COMMUNICATING THE CIRCLE

Are circular economy communication strategies starting to connect?

A GO CIRCULAR WHITE PAPER
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FOREWORD

‘I wish I was trying to sell cookies instead of the circular economy concept’ – it’s a thought I’ve had countless times since I joined Circle Economy in 2013. Being the communications manager of this impact-driven cooperative with the sole mission to make a circular economy happen, I am all too aware of the importance of communication. We can start as many circular projects with our members as we like, but they will only have real impact if other people know about them, so that they can grow from proven concepts to the global game-changers we need.

But how to communicate about this complex topic? Although I personally love theorising about systems thinking and the interdependence of ecology and economy, I share this paper’s finding that in order to transition to a circular economy, we need to convince people with real life examples. We need to promote these examples to a broader audience in the form of compelling stories. Entrepreneurs, civil servants, scientists and visionary CEOs must all step up and share their circular journeys.

We should also keep both the needs and values of our audience in mind. Whereas financial impact might make one person tick, another might be motivated by the technological possibilities, or by the connectivity that is created by going circular. I don’t think there is one perfect method to ‘communicate the circle’, but I do know that we should not hesitate to share as many circular stories as we can.
I. INTRODUCTION

Given that the circular economy (CE) has only started to resonate with businesses over the past five years, CE communication strategies are by and large, still in their infancy. As circular thinking starts to mainstream, CE corporate messaging will become a sharper focal point for those companies looking to strategically position themselves at the forefront of this agenda.

This White Paper is intended to give a current snapshot of how mature CE communication strategies are within business, what factors should be considered when developing such strategies, and how these strategies might evolve in the coming years. It also sets out to examine the wider context around the language that is being used to frame the CE.

The paper draws on the findings of a survey conducted over an eight-week period during Spring 2015. While the data is anonymised, leading CE actors including global corporations, emerging innovators and academic thinktanks were approached for their input. In total, 138 responses were received, of which 102 were deemed complete responses. For the purposes of accuracy and reliability, only data drawn from complete responses has been analysed for this report.

II. TAKEAWAY TRENDS

CE communication strategies are increasingly being seen as a valuable engagement tool by many organisations look to make this challenging transition. Those that have already adopted such strategies are mainly applying them both internally within their business, and externally to their supply chain and wider stakeholders.

For a CE communication strategy to be effective, it should encompass a number of different elements, but its overriding aim should be to demonstrate practical application of the concepts behind the circular model. The inclusion of real life examples, underlined by factual data, is regarded as a priority by many. Other elements such as creative storytelling, educational messages and calls to action are also deemed important.

Responsibility for CE communication strategies should be shared across an organisation, involving leadership from the top, but with inputs from various departments. Strategies need to be inclusive and aligned with the whole corporate values spectrum – not just sustainability, but brand reputation, finance, supply chain transparency, customer service and purchasing power.

On a wider level, support is growing for a global standardised definition of the CE – many remain confused by general messaging surrounding the CE, and feel that communication strategies would benefit from an agreed definition that could be applied globally, irrespective of geography or business interests.
COMMUNICATION CENTRAL TO DEEPER ENGAGEMENT

Having a strong voice on the CE is considered imperative if businesses are to achieve wider buy-in on circularity. Effective communication strategies were cited by the vast majority of respondents (83%) as being an ‘extremely important’ driver in terms of deepening engagement levels with this agenda, with a further 16% regarding it as ‘fairly important’. Just 1% felt communication strategies were of little importance as a CE engagement tool.

It was generally felt that CE communication strategies should operate both internally and externally within an organisation to ensure the inclusion of wider stakeholder groups. Of those respondents who stated that their own organisation was actively engaged with the CE in some way (83%), 37% had both an internal and external communication strategy in place, while 6% had an internal strategy only.

The survey also found that 28% of organisations were currently developing a strategy, suggesting that as business involvement levels increase around the CE, so does the perceived need for dedicated messaging. Conversely, a significant number (29%) have yet to formalise any plans for a communication strategy which may indicate that their activity within this space remains relatively quiet or experimental at this point in time.

‘REAL LIFE’ BENEFITS MUST FRONT ANY MESSAGE

Showcasing how the CE works in practice was considered by far the most important aspect of any communication strategy. Nearly half of respondents (46%) felt the main strategy objective should be to demonstrate practical application, followed by raising awareness of the agenda (16%), changing perceptions (15%), encouraging knowledge sharing (12%) and introducing new business models to the market (9%).

This was backed up by further findings showing that 94% of respondents felt it ‘important’ to include real life examples as a core element when communicating on the CE. Underlining such benefits with hard data was also considered necessary – 74% of respondents thought the inclusion of facts and figures was an important core element.

Demand for more case studies that can illustrate how the CE might work in practice is not surprising, given this is still an emerging business model. While there are some good accounts of practical application available in the public domain, there is a general feeling that newer and more in-depth case study material, particularly from emerging innovators, is needed to help disseminate wider learnings and best practice.
MESSAGING MUST WORK ON DIFFERENT LEVELS

A successful communication strategy should be comprised of several different elements – not just the practical. The inclusion of other ingredients such as creative storytelling, educational messages, statistics, and calls to action were all considered to be necessary by most respondents.

**CREATIVE STORYTELLING** The CE is people-centred at its heart. It is about co-creation and co-development, ultimately for the sake of societal transition. Transitional enablers such as designers, makers, hackers, futurists and disruptors can help unlock the types of innovation needed to bring stakeholders and supply chains together to work in new, and different ways. These represent exciting stories waiting to be told.

**EDUCATIONAL MESSAGES** Much still needs to done in the field of CE education, not just within the business community, but wider society too. There is an argument for simplifying the terminology, but also communicating circular benefits in a way that directly relates to both operational business and personal values. Behaviour change is central to making the CE work; finding a strategy that works on a psychological and emotional level, as well as a physiological level, is crucial.

**STATISTICS** There is a lack of data pertaining to CE success, particularly with real life examples. While a strong case has been made for the macro-economics, drilling down to the next level – the patterns of supply and demand, and determination of price and output in individual markets – needs greater scrutiny. Companies tend to approach circularity on a case-by-case basis, rather than looking at their entire business model. Communicating data more transparently, particularly around pilot work, would be a useful first step.

**CALLS TO ACTION** While businesses are leading on the CE, realistically they can only do so much within the current system constraints. Many regulatory, market and investment barriers persist, which prevent ground-level initiatives from scaling up. Both voluntary industry commitments and government intervention could play a valuable role here in addressing these bottlenecks. CE messaging should not flinch from taking a bolder, more persuasive approach if deemed appropriate.

Circular economy communication strategies should incorporate the following elements
INJECT LEADERSHIP, BUT BE INCLUSIVE

Any CE communication strategy should be led from the top, with board-level involvement. More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) felt the CEO should feed into the strategy, reflecting the importance of leadership. Alongside this, an inclusive approach should be taken to ensure there is a diverse mix of job functionality when it comes to input.

Those in charge of sustainability, marketing, procurement and finance were also considered to have a key role to play in helping to orchestrate communication strategies by 66%, 51%, 45% and 39% of respondents respectively. This would indicate that many businesses are already linking the CE strongly to not just resource efficiency, but wider corporate interests such as brand reputation, profit and supply chain purchasing power.

Other job functions that respondents felt should exert some influence were facilities management (24%), commercial sales (20%) and human resources (14%). This is significant in terms of internal buy-in. Human resources, for instance, could act as a useful lever in driving forward employee engagement on the CE especially when working alongside facilities management to ensure compliance of more internal circular practices relating to waste, recycling and energy efficiency.

Showcasing how the circular economy works in practice was considered by far the most important aspect of any communication strategy.
TIME FOR A GLOBAL DEFINITION OF CIRCULARITY?

One measure that could help guide both the content and delivery of communication strategies is to formally specify what the CE is through a global definition. Given the complexity of the different resource flow routes that can operate under the CE, the concept itself is open to interpretation. The majority of respondents (61%) felt that communication strategies would benefit from a standardised definition of circularity that could be applied internationally.

Such a definition could assist in a number of ways. First, it would help harmonise some of the terminology associated with the CE, which is often interchanged with other terms such as ‘cradle-to-cradle’, ‘net positive’ and ‘closed loop’. It would refine exactly what the CE is – that it aspires to go beyond recycling – by underlining the importance of working towards the higher value circles of product durability, repair and remanufacture. This would not only help frame the context behind future policy measures, but address ‘greenwashing’ issues. It may also help facilitate cross-border trading of circular goods and services.

However, language remains the main issue here. A common critique of CE messaging is that it is too lofty or intellectual, which means it can lose relevance when applied to everyday business practice. This is reflected in the study findings with nearly half of respondents (49%) describing CE messaging as ‘confusing’. Other negative descriptive terms flagged up were ‘repetitious’ (30%), ‘inaccessible’ (27%), ‘contradictory’ (17%) – even ‘pretentious’ (11%). Only a small number of respondents felt CE messaging to be ‘clear’ (6%) or ‘effective’ (13%).

That said, CE messaging does appear to resonate – 38% of respondents felt it to be ‘relevant’ while 22% described it as ‘meaningful’. This would indicate the need for a more creative communications approach to ensure circular concepts are fully understood and remain accessible. This will be even more important when considering consumer-facing campaigns around circularity.

What words best describe current messaging around the circular economy?
IV. CONCLUSION

It is encouraging to note that corporate CE communication strategies are being prioritised among many organisations who are active in this space. General messaging around the CE however remains confusing to a significant number of businesses, even if they are directly engaged in attempting to deliver more circular goods and services. This is a concern as it could impact on the effectiveness of individual communication strategies in the long term.

There is arguably a need to better define and standardise what the CE is, which may involve simplifying some of the conceptual theory behind the model. Tailoring specific communication strategies to the language of business, which may vary from sector to sector, could be helpful in this regard.

There is clear demand for more real life examples of how the CE can be applied in practice – and this extends to communication strategies. Organisations should look to adopt creative narratives when demonstrating how they are working towards circularity as this will help with perception and acceptance – overcoming institutionalised mindsets is widely regarded as one of the biggest challenges when innovating for systems change.

Lastly, such strategies shouldn’t be deemed the sole responsibility of the communications or public relations team. Wider input is required, both at board-level and across the different tiers of a business. While sustainability experts within an organisation have a key role to play in terms of input, seeking contributions from other departments such as procurement, finance and human resources will help ensure that strategies continue to resonate on several levels.

GO CIRCULAR

Go Circular is a new online platform for circular economy dialogue. It looks to promote unique thinking by bringing journalism, insight and research together into one place, making it a useful access point for those who wish to learn more about this transitional concept.

Go Circular also offers a range of editorial services to help organisations deliver compelling narratives for their circular strategies – whether it’s through content marketing, PR, journalism, copywriting, research, thought leadership or report authoring.

FIND OUT MORE
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maxine Perella is the founder of Go Circular. She is an environmental journalist and copywriter who has been writing about circular economy issues since 2010. During this time, she has authored a number of White Papers on the subject, all based on unique research.