

Examining Strategy Documents in the Internet: How Companies Express Multi-Voicedness and Stakeholder Inclusion?

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Abstract

Due to continual challenges in their external environment, corporations are facing an increased demand for public participation and stakeholder inclusion. As a result, companies are seeking ways to improve communication with their stakeholders. The emergence of the Internet has provided new corporate channels for offering information to stakeholders. This paper suggests is that the information contained in company web pages reflects strategic information about the company. In addition to offering information to public, web pages signal which issues a company holds as strategically important. The objective of this paper is to begin the process of examining how companies express their understanding of multiple stakeholder interests and their efforts to include stakeholders in their strategy documents. The theoretical premise of this paper draws from the strategic management and the stakeholder literatures. The empirical section examines the content of the web pages of two companies from the pulp and paper industry. Based on the results of meaning making analysis, we synthesize the content of the strategy documents with three dimensions: strategic actors, strategic activities, and strategic actions.

Keywords

strategy, stakeholder, multi-voiced strategizing, constructionism

Introduction

Changes in a firm's external environment are pressuring firms to re-examine their strategic decision making processes. In an increasingly globalized world, more and more social activists have been able to exert growing pressure on corporations to change their social impact. Activists fueled by the technological capacity have an increased capability to communicate globally virtually and with great immediacy. Changes in technology have also substantially reduced the costs of mobilizing support for social action. As a result, the number, size and impact of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) has soared (Guay et al. 2003). NGOs now number over 50,000, playing an active role monitoring the social activities of multinational corporations. In this era of globalization, Hart and Sanjay (2004, 8) note that corporations are facing a dynamically complex business environment where it is difficult to determine the knowledge that is necessary for strategic change.

Part of this complexity stems from coalitions of NGOs and what they call smarty mobs, groups of individuals. For example, in the pulp and paper industry Greenpeace and other activist groups are putting pressure on the companies regarding the loggings of old-growth forests in northern hemisphere. Numerous companies such as Nike, Shell, Monstanto, have been affected significantly by the forceful and effective actions of non-governmental organization. Too often corporations have focused on their primary stakeholders and ignored some of their stakeholders on the fringe. As a result corporations lack the knowledge that is needed to compete and are constantly reacting to stakeholder demands rather than anticipating stakeholder demands (Hart & Sharma, 2004). Therefore, to sustain a competitive advantage in this complex business environment, firms will be required to exercise competitive imagination and to integrate the perspectives of diverse and dispersed heterogeneous stakeholders, some who may be adversarial (Hart & Sharma 2004, 9).

As corporations face an increasing demand for public participation, they are actively seeking methods to incorporate varying stakeholder views into their strategies. In addition to the traditional channels of reporting to their stakeholders, numerous businesses have sought new ways to communicate with their stakeholders. Clearly, the Internet opens up a variety of possibilities for offering stakeholders up-to-date information about various issues and showing how the company is catering to different stakeholder views. The Internet may also be used to solicit information from stakeholder groups.

Researching corporate strategizing in the Internet

Web pages are a public window of a corporation. Anybody looking for information about a company can use the Internet as a source of data. Company web pages contain information concerning a variety of issues from customer offerings to recruiting advertisements. The starting point of this paper is that the information contained in the company web pages reflects strategic information about the company. Since company web pages contain strategic information, they can be treated as strategy documents. This means that one can make interpretations about a company's strategy by analyzing the content of its web pages. For example, we can interpret who is thought to be the audience of the pages, to whom the company is 'speaking'. The web pages indicate which stakeholders are considered as strategically important partners and what actions are considered as strategically important.

The purpose of our paper is to examine how companies express multi-voicedness and efforts to implement stakeholder inclusion. Multi-voicedness is defined as a company's understanding of multiple stakeholder interests. The theoretical premise of this paper draws from the strategic management literature and on the literature on stakeholder approaches. We build our discussion on a basic assumption of stakeholder thinking whereby the strategic purpose of an organization be it public or private, resides in the goals of the stakeholders (Evan & Freeman 1988, Wheeler & Sillanpää 1997). In addition, we follow the argument of Lehtimäki (2000) in arguing that current theoretical and practical models of strategy making are built on a single-voiced understanding of strategizing rather than on a multi-voiced strategy process where incorporating varying and even contradictory stakeholder views is also possible (Lehtimäki & Kujala 2005).

Following the social constructionist research paradigm, we focus on the language practices in the strategy documents. The starting point in the analysis is that language has an ability to produce meaning (Hall 1997, Deetz 1986, Watson 1995) in strategy making. Through meaning making analysis (Dachler & Hosking 1995, Gergen 1994) of corporate strategy documents of big corporations, we examine whether these companies disclose a single-voiced or a multi-voiced strategy.

For the target of our analysis, the pulp and paper industry has been selected. Over the past few years this industry has faced a substantial pressure from various stakeholders. Also, it is an industry with multinational corporations some of which are Finnish and play an important role in the Finnish economy and society-at-large. At this stage of the research process, we limited our analysis to North American and Scandinavian companies and began with two of largest companies in the industry, namely International Paper and Stora Enso.

The empirical material consists of the content of the web pages of these two companies. We analyze the front page of the companies' web pages along with the mission statements, visions, strategic goals, and other documents related to strategy issues. In examining the documents, we pay attention to strategic actions, actors and activities presented in the documents (Kujala et al. 2005). Based on the results of our analysis, we synthesize strategy documents' contents with three dimensions: strategic actors, strategic activities, and strategic actions.

From single-voiced to multi-voiced strategizing

Our approach builds on the basic premise of the stakeholder approach that an organization's purposely, be it public or private, is continuously constructed from multiple stakeholder views that often contradict each other (see Kujala et al. 2005). The purpose of the stakeholder organization stems from the goals of its stakeholders and becomes identified by engaging in dialog with different stakeholders (Evan & Freeman 1988, Kujala 2001, Wheeler & Sillanpää 1997). This means that corporations and their managers have obligations to a large set of different stakeholders, not just stockholders or owners. Effective strategizing in such an organization needs practices that celebrate the multi-voiced nature of the operations. However, it seems that current strategic theories and practical models do not support strategizing in multi-voiced business settings. Rather, they promote single-voiced strategy processes (Eriksson & Lehtimäki 2001).

The single-voicedness of strategic thinking refers to the deterministic manner of prevalent strategy making discourse in determining, who are strategically important actors and who are not (Knights & Morgan 1990). In current strategy making practices, it is natural to view top managers, strategy consultants and large institutional stakeholders as legitimate participants in the strategy processes (Lehtimäki 1999). It is as natural to neglect the role of, for instance, employees or all less influential stakeholders, such as activist groups and other NGOs, citizens and members of local communities or even raw material or component suppliers, in strategy making processes.

The core of the multi-voiced strategy process lies in the criticism of the conventions of strategy making which define other than the focal organization's understandings of its

purpose and goals as less valuable, opinionated or even worthless information. A multi-voiced business setting calls for a multi-voiced strategy process that allows for different opinions and understandings to be heard in strategy making. (See Kujala et al. 2005.) Following the previous research (Lehtimäki 2000, Lehtimäki & Kujala 2004, Kujala et al. 2005), we conclude the idea of single-voiced and multi-voiced strategizing with three dimensions: strategic actors, strategic activities and strategic actions as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Single-voiced and multi-voiced strategizing

	Single-voiced strategizing	Multi-voiced strategizing
Strategic actors	Rational and opportunistic actors	Willingness to listen and respect for others
Strategic activities	Hierarchical Instrumental	Relational Networked
Strategic actions	Unified strategic vision Rational planning	Open strategizing Stakeholder inclusion

Concerning strategic actors, multi-voiced strategizing is a way to break away from predominant actor categories that limit open dialog. The presumption in multi-voiced strategizing is to allow for participants to be heard and treated as knowledgeable in their own terms. Thus, multi-voiced strategizing requires that actors are willing to listen and respect for others instead of rational and opportunistic actor view of single-voiced strategizing. (Lehtimäki 2000.)

In multi-voiced strategizing, the strategy process is embedded in a broad range of stakeholder networks. This means that strategic activities are seen as relational and networked compared to hierarchical and instrumental activities of single-voiced strategizing. Of course, power issues are always present whether we talk about hierarchical and instrumental or relational and networked activities. But, instead of brushing them away, they need to be taken into account. Strategic management meets a challenge in trying to piece together all the goals of different stakeholders. One should keep in mind that all actors are actively seeking to accomplish their own purposes, but these purposes can be negotiated and discussed. (Lehtimäki & Kujala 2004.) Ideally, taking the multitude of goals and purposes as the starting point leads to deeper level interaction and allows an open dialog between different actors. Only then we can talk about genuine relational and networked strategic activities.

Finally, in multi-voiced strategic actions, single-voiced strategizing with unified strategic vision and rational planning is replaced with open strategizing and stakeholder inclusion. This means, for example, that strategy practices are changed from closed and tightly scheduled expert and management meetings to listening to different stakeholder viewpoints, analyzing the argumentation behind the viewpoints, and building an understanding of the value structure guiding different agendas under discussion (Kujala et al. 2005). Furthermore, strategizing becomes understood as an ongoing process rather than a sequential process that begins with planning and ends in published strategy documents to be implemented in the organization.

Multi-voiced strategizing brings stakeholder dialogue into the strategic focus. Visions, purposes and other ways of strategic actions become formulated in the continuous process of stakeholder inclusion.

Analyzing strategy documents

The social constructionist paradigm embraces many variations in theoretical perspective, interests, and methods. Following the social constructionist research paradigm, we analyze the research material by focusing on the language practices in the strategy texts in the Internet. The starting point in the analysis is that language has an ability to produce meaning (Hall 1997, Deetz 1986, Watson 1995) in strategy making. Language practices are discourses that construct the everyday day action. When certain language practices become widely accepted and adopted, they are considered legitimate. Different discourses make certain actions and actors important and relevant while other actions are to be avoided and other actors seem irrelevant and unimportant.

As such, discourses have the power to shape the reality of business activities and business actors. We understand strategy discourses as something that give meanings to daily business activities rather than something that exist in and of themselves and could therefore be analyzed in isolation. In line with David Knights and Glenn Morgan (1991, 253), we emphasize that the language we use when talking and writing about strategic issues does matter in terms of what we produce as useful, necessary, desirable or self-evident. Strategic management stories construct a reality where strategy making is both productive and desirable in terms of (economic) success (cf. Pietiläinen 1999).

Strategy texts on the companies' web pages draw on the dominant and sometimes also on marginalized strategic management discourses, and form parts of them. Discourses are language practices that provide concepts and tools with which to interpret and understand what strategies and strategy making is about. They are intertwined into local and situated strategizing talk by various actors, including companies' owners, managers, employees and other stakeholders. Actors may resist specific strategic management discourses by looking for alternative ways of seeing and talking, which means adopting new concepts and metaphors.

In our textual analysis, we consider what is understood as natural in the strategy making context and what is presented as a rational way of strategizing. Such an understanding shapes the way managerial work and other resources are organized in the company: who are considered as strategically important actors, what is defined as important strategic activity, and what kind of strategic action is aimed for. In the analysis, we focus on the taken-for-granted and the self-evident and read between the lines with a critical and questioning approach. We pay attention to which actors are mentioned and how these actors are depicted and characterized. Based on the characterizations, we interpret the taken-for-granted assumptions on the activities of different actors. In terms of strategic action, we examine the vision statements of the two companies and analyze what is considered as an important and relevant strategic goal and what kinds of assumptions of business reality it constructs.

Based on our theoretical premises of single-voiced and multi-voiced strategizing presented in Table 1, we have developed the empirical research questions for each of the three dimensions

of strategizing. Strategic actors are researched with a question: Which actors are mentioned in the documents? In the analysis, we pay attention to which actors are presented as active parties of strategizing in the documents. In addition, strategic activities are researched with the following question: How are the company's acts toward its stakeholders represented? Through meaning making analysis, we examine what kinds of expectations are contained in the text regarding the actors' functions and activities. We also depict what is the taken-for-granted basis of actors' relations in the documents. Finally, strategic actions are researched with a question: How does the company incorporate stakeholders as a part of its strategic actions? We analyze what is the self-evident state of the world where actors interact as represented in the strategic vision statements. Table 2 depicts the empirical research instrument with three strategy dimensions and the adjoining empirical research questions.

Table 2. Empirical research instrument

	Questions presented to the strategy documents
Strategic actors	Which actors are mentioned in the documents?
Strategic activities	How are the company's acts toward its stakeholders represented?
Strategic actions	How does the company incorporate stakeholders as a part of its strategic actions?

Strategic actors, activities and actions

Which actors are mentioned in the web pages?

A broad range of stakeholders is mentioned as strategically important actors in the documents. In the International Paper's web pages, the following actors are presented: customers, the company, media, investors, employees and the environment. In the Stora Enso's web pages the actors are almost identical: customers, investors, media, the group, the environment, and employees. All of the actors are not mentioned directly, instead they are present through related issues. For example, customers are represented through the mention of the company's products, and employees by the statements concerning careers. On both companies' web pages, products play a key role. International Paper lists product lines, which are paper, packaging, forest, wood and chemical. Stora Enso, in turn, has a broader approach through customer segmentation. One can navigate through Stora Enso's pages either as a business-to-business customer or a consumer.

Both companies address media, investors, employees and those interested in working for the company. Stora Enso addresses multiple types of investors: institutional investors, private shareholders and socially responsible investors. It also provides information on capital market development. Stora Enso puts also emphasis on sales and marketing network relations and research and development issues.

Ethics and sustainability issues are addressed on both of the company's web pages. International Paper discusses its company values, which include diversity and ethics, health and safety, philanthropy and the environment. Stora Enso talks about sustainability and its open dialog with stakeholders.

How are the company's acts toward its stakeholders represented?

In terms of strategic activities, the web pages indicate that the companies have similar types of interactions with their stakeholders, however, there are some subtle differences that can be identified. International Paper can be interpreted as a company willing and able to serve all its stakeholders. The pages portray a family like and friendly company that is knowledgeable and responsive to a wide range of stakeholder requests and opinions. The company comes across as an actor that seeks excellence in meeting everyone's needs. Stora Enso, in turn, becomes constructed as a cooperative company that only wants to develop good stakeholder relationships. And, it is presented as a partner who brings out the best in everyone who works with it. In addition, Stora Enso's web pages portray a company that emphasizes honesty and openness.

Both web pages provide a representation of a virtuous company. Potential differences of opinion among stakeholders, such as forest owners, hunters or environmentalist groups, are acknowledged but are presented in a manner that all problems with stakeholders are easily resolved. Both companies appear as being utterly understanding and willing to listen. In fact, they represent themselves as guides or father figures who can show other stakeholders and companies the way to virtue an excellence. This virtuousness of the company positions them as taking a paternalistic viewpoint with their stakeholders. Since the company leaders know and understand everything, it is very difficult for their to be differing opinions and viewpoints. As a result, strategic activities are single-voiced and lead to hierarchical relations between the company and its stakeholders.

How does the company incorporate stakeholders as a part of its strategic actions?

In strategy texts, vision statements are guidelines for strategic action. The vision statements of the companies are the following:

International Paper:

Our Vision – What We Want to Become

“International paper will be one of the best and most respected companies in the world – as measured by our employees, our customers, our communities and our shareowners.”

Stora Enso:

“We will be the leading forest products company in the world. We take the lead in developing the industry. Customers choose us for the value we create for them. We attract investors for the value we create. Our employees are proud to work with us. We are an attractive partner for our suppliers.”

Both companies include a set of stakeholders in their visions. International Paper emphasizes employees, customers, communities and shareowners, whereas Stora Enso includes customers, employees and suppliers. Stora Enso's vision statement is a little more detailed

than the vision statement of International Paper. The presence of stakeholders in the vision statements can be interpreted as a company open toward a variety of stakeholders and a willingness to include stakeholder goals in the corporation's strategic actions.

However, as is typical with vision statements in general, both companies' visions are very broad in scope, and they are very abstract given the everyday challenges of managing stakeholder relations. The vision statements do not differentiate the companies; they are generic vision statements that could be applicable to almost any company in any industry. Furthermore, these visions represent a world where strategic actions can be undertaken in harmony. In the world of these vision statements, all actors share the same values and have a common understanding of worthwhile objectives and how they can be achieved.

It can be argued that, on one hand, the vision statements suggest the possibility for stakeholder dialog. The companies apparently recognize that multiple stakeholder interests exist and they are even willing to let the stakeholders measure their success and attractiveness. On the other hand, the vision statements do not provide any tools or guidelines for multi-voiced stakeholder dialog due to their abstract nature.

Conclusions

The existence of long-term stakeholder pressure on both paper companies is visible in their vision statements. Both companies' visions list a variety of stakeholders. Also, the web pages in general address interests of multiple stakeholders. Although relations to stakeholders are emphasized, any potential discrepancies are brushed away. As an example, stakeholder dialog is promoted in terms of the company, not in the terms of the various stakeholders. Furthermore, in the vision statements, while an understanding of the value of stakeholder dialog is expressed, there is little room for conflicting voices to emerge. Thus, we conclude that strategizing of these companies is single-voiced rather than multi-voiced. (Table 3.)

Table 3. Synthesis of the preliminary findings

	Synthesis of the content of the strategy documents
Strategic actors	A broad variety of stakeholders presented From company's point of view, e.g. customers → products, supplier networks → the group
Strategic activities	Virtuous, generally acceptable Relations to stakeholders emphasized, but any potential discrepancies brushed away
Strategic actions	Strategy abstracted away from the everyday practices of working and running the company Agreement and understanding valuable in stakeholder dialog, little room for different voices

Changes in the business environment are forcing managers to perceive their organizations as stakeholder organizations, and the form of business enterprises is shifting from independent entities toward more networked organizational structures. To improve strategizing in these new organization structures, it is important that companies develop ways to incorporate multiple stakeholder views into their strategic goals. Multi-voiced strategizing can provide opportunities for new ideas and innovations. Also, a strategy that reflects the true time and place bound goals of an organization can be drawn together. This would be a change from current strategy documents that tend to be abstract and repeat the common values of western societies. Multi-voiced strategizing could also mean a new way to communicate even with those stakeholders who have conflicting needs, demands or interests.

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