

B Corps' Social Media Communications

Subjects: Management

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A growing emphasis on stakeholder values of social and environmental responsibility and the triple bottom line (TBL) thinking led to the emergence of B Corporations (hereafter B Corps). B Corps are social enterprises that are committed to the TBL and certified by B Lab, a non-profit organization that assesses corporations' overall impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, community, and the environment. Although B Corps serves as a catalyst for sustainable development, little is known about how they communicate on social media during a crisis. In this study, we examined the social media communications of B Corps to (1) identify salient topics and themes, (2) analyze how these themes align with the TBL, and (3) evaluate social media performance against industry benchmarks. We focused on the apparel, footwear, and accessories (AFA) sectors in the U.S. and chose Twitter, a platform known for crisis communication. Using a qualitative method, we found four topics and 21 underlying themes. Topics related to social/environmental issues and COVID-19 were most dominant, followed by product/brand promotions. Further classification of specific themes and cases from a TBL perspective demonstrated that, overall, B Corps in the AFA sectors leveraged various approaches to promote balance between each TBL dimension. Lastly, although collectively B Corps exceeded some of the Twitter industry benchmarks, at an individual level, most brands had room for improvement to build a stronger community and promote synergy among the three pillars of the TBL.

Keywords: triple bottom line ; B Corporations ; COVID-19 ; social media ; communication

1. The Triple Bottom Line Framework

As per the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainability can be defined as “*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” ^[1] (p. 16). Corporations committed to sustainability leverage the TBL framework to examine the impact of their businesses. While the TBL encourages businesses to incorporate the three pillars into their agenda, not all businesses fully leverage it. In a recent commentary, Elkington ^[2], who coined a concept of the TBL in 1994, stresses that corporations should account for the full cost of doing business, and B Corps hold promise in their commitment to the TBL as they focus on a “best for the world” outlook.

2. The B Corp Certification

B Corp certification entails several steps, including meeting the basic standards of the performance assessment (B Impact Assessment), fulfilling all legal requirements, and undergoing transparency and verification procedures. For approved companies, annual certification fees vary by geographic region and annual sales volume. For example, companies with annual sales lower than USD 150,000 pay USD 1000 per year, while companies making between USD 750 million and USD 999.9 million pay USD 50,000 annually ^[3]. The certification is coordinated by the B Lab which is overseen by multiple governing and advisory bodies ^[3]. Specifically, the B Impact Assessment required for B Corp certification breaks the social and environmental impacts of a business into five impact areas, including governance, workers, community, environment, and customers. First, governance impact examines whether the company has a social/environmental mission and how it engages stakeholders to achieve this mission. It evaluates the overall mission, ethics, accountability, and transparency within the company. Second, workers impact area focuses on the overall work environment. It measures compensation, benefits, training, work culture, worker health, safety, and more. Third, community impact addresses a company's supplier relations, diversity, and engagement with the local community as well as charitable giving and addressing social issues. Fourth, environmental impact focuses on environmental performance of a company by assessing its facilities, materials, emissions, resource and energy use, as well as the environmental impact of its supply chain. It also evaluates whether the product of a company addresses environmental issues, such as reducing waste and wildlife conservation. Finally, impact on customers focuses on the public benefit of the products a company offers. It assesses if products provide a solution for a social or environmental issue, such as public health, preservation of the environment, and so on ^[3]. To be certified as a B Corp, a company is required to achieve a minimum of 80 points out of

200 available on the B Impact Assessment ^[3]. The B Corp impact assessment categories and underlying attributes demonstrate the complexity, commitment, and resources needed to fully integrate the three pillars of sustainability in the business. Therefore, to incorporate sustainability as a core value, companies must consider it from the perspective of the three dimensions of the TBL and the various stakeholders impacted by the TBL.

3. Sustainability Communications on Social Media

Communication of a firm's sustainable practices influences consumers' brand choices and purchase decisions by enhancing brand visibility, reputation, and trust ^{[4][5]}. Companies have used various means to communicate their sustainability, including websites, CSR reports, and social media ^{[5][6][7]}. In particular, social media is an important platform to examine sustainability communication because there is representation from a global audience, and it provides an avenue for stakeholders to co-create communication and express their opinions, experiences, and values, which can help build a stronger community and develop more effective communication strategies to promote sustainability ^{[6][8]}.

4. B Corp's Social Media Communications during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Opportunities and Implications

By qualitatively analyzing B Corps' Twitter accounts, we found that social and environmental issues and COVID-19 were the two dominant topics communicated on social media, followed by product/brand promotion and general messages. We further identified a range of underlying themes that emerged from each topic. The topic corresponding to social and environmental messages had nine themes, including communicating about sustainable products or practices, raising awareness regarding sustainable issues through education and stakeholder engagement, addressing social issues such as racism, discussing environmental issues, supporting activism, and promoting B Corp and certification. The COVID-19 related topic included a variety of business decisions or activities to cope with the crisis, ranging from realignment strategies in production, operations, promotions, and distribution to supporting community resilience through donations/fundraising, community support, and engagement. On the other hand, messages corresponding to the product/brand promotion topic focused on general promotional messages without direct reference to sustainability or COVID-19. Specifically, B Corps promoted their offerings through collaborations, engaging partners/influencers/media, and engaging consumers through sales/discounts, giveaways, contests, and user-generated content. Finally, B Corps occasionally shared general messages by means of relatable events, stories, or photos.

Overall, we found that, collectively, social media communications of B Corps address interactions among the three dimensions of the TBL, but individually, each corporation has potential to further develop synergy among the three pillars of sustainability. Findings from this study attest that exogenous shocks, such as COVID-19, do not divert attention from the significance of the TBL. Instead, such shocks can reinforce and offer new and creative opportunities to address the TBL. This is critical given the position of B Corps as the trailblazers of positive change. Their communication to stakeholders can be instrumental in developing benchmarks and stakeholder expectations that businesses should not focus on profits alone even during a crisis. Our findings highlight that corporations have obligations to address all three pillars of the TBL creatively and in ways that create value, even when tensions exist between the dimensions.

Furthermore, although B Corps in the AFA sectors collectively or on average met or exceeded industry benchmarks, we found that many of them did not fully leverage Twitter, and their individual performance showed somewhat weak presence in terms of the follower size, weekly post numbers, and/or AER/Post. We suggest that especially high-performing B Corps focus on building their community by improving the frequency of communication and actively engaging them with content that resonates with the interests of various stakeholders. Companies could utilize interactive methods to make content more engaging and entertaining, such as motivating consumers to share their content, hosting contests or promotions, polling consumers, and creating sustainability-related conversations, which could improve engagement. In terms of message content, some companies heavily focused on educational content or information sharing about their sustainability performance. While this is certainly necessary to increase awareness and make a positive impact, companies may consider balancing the content to meet the interests of various internal and external stakeholders by providing a combination of promotional (economic), social, and environmental topics. Lastly, certified B Corps have a competitive advantage to build a stronger community rooted in transparency. Because many consumers are still not familiar with B Corp certification, B Corps should create more clear and engaging communications on social media to enhance the value of B Corp certification and strengthen organizational identity.

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