Challenges and opportunities in Corporate Responsibility Branding

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With an increasing focus on purpose, sustainability, environment and climate in recent years, many companies have developed a range of new methods to communicate their efforts and processes in these areas. The goal has been to strengthen an organisational focus on sustainability, and to gain trust and reputation among stakeholders.

This article introduces the concept of Corporate Responsibility Branding (hereafter CRB) as a comprehensive model to strengthen both internal and external dialogues about the development of responsible and sustainable initiatives. I use the term branding, even though it does not involve developing identity through a visual aesthetic profile and using storytelling, marketing, and campaign communication.

CRB is instead a management, relational, and dialogue-based discipline aimed at developing and strengthening a company's brand value by strategically and operationally balancing business and sustainability. CRB aims to create meaning internally for management and employees, providing a deeper sense of purpose in their work, and externally by demonstrating responsibility and involving society and the environment in the company's decisions, operations, and communication.

The Balanced Brand

CRB is about inviting the debate on climate, environment, sustainability, social responsibility, and the circular economy welcome within the company – it is about leadership, culture, values, and purpose (especially, when the company is not born with such a societal DNA). If CRB is taken seriously, it is both a discipline that has consequences for a company's way of thinking and conducting business and a discipline that suggests ways to develop relationships and dialogue, create involvement and engagement, and report and communicate the results of the work.

There are already many approaches to management to create this balanced brand, focusing on broad stakeholder involvement and value creation for both business, people, and society. Let us look at some of them:

The Stakeholder Model

The concept of stakeholders was conceptualized by Edward R. Freeman in the groundbreaking book "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach." Freeman defines a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by an organization's efforts to achieve its goals" (Freeman, 1984: 46). This definition has been challenged and expanded with several stakeholder-identifying factors, such as

Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), who created a model earmarking the individual stakeholders' identity in relation to an organization. They define eight different stakeholder types based on combinations of their positions as more or less powerful, urgent, or legitimate.

There are several models for mapping and describing a company's stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Windsor, 1992; Carroll, 1993; Clarkson, 1995; Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997; Svendsen, 1998; Janns and Dybdal, 2002; Sandstrøm, 2012; Pirozzi, 2019). Common to these models is that they provide an opportunity to understand and manage a group of stakeholders rather than the surrounding society as a whole. However, stakeholder models often treat stakeholders as a target for communication rather than dialogue partners to be involved, and the literature rarely provides answers on how this involvement can be facilitated (Gregory, 2007: 59).

The Triple Bottom Line

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a report called "Our Common Future." This report, known as the Brundtland Report after the commission's chair, Gro Harlem Brundtland, called for a strategy that unites development/growth and the environment. This thread continued with Agenda 21, introduced at the 1992 World Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Here, there was an agreement that the world's and companies' development should be more environmentally and socially responsible, and several OECD nations adopted the 27 principles in Agenda 21 (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2002).

Therefore, it was hardly a surprise when John Elkington proposed the concept of the triple bottom line in 1994 as a method to report both financial, social, and environmental data about the company (Elkington, 1994). Today, there are many different standards for communicating and reporting non-financial data, and many different terms for this form of reporting. The most widespread template so far has been the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), which includes a comprehensive set of guidelines for reporting on all three bottom lines. GRI was first published in 2002 and is used today by a wide range of Danish companies. But EUs Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the supporting European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) will at least for larger European companies be the de facto standard for talking and reporting on sustainability/ESG in the years to come.

The concept of the triple bottom line and the stakeholder model are closely linked. John Elkington believes that a crucial question business leaders must answer is, "what is the right balance between shareholders and stakeholders, and what balance is needed in working with and reporting on the triple bottom line" (Doane, 2004: 6). Advocates for the triple bottom line also believe that success in introducing new products/brands and running a business depends on how all stakeholders' interests are taken care of throughout the value chain (Lee, 2007).

Creating Shared Value

The concept of Creating Shared Value (CSV) is gaining increasing recognition in companies worldwide (sharedvalue.org/about-shared-value). The idea of balanced/shared value creation provides a good foundation for CRB.

Creating Shared Value (CSV) was conceptualized by Porter and Kramer in the Harvard Business Review article with the same title (Porter & Kramer, 2011). They define the concept as follows:

"The concept of shared value can be defined as policies and practices that increase a company's competitiveness while improving the economic and social conditions in the societies where they operate. The development of shared value focuses on identifying and expanding the connections between societal and economic progress" (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

The concept is based on the premise that both economic and social progress should be addressed based on value principles, where both costs and benefits/long-term earnings are considered. Porter and Kramer see the new concept as a break with and a reinvention of capitalism. They also see CSV as a third generation of CSR, where the first generation is pure philanthropy, and the second generation is CSR as compliance, risk, and expense. In CSV, economic and social parameters are integrated into the business model and strategy; the significance is defined individually for each organization, and the selected parameters are integrated into the company's budget and its way of doing business and making money.

CSV is also anchored in a community of companies, NGOs, universities, consultants, etc., organized under the Shared Value Initiative (sharedvalue.org). Among the major companies that embrace and apply CSV principles are Adobe, Bayer, IBM, Inditex, Nestlé, Novartis, Novo Nordisk, and Walmart.

UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals
In 2015, the UN adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (also known as SDGs). The goals apply to all countries and the global population. They commit all 193 member countries to completely eradicate poverty and hunger worldwide, ensure good education and health for all, reduce inequality, promote equality, decent jobs, and sustainable economic growth and consumption. They also focus on promoting peace, security, strong institutions, and strengthening international partnerships. The new agenda recognizes that social, economic, and environmental development, peace, security, and international cooperation are closely interconnected, and achieving sustainable development results requires an integrated effort (dk.undp.org).

The Sustainable Development Goals also apply to businesses, although they can choose to remain passive and primarily adhere to existing regulations and standards for policy formulation, governance, management, reporting, and communication. However, many companies view the Sustainable Development Goals as an opportunity to create a framework for communication and develop relationships with defined stakeholders. In this way, the goals have become a useful dialogue tool directly linked to the company's stakeholder model.

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)
The term "ESG" refers to Environmental, Social, and Governance criteria, and its origins can be traced back to the world of sustainable and responsible investing. While it is challenging to pinpoint a single individual who coined the term, it gained popularity in the financial industry and among investors in the early 2000s. They

started to use ESG criteria to assess the broader impact of investments on various stakeholders and the planet.

In recent years, ESG considerations have become increasingly important for companies, investors, and other stakeholders as sustainability and ethical business practices have gained prominence in the corporate world. ESG is now the most popular and widely recognized framework to communicate and report on a company's responsibility and sustainable impact. As such ESG is also the framework used for the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), and companies are now hiring *ESG managers* and are developing *ESG strategies* as opposed to using other terms for these functions and measures.

However, ESG is not just a new way of framing corporate social responsibility or sustainability. It is also a clear signal to companies, investors, customers, and other stakeholders that the responsibility of companies and their management goes beyond a focus on environmental issues or on employee's well-being.

When adopting an ESG mindset, you need to involve your full value chain in a responsible and ethical business conduct. This means anchoring and implementing policies and procedures for issues like human rights, anti-corruption, data ethics, and diversity and inclusion, and it means that companies must build a resilient governance structure to handle these issues both internally and externally. Therefore, ESG is also a true management task that demands a consistent and prioritised stakeholder dialogue and a transparent and comparable reporting on targets and progress on all material topics in the framework.

Stakeholder Capitalism

In this context, it is challenging to avoid the concept of *stakeholder capitalism*. It is not entirely new, as Freeman, for example, has used the term in the headlines of research articles (Freeman & Liedtka, 1997; Freeman, Martin & Parmar, 2007), and Schwab & Moynihan, representatives from the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2020), mention that the concept has been used for half a century in this context, particularly at WEF meetings in Davos.

However, the concept has been brought to the forefront by various events and agendas, gaining increasing support among companies. This has happened through legislation, the work of auditors, and the WEF's efforts to specify stakeholder capitalism through concrete goals, actions, and measurement and reporting parameters for businesses.

The embrace of stakeholder capitalism is closely tied to the acknowledged recognition of the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1994), Creating Shared Value (Porter & Kramer, 2011), the UN Global Compact, Global Reporting Initiative, and ESG reporting. Additionally, the United Nations, through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, has placed climate and a broad understanding of sustainability on the agenda for citizens, media, politicians, organizations, and businesses alike. All these elements contribute to the same theme.

Stakeholder capitalism was also a significant theme at the WEF meeting in Davos in 2021, when WEF founder Klaus Schwab discussed the topic at one of the main sessions.

Schwab spoke about the initiative initiated by WEF's International Business Council in 2017. In that year, 140 top leaders from the world's largest companies pledged to adjust their values and strategies in alignment with the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals to better serve societal goals. This marked the beginning of a consensus that long-term values are best created by focusing on the interests of all stakeholders (WEF, 2020, 2021). This initiative led to WEF's work in creating a common method for sustainable value creation, including a method for reporting and communicating the work on responsibility and sustainability in companies. This method, a measurement system, was presented at the Davos meeting in January 2021.

Many entities support the principles of stakeholder capitalism. For example, the four major audit and advisory firms (PwC, Deloitte, KPMG, and EY) have played an active role in developing WEF's measurement system. This support also aligns with existing legislation and standards in the field. Additionally, other major advisory firms are joining the community. McKinsey consultants, for instance, see stakeholder capitalism as a response to the lack of trust and the search for meaning evident in a general decline in trust in capitalism, companies, and business leaders (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). Business leaders should embrace the clear contradiction between low trust and high expectations and make choices that demonstrate their commitment to serving not only investors/shareholders but also customers, suppliers, employees, and other stakeholders (Hunt, Simpson & Yamada, 2020).

Hevia & Álvarez from the Spanish think tank IDEAS LLYC also advocate for a paradigm shift in companies' focus on value creation and relationships. They argue for unlearning the investor-centered dynamics embedded in the way we lead and report. From now on, leaders must also consider the values created for consumers, customers, employees, suppliers, and other stakeholders (Hevia & Álvarez, 2020). Similarly, companies must unlearn their single-minded focus on economic and financial capital. The company's balance must accommodate an increasing number of intangible values, and the management agenda must include a growing number of non-financial values. This requires a more holistic focus on the concept of value. In addition to financial capital, companies must also operate with talent capital, knowledge capital, relational capital, and reputation capital (Ibid.).

There are several other models and initiatives for developing, managing, reporting, and communicating corporate responsibility, social issues, environment, and climate, as well as sustainable development and management. One historical challenge has been to establish common and comparable models, making it easy for authorities, investors, and other stakeholders to quickly assess whether a given organization or business adheres to applicable principles and practices. With the above measures, complementary organizational and managerial frameworks have been created for future efforts to build balanced, value-creating, and responsible brands.

All this bring us closer to the subject at hand. For what is a responsible brand (a genuine CR-brand), and what is Corporate Responsibility Branding (CRB)? First, we need to look at comparable concepts.

Other Concepts

CRB shares similarities with several other concepts. CRB is, therefore, related to terms such as social marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Kotler, 1972; Bloom & Novelli, 1981; Abratt & Sacks, 1989; Wood, 2008; 2011, Andreasen, 2011; Wymer, 2011; Lefebvre, 2011, 2012, 2013), corporate societal marketing (Anghel, Grigore & Rosca, 2011; Chen, 2011; Hildebrand et al., 2011; Hinson & Kodua, 2012), sustainable marketing (Van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996; Hunt, 2010; Gordon, Carrigan & Hastings, 2011), cause-related marketing (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988; Brønn & Vrioni, 2001; Anghel, Grigore & Rosca, 2011), purpose-driven branding (Mourkogiannis, 2006; Sinek, 2011; Reimann, 2013; Ostendorf, 2017; Quinn & Thakor, 2018; Izzo & Vanderweilen, 2018; Rey, Bastons & Sotok, 2019), green marketing (Peattie, 1995, 1999; Prakash, 2002; Cronin et al., 2011; Walker & Wan, 2012), cultural branding (Holt, 2004; Karmark, 2005; Holt & Cameron, 2010), CSR-branding (Hildebrand, Sen & Bhattacharya, 2011; Hinson & Kodua, 2012), ethical branding (Fan, 2005; Nasruddin & Bustami, 2007), network branding (Hatch & Schultz, 2009), and relations branding (Sandstrøm, 2012). Several of these concepts are worth exploring further.

An early advocate for a variation of CRB is Philip Kotler, who, along with Gerald Zaltman in 1971, introduced the concept of social marketing in an article in the Journal of Marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). In the article, Kotler & Zaltman argue that companies should adopt a long-term perspective in meeting consumer desires. Companies should take care of consumers' well-being through social and ecological considerations in the development and marketing of products. For if they fail here, it will affect their business success in the long run (Ibid., 1971).

Later interpretations of socially oriented marketing have placed considerably greater emphasis on CSR and the company's overall stakeholder responsibility. This applies, for example, to theorists within corporate societal marketing (Anghel, Grigore & Rosca, 2011; Chen, 2011; Hildebrand et al., 2011; Hinson & Kodua, 2012). Here, CSR is seen as an investment in employees, local communities, and the environment, benefiting the company as a marketing activity contributing to positioning and image development. Companies can use CSR to maintain mutually value-creating relationships with a broad range of stakeholders (Hinson & Kodua, 2012). But it's a delicate balance. If companies are accused of only putting CSR on the agenda to serve self-interests and that it's only advertising, not a genuine and significant effort, it can backfire (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

The concept of ethical branding has not been extensively covered in the literature (Nasrudin & Bustami, 2007). However, the many corporate scandals in the early 2000s (such as Enron, Worldcom, and Tyco), the financial crisis in the late 2000s, and various NGO- and citizen-created movements (such as Occupy Wall Street, Adbusters, and Zeitgeist Movement) have strongly fuelled the debate about the moral values and societal power and role of corporations. The American author and activist Naomi Klein has criticized large corporations' branding in many contexts for being deceitful and superficial rather than having a genuine and substantial interest in the well-being of customers and consumers (Klein, 1999, 2008, 2015, 2019.) Many companies might argue that branding is just about adding extra value to products and services. But branding also represents and promotes a particular lifestyle, a specific culture, and influences consumers' inner lives, their values, beliefs, politics – yes, their soul (Fan, 2005). Even though many business leaders might also agree that branding should be ethical, it's harder to find universal guidelines on what ethical branding is. Ethics are complex, especially when companies actively engage with it (Fan, 2005).

Admittedly, there are many similarities in the demands for modern corporate branding, as Hatch & Schultz (2009) and I (2012) respectively refer to as *network branding* and *relations branding*. Hatch & Schultz define network branding as dynamic, reflexive, cross-functional, future-oriented, employee-involved, network-oriented, and uncontrolled. As in more traditional corporate branding, the company's identity is still the starting point for the brand, but it can only be defined in an active conversation with the company's many stakeholders. Identity is not a state - it is a process (Schultz, 2009).

Relations branding builds on many of the same principles as network branding. It is a 3rd generation branding that challenges existing communication and branding models with a focus on sender-receiver relationships and consistent and integrated mass communication, introducing a relational and involving branding based on ideas of stakeholder involvement and co-creation. Relations branding also does not see companies and organizations as closed brand entities but rather as actors in a shared development of a brand culture and narrative. Branding thus occurs through social and business relationships between people, groups, and organizations, all working to solve defined challenges or issues, providing identity, reputation, and legitimacy to each actor. This is the mindset underlying the *involving paradigm*, which is the foundation of relations branding (Sandstrøm, 2012).

Branding as Transaction or Relation

Both network branding and relations branding break with the idea that branding is primarily marketing; a factual and emotional transfer of profiling information and expressions from a company/brand to another person or group. Today, there are thus two fundamentally different ways to view branding. Either branding is seen as a transaction, a company's action in contact with a selected target audience, or it is seen as a system of value-creating relationships that the organization has with its stakeholders.

The difference is significant for how CRB is developed and executed. When branding is seen as a transaction, a company will typically focus on creating brands with specific functional features that allow for a unique position in the market and added value, which is added on top of the price that would otherwise apply to a generic product. Branding will focus on developing identity and creating effective and consistent marketing for the prioritized target groups. Transaction-based branding is centered around senders and receivers, controlled and regulated communication with the market; customers, consumers, and partners.

When branding is seen as a relation, a company sees the actual relationship – cooperation, process, involvement, contact – as what creates and constitutes the brand. In other words, it is the company's ability to initiate, develop, and maintain relationships that are valuable for all involved stakeholders, shaping the strong brand. Relation-based branding is community-oriented, difficult to control and manage, reflective, and dialogue-based. And the development of a brand will largely be a result of involvement from many different stakeholders, as well as the overall stories created by both the company and stakeholders through this relationship development.

It is not possible to primarily talk about CRB within the framework of transaction-based branding. For it is inherent in CRB that it is a social attitude and action that includes interaction, connections, and cooperation between people. Elements that resonate much better with relations than transactions. Even though transaction-based branding can, therefore, have a benevolent purpose and involve a strong ethical cause, the lack of stakeholder dialogue and involvement of the external world can be criticized and do not match the requirement for openness and transparency, which is part of CRB.

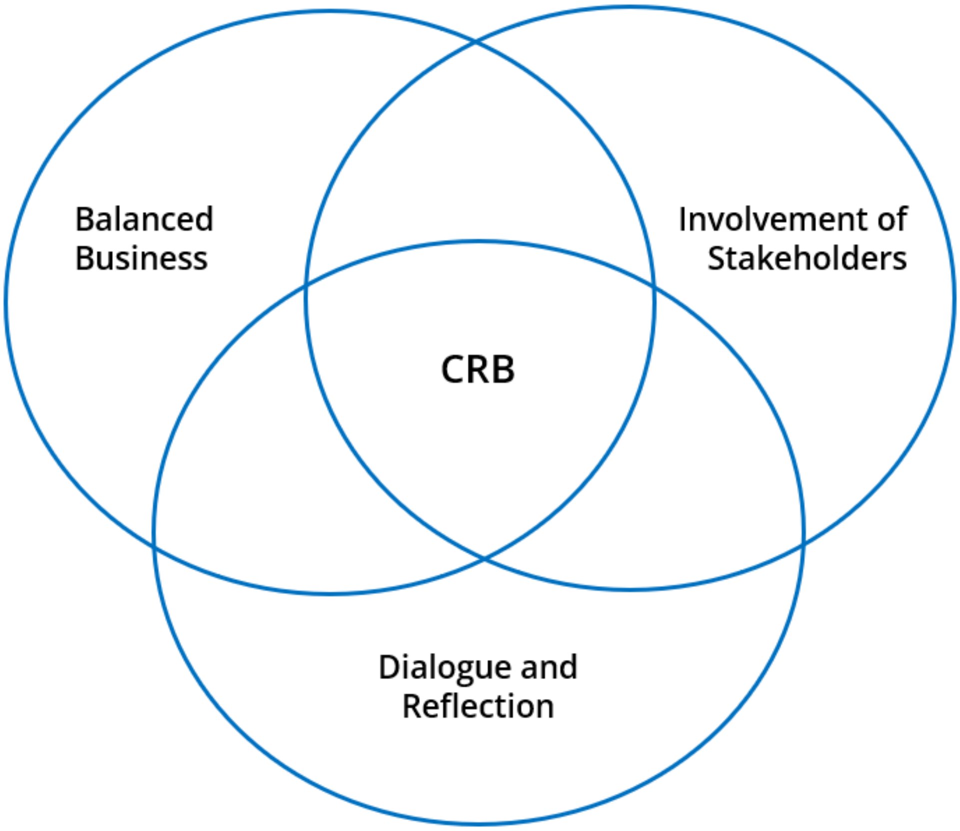
However, the opposite also applies. For a company can be as involving, cooperative, and dialogue-seeking as any. But if the goal of the relationships is not an economic, environmental, and social balance, the development of relations is not worth much. The dimension of responsibility must be represented in both the substance of the brand - its identity and purpose/purpose - and in the actions and dialogue that follow from the substance.

Guidelines for CRB

The following requirements can be formulated for organizations practicing CRB:

Balanced Business
CRB is a business-oriented discipline. If the company is a commercial entity producing and selling detergents, cars, or clothing, it must, of course, make money. However, the business-oriented and commercial elements cannot stand alone. Responsibility must also be present. So, if the company produces detergent, it also involves researchers and other experts in creating as sustainable production as possible, and it develops detergents that are allergy-friendly and without dyes and perfumes that can be bothersome to consumers. If it produces cars, it aligns with a growing political and societal desire to develop more environmentally friendly alternatives to diesel and gasoline cars. And if it produces clothing, it collaborates with NGOs, industry associations, engineers, and researchers to find new sustainable materials, methods of recycling, and production methods that minimally impact the environment and climate. Companies that go farthest along this balanced path will be best equipped to address societal challenges and meet future critical and climate-focused consumers on equal terms.

Figure 1: Three basic elements of CRB.



Source: Own creation.

Involvement of Stakeholders

It is a fundamental part of companies' CRB that they systematically develop and maintain relationships with and communication to a broad range of stakeholders. Stakeholder involvement takes place on multiple levels and in all parts of the value chain. For example, the company may involve members or customers in the development of ideas and concepts for new products and services. The company might invite researchers, engineers, anthropologists, developers, and designers to work on service or experience design. Additionally, the company may invite NGOs, politicians, as well as industry, professional, and employer associations to discuss the future of sustainable management and development. The company is aware of its societal role and impact, using involvement to gain insights into current trends and specific issues. Simultaneously, it further develops relationships with stakeholders, increases its legitimacy, and strengthens its brand.

Dialogue and Reflection

There is a risk that stakeholder involvement becomes a pseudo-event, only intended to demonstrate the company's willingness to listen to its stakeholders. However, this is not enough. CRB requires that the company engages in real dialogue with its stakeholders, reflects on the value and opportunities in external perspectives on the company's values, management, culture, operations, and communication. The company must be willing to change parameters that can create value for both the company and the external world. The company and its leadership should not blindly follow stakeholders' wishes and demands but rather evaluate all perspectives against the existing business model and strategy. They should use this as a guide to assess the overall long-term economic, environmental, and social value of potential changes.

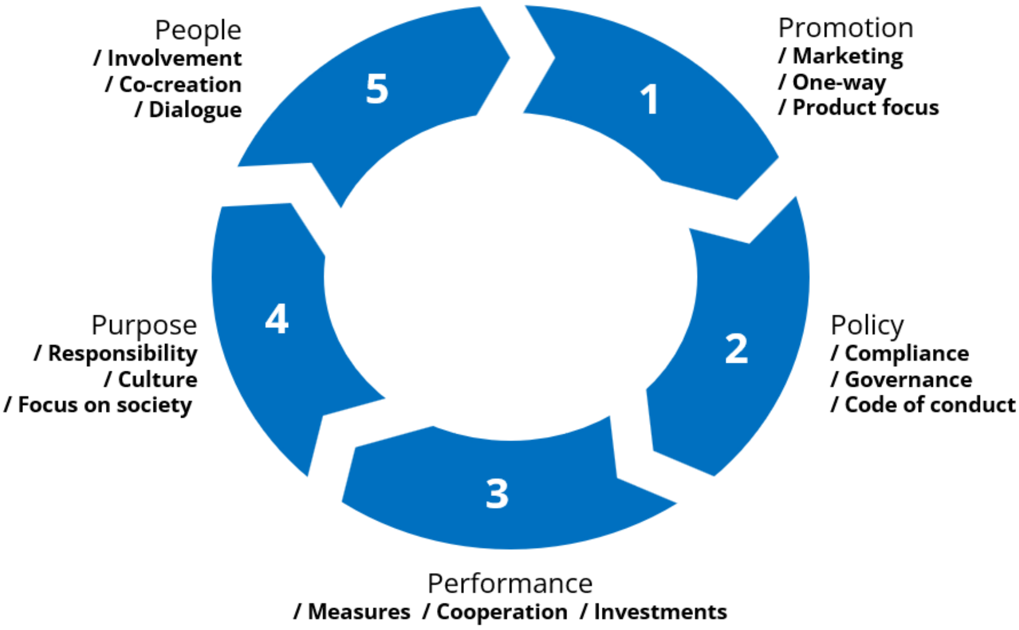
With these building blocks for a definition of CRB, I am now ready to summarize everything in a brief statement:

Corporate Responsibility Branding (CRB) is a branding discipline practiced by companies that, rooted in a meaningful purpose and principles of a balanced and responsible business focusing on both economics and sustainability, engage in dialogue with and involve internal and external stakeholders with the aim of creating value for both employees, customers, owners, and society.

Different Stages

Although the above can be considered the ultimate approach to CRB, few companies start here. Instead, I will define five stages of CRB.

Figure 2: 5 P model – different stages in CRB.



Source: Own creation.

Stage 1: Promotion
At this stage, the company has recognized that primary stakeholders are talking about and interested in sustainability, social issues, environment, and climate. This can be leveraged in the organization's marketing. The organization incorporates messages on these themes into its marketing. For example, it may add an extra price to products and services, then donate this amount to a charitable cause or organization—marketed as an "environmental surcharge," "climate compensation" or a special social effort. Many organizations collaborate with social and environmentally oriented organizations to capitalize on their partners' legitimacy and trust through co-branding.

At this stage, there is no specific organizational and managerial effort tied to the marketing of the new social and green position. CRB is primarily implemented as a marketing function, without consequences for products and processes in the company.

Stage 2: Policy
CRB requires leadership and management, and the company must have formulated a policy or principles on how it will handle social and environmental issues. Typically, there will be a focus on compliance and how the company manages risks related to non-economic issues. The policy stage is reactive, a response to stakeholders' demands for transparency and clear guidelines for the company's approach to CSR and sustainable production and management.

The policy stage is not necessarily tied to performance: new initiatives and actions in the organization and its relationships with stakeholders. The leadership often believes that they are already acting "by the book" and that there is primarily a need to document the management's code of conduct and guidelines.

Stage 3: Performance
At this stage, the company has realized that policies and promotion alone are not a viable path in CRB. A natural consequence of working to define policies and principles is that the company optimizes and reimagines processes and products in several areas. Real and substantial action is required. For example, the company may have defined increased environmental requirements for its suppliers' products and production methods, leading to the need to identify new sourcing, transform logistics chains, and change procurement habits. The company's decisions and actions are brand communication with substance, directly affecting relationships with one or more stakeholders.

Stage 4: Purpose
It is crucial which actions the company takes. For it to be considered CRB, the company must conduct business based on holistic and balanced management principles. There are many ways to establish and anchor these principles in the organization. It can be through a code of conduct, a value foundation, a vision and mission, a DNA, an essence, core beliefs, or something else entirely. However, many companies swear by the term "purpose," which typically includes several of the mentioned concepts. Purpose is about defining a larger—often holistic and societal—purpose of doing business; typically based on a formulation of the organization's WHY (Sinek, 2011).

The work with purpose is largely about what in of brand the company wants to be and how it will position this to different stakeholder groups. Purpose-driven companies are open and transparent in their communication with the outside world, have a higher purpose than just making money, and stand by their decisions and actions.

Stage 5: People
The work with purpose must not become an exclusive affair for enlightened companies. CRB is open, inviting, and inclusive. At this stage, it is expressed by companies involving their environment—their stakeholders—more or less directly in the company's development, management, and communication. This is manifested in companies using co-creation as an integral part of the company's innovation processes. When new products and services need to be developed—perhaps even invented—the company involves experts such as researchers, developers, designers, and advisors, as well as citizens, members, customers, consumers, participants, or others who will ultimately use what is being created.

Internally, there is a systematic focus on involving employees in the development of purpose, strategy, plans, processes, and relationships. In addition, the company has defined special systems and guidelines for the development of employee well-being and a good working environment, and it systematically measures and follows up on efforts focused on environmental and social issues. The pure focus on compliance has been replaced with a proactive stance on what creates a good workplace and a balanced effort to create results for both business, people, and society.

The five stages are not either-or. For some companies, the five stages may be seen as evolutionary steps on a path towards a more ultimate use of CRB. For others, there will be a choice of how far they want to go with a bold step in choosing a CRB strategy. Often, developing a CR brand over time will involve including elements from several of the above stages. In fact, it is difficult in practice to imagine a policy without action, or the development of a purpose without involving people. Regarding the promotion part, it may indeed start as actual marketing of "green solutions," while at a later stage, it will be expressed in dialogue and shared narratives about the balanced brand.

Four Types of Companies

Not all companies should be pioneers in CRB and thus contribute best practice examples of how sustainability and business can go hand in hand. For some companies, it makes more sense to adopt new technology and methods to improve climate, environment, and social conditions, while others primarily adhere to existing standards without making a big marketing effort regarding their consideration for society and the external world.

Looking at companies' work on responsibility and sustainability, as well as how they report and communicate about it, I see some significant differences in the approach to working with CRB. I have identified four types:

1. **CRB Innovator**

   CRB innovators contribute to creating new technological, managerial, organizational, and communicative solutions on how companies can make a good business focusing on multiple bottom lines. These companies are typically born with a sustainability DNA, a clear purpose, and leadership that shows the way for the entire organization. Companies in this group have attitudes towards sustainability, climate, social conditions, responsibility, and leadership—and typically, they are not afraid to express opinions in political and media contexts.

   An example of a CRB innovator is the American company Patagonia, which has paved the way through pronounced support for nature conservation since its establishment in the early 1970s. Patagonia, which produces outdoor clothing and equipment, works to utilize and recycle nature's resources to the fullest and is an inspiration for other clothing and fashion manufacturers worldwide. Patagonia has a clear purpose - "we're in business to save our home planet" - and values that are lived daily by the company's leadership and employees. The company is known as "the activist company".

2. **CRB Follower**

   This group of companies is quick to adopt principles and standards for sustainability reporting and communication. They also have attitudes towards good management, ethics, responsibility, sustainability, and stakeholder involvement, although they rarely express themselves politically or polemically. They are inspired by innovators and often participate in communities, conferences, and seminars where the balance between business and sustainability is on the agenda. They are deeply aware of their role in society but do not slacken their focus on developing products and markets that enable them to make money for their investors and owners. They are not afraid to use responsibility and sustainability in their marketing.

   An example of a CRB follower is the Dutch conglomerate Philips, best known for lighting, TVs and electronics, care products, and household appliances. Philips has been among the world's leaders for several years when it comes to investments in green technology and sustainability reporting. The company operates with three bottom lines, reported in an integrated annual report (www.philips.com). The ambitious goals and actions follow. For several years, the company has streamlined its energy consumption, and the goal is to produce CO_2 neutrally in just a few years, partly using windmill energy. At the same time, Philips is a good example in the circular economy, as the company works to reduce its waste to zero by reusing materials in the medical industry for new products for Philips (Vallaster, Lindgreen & Maon, 2012).

3. **CRB Conscious**

The CRB conscious are aware of the sustainability agenda and the changed roles that citizens and companies are expected to play in the fight for the climate and other significant societal issues. However, they are not the first to move in this area but follow suit when the competitive advantages are obvious. They comply with rules and standards for compliance in the area and develop CSR or sustainability reports that document it. They are rarely particularly communicative about their efforts and often reluctant to use CSR, sustainability, and responsibility as elements in their marketing. Companies' focus on the environment and climate is primarily about harvesting efficiency and productivity benefits, and to a lesser extent, about contributing to solving more significant societal challenges. These companies rarely have a comprehensive program for stakeholder dialogue, and top management is not at the forefront when it comes to promoting sustain-ability standards and agendas.

In 2023, the consultancy Position Green ranked ChemoMetec as an E (from A to F) in an evaluation of ESG reporting from 300 listed Nordic companies. ChemoMetec had a revenue of 442.3 million DKK in 2022/23 and is present on more than 100 markets. On that background it is not flattering to be given the label "An attempt at sustainability reporting but no recognised standard is followed. Difficult to gauge priorities and quantifiable information is lacking" (Position Green, ESG 100 Report 2023). Therefore, a status that points in the direction of a CRB Conscious company.

However, this can change, and ChemoMetec is stating in their 2022/23 report that" We have stepped up our sustainability work in the past year. The aim of our heightened focus is to ensure that ChemoMetec's operations become increasingly sustainable and to enable us to comply with the ever-stricter reporting requirements that will be phased in over the coming years. ChemoMetec will be required to report in accordance with the CSRD and accompanying standards as from the 2025/26 financial year and in accordance with the EU Taxonomy Regulation as from the 2026/27 financial year."

A few years from now we will probably see ChemoMetec moving up in the hierarchy of the typology of this article as well as in the Position Green ranking. In the first edition of this article, I had the solutions provider for the mining and cement industry FL Smidth quoted as an example of a CRB Conscious company. This seems no longer fair, and lately the company is also ranked A by Position Green for their excellent ESG reporting.

4. **CRB Ignorant**

The last group includes companies do not believe it is the business's lot to play an active role in developing a sustainable society or that it needs to consider being responsible for the environment and climate. They comply with laws and follow the regulations they are subject to. The company's management is primarily convinced that their company¨s role in the world primarily is to serve customers and owners. This is best achieved by focusing on how the company can develop products that the market demands and by focusing on having as low costs and as high profit margins as possible. Ignorants adhere to Friedman's understanding of the company's role as profit-maximizing (Friedman, 1962) and believe that the world's challenges and goals for climate, environment, poverty, inequality, hunger, education, sanitation, etc., must be a task for the state, politicians, and citizens—not for companies, and certainly not for their company.

There are not many companies and business leaders who openly call themselves ignorants when it comes to balancing business and sustainability. Most may even think that living hidden is living well. As long as the company continues with its activities and takes care of its business and customers, there is no reason to go further in social responsibility or to loudly speak about the company's position in this area. However, some ignorants believe that purpose, values, responsibility, climate, and the environment are primarily an obvious marketing opportunity that only requires the development of emotional visual and linguistic tools. Substance and actions can come later—if affordable. A notorious example of this use of visual tools is Benetton's use of political advertisements in the 1980s-90s (Fan, 2005).

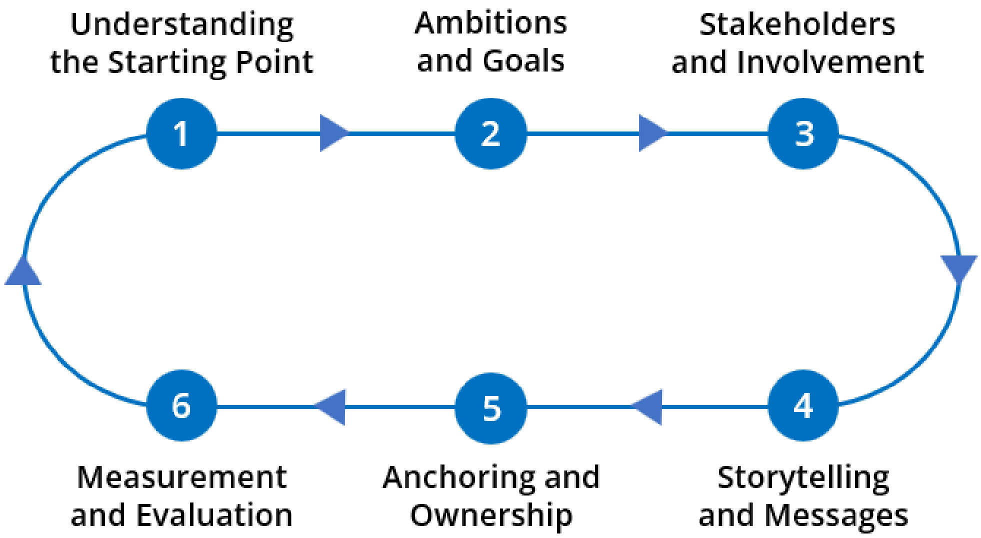
An example of the use of linguistic tools without substance and reality is Enron's representation of itself as a highly ethical company. In the summer of 2000, Enron published a 65-page document titled "Code of Ethics." In the preface, Chairman and CEO Kenneth Lay wrote: "As leaders and employees of Enron Corp. and its subsidiaries and affiliated companies, it is our duty to conduct business in accordance with applicable laws and in a moral and honest manner" (Enron, 2000). The document defines the four fundamental values—respect, integrity, communication, and excellence—and establishes a lot of appealing policies and principles for how leaders and employees should act with the ethical banner held high. In 2001, Enron went bankrupt, and top management and the audit firm Arthur Andersen were subsequently convicted of accounting fraud and lying to investors. In other words, top management does not seem to have read and adhered to the regulations in the ethical code.

CRB strategy

CRB doesn't come by itself and cannot be delegated to the newly arrived marketing coordinator as a minor test project. To succeed, it requires consistency, coherence, control, and integration. Therefore, the organization must establish a strategy with clear goals, well-defined initiatives, anchored communication, specified resources, and some unambiguous benchmarks and measurement methods. It may be tempting to propose an emergent strategy (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), continually adapting to a dynamic organization and environment. And, of course, a strategy and its implementation should reflect the company's environment and societal changes. However, it is crucial that the strategy maintains a persistent focus on the goal, and the company operates according to management principles that align with the mentioned guidelines for CRB.

The strategy may hold the following steps:

Figure 3: Strategic steps in developing CRB.



Source: Own creation.

Step 1: Understanding the Starting Point
Before defining goals and content for the development of the social brand, you will need insight into the brand's current position – both internally and externally. Some questions you'll likely want answers to include: What reputation does the company have today, what are we known for, and are there any strong stories or myths about the organization that we should consider in the CRB strategy?

It is crucial to know whether stakeholders are aware of and recognize existing initiatives in the social and environmental areas. Additionally, understanding whether stakeholders want to be involved in decisions or dialogue in these areas is important. It may also be relevant to gain insight into what similar companies – within the industry, for example – are doing in the field and how they build relationships and communicate about it.

Internally, it is essential to know if the organization and culture are geared towards a more proactive CRB. For example, understanding if the right resources, systems, and competencies are present in the organization, or if there needs to be a plan for developing these in the social branding strategy. It is also important to gauge whether leaders and employees are already motivated to implement CRB or if it requires a special effort to get everyone on board with the changes and new projects resulting from the shifted focus.

Step 2: Ambitions and Goals
Different types of goals can be established with a focus on long-term, medium-term, and short-term objectives. Long-term goals can be formulated as a vision or

ambition demonstrating the organization's dream of how economic, environmental, and social conditions can create business and societal value. Medium-term goals can extend 2-3 years ahead and be formulated within relevant critical themes, in relation to stakeholder groups, or within different parts of a comprehensive communication or reporting framework (such as the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals). Short-term goals can be defined as concrete success criteria or key performance indicators (KPIs) typically to be achieved within 1 year.

It is important to note that goal formulation in the CRB strategy should not cover ordinary business and operational goals for creating economic and societal values. Those are covered by a business strategy or a strategy for working with non-financial parameters such as the environment, climate, employee, and supplier relations, among others. Instead, they should support these goals by defining objectives for reputation, trust, relationship development, and communication with all internal and external stakeholders.

Step 3: Stakeholders and Involvement
Mapping and understanding the organization's stakeholders are different from classical PR and marketing. It is not about defining target groups to be reached through targeted communication measures but about establishing methods to understand and develop relationships with relevant stakeholders. The focus is not on defining and communicating with selected customer segments but on engaging in a dialogue and interacting with a broad circle of internal and external stakeholders.

Firstly, it is necessary to define which people and groups the organization influences and who influences the organization. Then determine in which areas it would be advantageous for internal and external stakeholders to be involved in common development, collaboration, and dialogue. Next, determine which methods to use and what initiatives to launch to succeed in this involvement. Finally, establish how to follow up and measure whether the involvement and efforts bear fruit for all parties.

While it might be tempting to keep the work on responsibility and sustainability internal, involving a wide range of stakeholders in all phases of CRB makes sense for disciplines like transparency, openness, community, and collaboration.

Step 4: Storytelling and Messages
Classical branding is about creating mindshare – as prominent a position as possible in as many potential customers' minds as possible. This is typically done through visual and linguistic tools, aesthetics, and marketing. CRB, however, is about something entirely different. It is about creating a substantive narrative about how the organization adds value to stakeholders like customers, employees, and owners in balance with the society and culture it is a part of. Branding is thus a social, cultural, and relational event taking place in a community of internal and external stakeholders.

The organization contributes only to a part of the narrative – and hence the CRB. For a brand is the sum of all the expectations, interpretations, feelings, and stories that the entire community of the organization and the external environment consists of. When the social and relational are added to branding, it is both as a requirement for the process itself – developing, reflecting, and communicating together – and as a theme for the process; namely, this balanced focus on business, environment/climate, and social conditions.

If the narrative is a common denominator for stakeholder interaction, does it even make sense to talk about organizational stories? It does. Organizations must claim to be a significant voice in the negotiation of discourses and themes in the stories. It is the organization and its members who know their reality – processes and results – best. Therefore, it makes sense for them to initiate the narrative, define frameworks and content, and then engage in a dialogue with stakeholders to gain more knowledge, input, and perspectives.

Situation, target audience, and medium set the framework for the format and content of stories, and organizations cannot prepare for every contact and relational development. However, they do not need to, if the dialogue is to be authentic, direct, intuitive, and meaningful. Instead, organizations can work with a common dialogical basis – a core narrative – defining the organization's identity, fundamental values, leadership principles, vision, and focus. In this way, management and employees have a basic starting point for dialogue and relationship development, and other stakeholders have the opportunity to prepare for the dialogue based on this narrative.

Step 5: Anchoring and Ownership

The internal anchoring of the CR brand is crucial for success. If the organization fails to involve all employees in the process of developing an organization and a brand that incorporates principles of sustainability and responsibility into its DNA, it will be challenging to set a direction for brand development. Ownership and motivation must be created in all parts of the organization.

Anchoring is primarily created through communication and through management decisions and behaviour. Nothing communicates as well as actual action. However, the extent of the challenge will differ depending on whether you work in an organization born with a sustainable profile or whether it is primarily a commercially driven organization working to achieve a better balance in focus on business and social responsibility. Both types of organizations, however, need to consider how they can continuously create support, new forms of dialogue, innovative relationship development, better reporting of results, etc., as they evolve and grow.

A good starting point for anchoring is to create broad and deep involvement of stakeholders in developing policies, principles, systems, and strategies for sustainability initiatives. Various communication measures can help create understanding and anchoring in the organization:

- A text-heavy strategy in Word and results displayed in Excel sheets are rarely the best way to communicate when the target audience has not been part of the process of developing the strategy or collecting results. It can be useful to visualize strategy and results through a poster, a microsite, animation, video, or similar. This way, strategy and results become more vivid, comprehensible, and understandable, and easier to discuss and communicate further.

- Leadership must take the lead in telling the story of how the organization works with sustainability aspects and what strategy has been formulated for CR branding. It can be advantageous to "translate" strategy and branding terms into a more direct communication that puts employees' and other stakeholders' situations and everyday life into play. Communication should, among other things, answer: What changes will be needed? What role can each individual play? What collaborations and relationships will it require? What benefits will we create for the organization, employees, the environment, and society? In other words, it is about putting the recipient of the message in the center and addressing some of the habits, prejudices, and concerns that stakeholders may have.
- It is a continuous task to create anchoring and ownership. Therefore, the organization should regularly communicate about the results being achieved. This can be done through the dissemination of cases and projects that the organization has initiated or been part of. This way, the organization and involved stakeholders will always have a sense of progress and that results are being achieved for the benefit of all parties.

Step 6: Measurement and Evaluation
Measurements are essential for several reasons. They contribute primarily to knowledge about whether the branding initiatives set in motion provide the effect and results that the company strives for. With that knowledge, the company can adjust activities as well as the content and form of channels, media, and materials. Additionally, measurements provide knowledge and learning to management, communication, and marketing professionals about the extent to which communication, marketing, and involving processes are appreciated by the prioritized target groups.

CRB measurements are not about measuring, following up, and reporting on results and the effect of initiatives within occupational health and safety, CO2 emissions, energy efficiency, social responsibility, etc. It is part of compliance and the follow-up of the principles and standards the organization has chosen as management tools. Instead, the measurement focuses on building trust in the corporate brand, on relationship development, and on the dialogue processes that are the focal point of the branding task.

Several measurements/analyses can be relevant:

Brand position, values, and narrative
It is relevant to know how far the organization has come in establishing brand position, values, and narrative among stakeholders. Is the organization and the corporate brand understood and acknowledged to the extent defined in the strategy, or is there still a way to go? What values do stakeholders associate with the organization, and how does it match leaders' and employees' own self-understanding? And what stories prevail about the organization in various forums and media?

The measurement can advantageously take place through a mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. It can be, for example, an online survey to selected stakeholders to measure the development and effect of efforts to communicate a new position, values, and narrative. And it can be through interviews with internal and external key individuals to gain insight into what situations, messages, feelings, and contacts are at play when understanding and acknowledgment either succeeds or fails.

Brand reputation

Another relevant measurement focuses on the organization's reputation and stakeholders' expectations and trust in the organization, its management, and products. A periodic reputation measurement can provide useful knowledge about how the organization is doing over time and in relation to organizations it typically compares itself with.

It may be relevant to refer to the parameters Reputation Institute uses in their reputation measurements (reputationinstitute.com). They use 7 parameters: products/services, innovation, workplace conditions, governance, CSR, leadership, and performance. By asking questions and measuring all 7 parameters and possibly comparing with the response for a peer group, you get a good picture of the extent to which your stakeholders appreciate, admire, and trust your organization and your corporate brand now and in the future. This measurement thus provides a holistic view of the organization, reaching far beyond financial performance by also measuring stakeholders' perception of social and environmental bottom lines and performance indicators.

Motivation and engagement

Finally, it will be relevant to measure the motivation and engagement of management, employees, and close collaborators regarding being part of and pursuing a balanced business model and strategy. Is culture and strategy synchronized with each other, or is there a gap between what is formulated as principles and goals for balanced business operations and social branding on the one hand and what management, employees, and partners work for and express in daily life on the other hand?

It is almost impossible to analyze culture through quantitative measurements. There are simply too many pitfalls and opportunities to answer fundamentally and intentionally rather than expressing actual action and engagement. However, it can be observed and analyzed through an ethnographic fieldwork where a combination of participation, observation, interviews, and collection of typical stories can provide a good overall picture of whether there is real support, motivation, and engagement that supports business and strategy.

Other measurements

In addition to the above measurements, there are also several so-called brand equity measurements that annually take the pulse of brands worldwide. Examples of these are BAV Group's BrandAsset Valuator, which is based on the assessment of about 1 million people of 60,000 brands from around the world (www.bavgroup.com, 2019), Interbrand's Best Brands measurement, which is based on an evaluation of both financial data and the role and strength of brands (www.interbrand.com/best-brands, 2019), Kantar Millward Brown's BrandZ measurement assesses current and future brand strength through research that includes preferences of more than 3.7 million consumers for 165,000 brands (brandz.com, 2019), and finally, Brand Finance measures the value of brands through an evaluation of, among other things, brand strength, market value, and brand earnings (www.brandfinance.com, 2019).

Although there are plenty of potential measurements, they should be used with caution. Many companies use an impressive arsenal of quantitative and qualitative measurements, without translating these into discussions and evaluations of good and bad practices and communication – and without the measurements also resulting in actual improvements in branding.

It is important that there is a clear purpose for measurements and that they can say something concrete about the extent to which the defined brand goals are - or are on the way to being - fulfilled. Moreover, it makes sense to follow up on brand strength measurements and the like conducted before a major branding process. This measurement thus becomes a follow-up on a kind of baseline measurement, where the results of a process can be measured and evaluated.

Finally, a lot of knowledge and learning lie in the relationships that the organization's leaders and employees engage in with stakeholders on a daily basis. The exercise is to collect, structure, and evaluate this knowledge so that it can be actively used to improve communication and branding. It could be knowledge from customer service, sales staff, investor feedback, recruitment processes, social media communication, media coverage, website visits, co-creation, crowdsourcing, or something entirely different. Much knowledge about stakeholders already exists and does not necessarily require large measuring instruments to provide useful knowledge about brand strength and reputation.

Challenges for CRB

For organizations and companies, there are several challenges associated with the adoption of CRB as a process and dialogue tool:

Marketing Instead of Branding
CRB is not a new clever marketing tool that, based on a focus on responsibility, climate, and the environment, can provide the marketing department with new narratives and messages for the promotion and sale of new products and services. Instead, CRB is about working towards the entire organization supporting a socially focused purpose and principles of sustainable and business-driven leadership and dialogue. CRB requires that the organization has a fundamental desire to change and streamline the handling of issues related to the environment, climate, working and supplier conditions, consumption, and recycling, etc.

However, for many companies, the challenge lies in the fact that sustainability efforts also present a marketing opportunity, and some companies may be tempted to quickly embrace a green or social agenda without being able to demonstrate any substantial effort in the area. In such cases, stakeholders are likely to call out the company with terms such as "greenwashing," "bluewashing," "redwashing," or "pinkwashing." The challenge is to restrain eager marketing professionals who see the obvious marketing opportunities in linking product marketing with CSR and climate accolades. In these situations, leaders and other sustainability stakeholders must insist that concrete actions be taken and that the impact of the company's sustainability work be demonstrated before external PR and marketing efforts are launched.

Integration into Business Model and Organization

The company's sustainability agenda must not become a tendentious idea that only appears in short-term plans and projects. This would be equivalent to the company only having a goal to make money in some periods and for some products. Focus on sustainability and earnings must go hand in hand to make business sense and be meaningful for employees, customers, investors, and other stakeholders. Otherwise, there will be no trust that the company will be present and create both societal and business value in the long run.

Sustainability must also be internally embedded in the company; in its DNA/purpose, in the business model, in leadership, in systems and competencies, in operations and production, and in reporting, monitoring, communication, and marketing. It is essential that goals and projects for sustainability are defined for all business units and departments so that everyone is aware of their role and can support balanced value creation in the company.

Integration can be achieved with the support of stakeholder models, the Creating Shared Value concept, or the idea of the triple bottom line. In addition, management, development, and reporting frameworks such as the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, UN Global Compact, Global Reporting Initiative, or the ESG reporting guide (Finansforeningen et al., 2019) can provide both leaders and employees with tools to systematize and drive efforts. These frameworks provide standards that make it easier for external stakeholders to understand and compare the company's data and results with those of other companies.

Balancing Stakeholder Expectations

When companies use CRB, expectations will quickly form among stakeholders about how they will be affected by and involved in the company's actions and attitudes. This task is not fundamentally different from other companies, organizations, and authorities that are aware of different stakeholders' positions and roles in relation to legitimacy and reputation. Still, CRB sets the bar high for sustainability, dialogue, and involvement, and when the company needs to maintain an equal focus on productivity and efficiency, it can easily lead to discussions and ambiguities both internally and externally about where the leadership's focus lies and where the strategy will lead the company.

This will be especially true if the company's products and markets falter, and the company must make decisions and prioritizations in the short term that do not seem particularly sustainable. For example, if the company has to lay off employees, drop investments, or postpone sponsorship of the local handball club. In such situations, the leadership must be clear with all stakeholders and explain why these decisions are beneficial for both the company and society in the longer term.

However, expectation formation will also be influenced when the company is in ongoing dialogue with its stakeholders, and everyone is available for questions and comments on all relevant media.

CRB is Responsible and Meaningful Change

CRB is not an afterthought, something added on after the company has defined a purpose, policies, and principles, and implemented initiatives and projects contributing to responsible, balanced business operations. Through dialogue and engagement, CRB is a way to continuously articulate and anchor a sustainability agenda within the company and among its stakeholders and the wider community. Communication and branding wield a reality-constructing power that can and should be used to the mutual benefit of society and businesses.

CRB is a tool for creating change, and change is needed in a time when global climate changes affect our living conditions, requiring a more sustainable world in all aspects. A world where companies should also play a significant role in the solutions to the necessary processes of change.

In this context, communication and brand managers in companies and their advisors in management, audit, communication, and advertising agencies also have a significant role to play – and a shared responsibility for the position and role many large companies and brands have achieved.

Frederik Preisler, director of the advertising agency Mensch, expresses a similar viewpoint when he says: "As an industry, we have a common obligation to influence the world in a slightly more favorable direction (...). The advertising industry has contributed to the world shaking in these years: Overconsumption, environmental and climate abuse, and greed (Odde, 2019)."

The solution lies in communication, he says: "Communication is the most potent tool for change we know. All the world's major upheavals are based on communication. It is communication that persuades people to change actions, behaviour, attitude, etc. So, we have weapons (...). Agencies should insist on delivering services that make it clear what a company specifically contributes to the society it is a part of (Odde, 2019)."

CRB seeks to be an answer to this task. Where communication is not marketing meant to convince but a dialogue meant to involve, create meaning, and foster common understanding. Where top management does not always have and get it right and only holds power when negotiated with the external world and stakeholders. Where economics does not always prevail over sustainability but thrives hand in hand to create value for both the company and society. And where brands are not seductive, advertising-created identities but legitimate, social identities created through meaningful processes, relationships, and community.

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