

Promoting corporate sustainability on the web

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Almost three-quarters of Standard & Poor's top 500 US companies mentioned one or more sustainability programs on their websites. A new study shows that the largest companies are doing so in order to attract and maintain a profitable customer base rather than to actually incorporate and promote sustainability. Nevertheless, the side effect of their promotional efforts may be to boost such efforts within their company and have an impact on increasing adoption across various industries and services.

Brothers Nathan Heinze of Saint Petersburg College in Clearwater, Florida, and Timothy Heinze of California State University, Chico, have used impression management theory and ten organizational categories uncovered in previous research to assess the websites and environmental efforts of 500 leading US companies. Writing in the *International Journal of Global Environmental Issues*, the researchers explain that in the current economic climate of austerity measures, crippling national debt and ultra-competitive markets, companies must use every opportunity available to them in order to survive and to stay competitive. "Implementing sustainability programs and featuring them on their websites is a method to help reach that goal, besides the possible cost savings and benefit to the environment," the team says.

They found that sustainability efforts and the promotion of those efforts via the web varies across industries from financial, information technology, healthcare, heavy industry, energy, utilities, materials and telecommunications. They found, for instance, that in 2008, fewer than

half of companies noted energy-saving efforts on their websites, while by 2011, that proportion had risen to two-thirds. They add that over one third of companies (36%) have chemical waste programs in place, and almost the same percentage (31%) support biodiversity program, both increases from 2008 levels of 30% and 24%.

However, while the percentage of utility companies with programs in energy, waste reduction, and climate change prevention was upwards of 80%, the same figures for the finance industry were only 48%, 46%, and 41%, respectively ; although that is a significant improvement on the percentages for 2008 of 27%, 25%, and 17%.

"It is probable that the dramatic disparity among industries can be attributed to a difference in strategic emphasis. For example, utilities and materials are more directly involved in the manufacturing, transporting, and delivery of physical goods to their customers than are financials," the researchers explain. There could be a more pernicious rationale. "Another possibility for the disparity is the focus of the corporate websites. For example, an oil company is likely viewed with more suspicion by an environmentally conscious public than is a financial company," the team adds.

The researchers suggest that their study establishes a baseline from which future measurements can be taken to assess the continued progress of large companies in their sustainability efforts. The findings hint at an enormous growth in sustainability by America's largest corporations and this finding might serve notice on management that environmental sustainability can no longer be treated as a cursory concern. "The study offers guidelines to managers for creating a web presence that emphasizes environmental [sustainability](#) practices consistent with other companies in their own industries," they conclude.

More information: "Sustainability practices and promotion: websites

of large US companies" in *Int. J. Global Environmental Issues*, 2011, 11, 157-169

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