practical and theoretical approaches cause difficulties, as corporate reliance on strategies and concepts in CSR appears to be relatively low, irrespective of the degree of customer engagement. The formation of a CSR strategy in practice, which can be interpreted as CSR sensemaking in research, proves to be an unstructured and “messy” process, “shaped through trial and error” (Cramer et al., 2004, p.221). Although theoretical models frequently apply only partially or overlap, an exemplary application of practical cases to the four research backgrounds will follow.

The time-dependent stage model is related to recent developments at [REDACTED], as the firm’s customer engagement advances along with the maturity of the CSR department and activities. The qualitative data collection supports Lawrence claim (2002), suggesting that the majority of companies are still positioned in the initial stages of stakeholder mapping and management and mostly large firms have reached the stage of stakeholder engagement [REDACTED].

The generic CSR communication strategy by Manheim and Pratt (1986) from PR theory is suitable to fathom the [REDACTED] campaign as it addresses a broader public and respects the three agendas of interest. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

The assumption that an adapted marketing mix achieves a high level of customer involvement is illustrated by the numerous marketing activities by [REDACTED] ranging from sustainable marketing to cause-related marketing [REDACTED]

Applying Morsing and Schultz’s (2006) integrated stakeholder management strategies, all customer communication measures listed above can be assigned to one of the three categories. In line with the authors’ realisations, the qualitative data collection shows a corporate preference for one-way communication processes, i.e. the display and

dissemination of information, and thus indicates an underestimation of the values gained through symmetrical customer dialogue.

#### 4.2 Knowledge gaps and research proposal

Although corporate practice and studies prove the materiality of CSR customer communication activities, research on CSR customer communication generally lack depth and two distinctive research gaps stand out, which correspond with Aguinis and Glavas (2012) universal knowledge gaps in CSR.

First of all, few studies address the special stance of customers in CSR activities and communication, and related success factors on the individual level. Psychological processes during customer engagement and the role of social and ecological topics, should be examined carefully. Additionally, the effect of individual characteristics, such as cultural dimensions and demographics, and situational factors on the perception and desirability of CSR involvement is of further interest. The objective in analysing the individual level is to answer the question of whether different customer groups should be approached with different communication styles.

Moreover, there is a lack of comprehending organizational mediators which link corporate outcomes, including brand image strengthening, reputation consolidation and social capital establishment, with corporate performance, in conjunction with the role of intensity in customer engagement on sustainability activities. Particularly, economic and internal prerequisites, for example CSR experience, size of the company, the degree of customer orientation, industrial differences, employee commitment and the intentions and CSR perceptions of business departments need close consideration.

Ideally, a multilevel analysis, integrating the individual level of customers and the organizational level of companies, will lead to sophisticated insights into the CSR customer involvement and will overcome micro-macro chasms in research. Concerning the method used, a longitudinal research, accompanying customers over time is advisable, hence the experience sampling methodology can be applied.

#### 5 Conclusion

With the rising practical application of CSR, the question of how to convey related messages to positively impact customers is growing in importance. In this study, four theoretical backgrounds fathom customer involvement in CSR activities, grasping

the natural integrity of high levels of customer interaction and the implementation of sustainability campaigns.

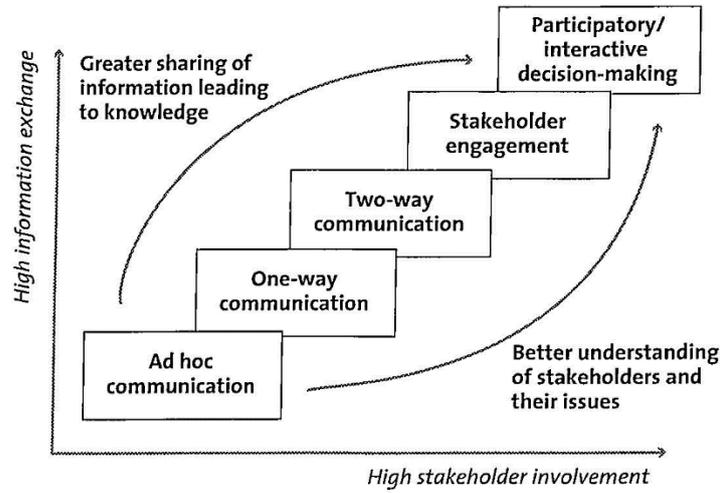
The stakeholder theory gives evidence to the need of including stakeholders, especially customers, in strategy developing and maintaining close ties with them in matters of the ideally externally-driven CSR. PR scholars focus on varying corporate interaction intentions and suggest to address active publics, including customers, with two-way symmetrical communication, particularly in CSR, which is related to PR by nature. The integrated stakeholder communication model offers three different strategies, namely the stakeholder information, response and involvement strategy, advising companies to engage stakeholders in sensegiving and sensemaking processes through negotiation and systematic dialogue. From a marketing point of view, customer involvement forms one of four pillars in the marketing mix, which is adapted to the special nature of CSR and necessitates augmented levels of authenticity and credibility achieved through the alignment of corporate and customer values.

The qualitative data collection shows that some companies, mostly large and internationally performing, proactively engage in customer exchange and undertake a variety of actions to gain profound insights on perceptions of ethical conduct. However, the qualitative data exposes that some firms lack in experience, knowledge or determination to implement a systematic approach to customer involvement in CSR activities.

This study reveals that companies are transforming the perceived need for CSR customer involvement into internally-driven action without theoretical background knowledge, as researchers are not keeping pace with recent practical occurrences. Along with the trend of engaging in CSR, an increasing number of firms will turn to research in order to develop a suitable customer involvement strategy, which effectively lead to the desired corporate outcomes.

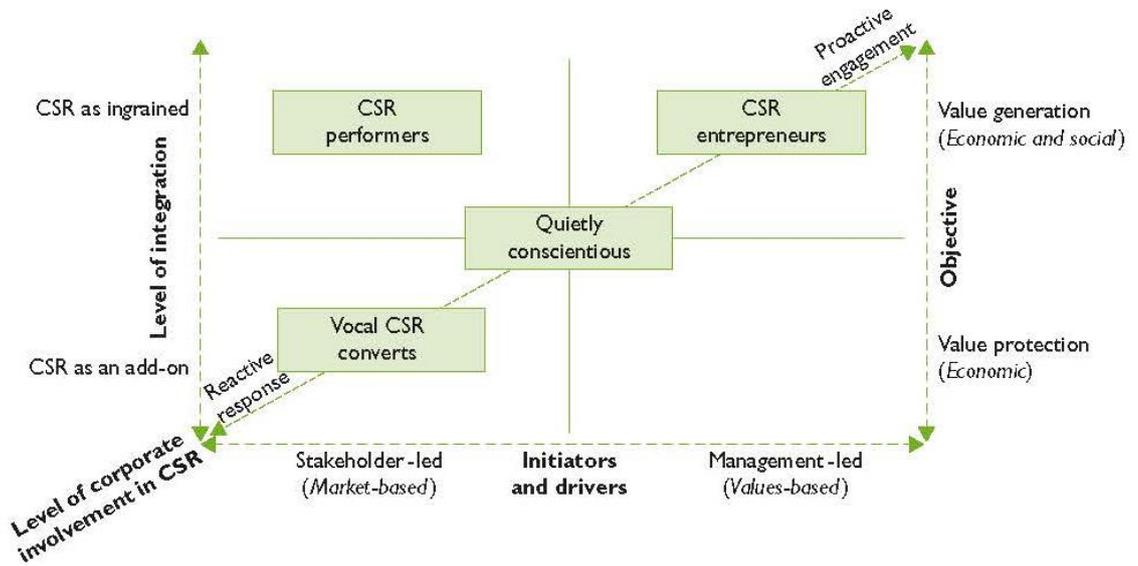
Therefore, the thesis suggests a connection between the psychological effects on the customer level and corporate outcomes on an organizational level, measured within a longitudinal multilevel analysis. Thus, it paves the way for integrated research projects and contributes to gain an overall understanding and impression of mechanisms and common practices of customer involvement in CSR activities.

Appendix



**Figure 1: Types of Communication**

Source: Hund, Engel-Cox, Fowler, Selby & Haddon (2001)



**Figure 2: Strategic CSR Brand Framework**

Source: Vallaster, Lindgreen, & Maon,(2012)







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## INVOLVING CUSTOMERS IN CSR ACTIVITIES

[REDACTED]

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