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New communication forms on sustainability through the event culture

Abstract

The project aims to win companies and actors of the event industry for a dialogue on the opportunities of sustainable development. The two key issues "event culture" on the one hand and responsibility of enterprises on the other hand should be integrated to find new communication strategies to strengthen the role of sustainability inside and outside the company.

The paper based on a project "Event Culture and Sustainability" which has been commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research within the research programme "Sustainable Economy / New Concepts of Product Use".

Image building of companies, the advertising of products, and the presentation of persons, ideas and visions to the public have taken on more and more the character of entertainment including emotionally and aesthetically based performances. Organised shows and special events are an expression of a changing communication culture in modern societies. Public life will be increasingly influenced by a new kind of reputation management. An industry for special events has evolved which is dedicated to the creative task of organising these new forms of communication. Here the public is addressed in an emotional way. Core values and entertainment synthesise, an event culture evolves

The paper wants to approach the social phenomena of "special events" from a particular viewpoint. This includes the different values in post-industrial societies and the opportunities of bringing these together: event culture on the one hand, responsibility for the future in the sense of a sustainable development on the other. Two key issues form the framework for the intended communication and learning process, which the project team will support with its expertise:

1. How can events become more sustainable with respect to their effects?
2. How can sustainable strategies become more eventful?

Background

Image building of companies, the advertising of products, and the presentation of persons, ideas, and visions to the public have taken on more and more the character of entertainment including emotionally and aesthetically based performances. Organised shows and special events are an expression of a changed communications culture in modern societies.

Public life will increasingly be influenced by a new kind of reputation management. An industry for special events has evolved which is dedicated to the creative task of organising these new forms of communication. Here the public is addressed in an emotional way. Core values and entertainment synthesise, an event culture evolves.

In our days the discourse on sustainability is characterised through a problem-oriented discussion, where mainly functional arguments and information are procured. Unlike this, values and visions of the event culture are conveyed on a more emotional way.

This concerns the different values in post-industrial societies and the opportunities of bringing these together: event culture on the one hand, responsibility for the future in the

sense of a sustainable development on the other. Two key issues form the framework for the communication and learning process aimed at:

1. How can events become more sustainable with respect to their effects?
2. How can sustainable strategies become more eventful?

The paper focuses on new ways to communicate the idea of sustainability and introduces the cultural dimension as a major part to integrate sustainability into business concepts.

It concentrates on defining the role of events and provide the interfaces to sustainability. The relation between an interactive and structural context of events and an emotional oriented communication form are analysed under different aspects:

The transition from a functional oriented production to a production of esthetical values. There should be a concentration on the organisation of companies as well as the level of products.

Finally, recommendations for the integration of forms of the event marketing into business communication strategies will be drawn, that support the idea of sustainable development.

Cultural dimension on sustainability

The idea of sustainability is used and understood in the political arena in different ways. Accordingly, it exists a wide range of targets and criteria. Through the fact, that many different interest groups are involved in the discussion, there is only a brief general understanding of the concept.

The background idea of sustainability is based on the target of preservation. In the 18th century German forestry industry developed the principle to live on the output instead of consuming the foundation were developed. This idea was transferred to the international debate starting in the seventies with Meadows (1972) "Limits of growth". The authors claimed, that the development of the resource consumption of the whole world and especially in the industrialised countries will increase beyond limits of the global eco-system. This could lead to irreversible ecological effects and destroy opportunities for the development of future generations.

Based on this discussion the Brundtland commission was founded by the UN one decade later. The commission, headed by the former prime minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, published their report "Our Common future" in 1987. They concluded that there is a need for a stronger link between the protection of the environment and the future development in so-called less-developed countries. They recommended a perspective, which includes inter-generational as well as intra-generational justice.

This report was the basic document for the UNCED conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. More than 190 head of states signed an action program on sustainable development so called "Agenda 21". 10 Years after Rio a new summit in Johannesburg took place. It was observed that the global problems of development and environment are not solved yet and that there is still a need for further efforts.

The scientific debate on sustainability is characterised by a discourse to measure what sustainability really means. The three dimensions - ecology, social justice, and economy - are the most common elements, which are referred to. The model of the sustainable triangle leads to a wide interpretation. There is no formal definition of sustainable development. A clear definition may be unnecessary to design action programmes; however, basic conceptual guidelines must be drawn (or rather re-drawn) to set sustainability goals. In 1987 the Brundtland Commission proposed a brief, widely quoted description of the major components of a sustainable development: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The above quotation offers a formula which most of the more elaborate definitions of sustainable development have adopted in some way. Starting from this formula and its various interpretations, in particular, the one contained in Agenda 21, the three main dimensions of sustainable development can be identified: environmental (comprising resource use and its ecological impact); economic (combining the provision and distribution of the means of sustaining life) and societal (including the institutions through which we interact with each another). The concept leaves out the question of how to integrate

sustainability into the processes and which changes have to be made to realise the shift. One idea is to integrate the cultural dimension into the sustainable concept.

Understanding culture as a system of common shared values underlines two aspects: First of all, values, which are related to a sustainable perspective, touch basically the economy, conditions of work, and life-style of modern industrial societies. Processes of production and consumption must be coupled with social, ecological and economic potentials. The preservation of natural capital on a global scale leads to new guiding principles for the development of society. These values stand opposite to the old values, which are based on unlimited growth.

These theses are not popular, as they demand a new way to integrate a necessary cultural change. They argue for a revision of norms and values in all parts from politics to economy up to the personal life style.

The cultural deficit could be identified for the following reasons:

- Sustainability is still understood only as an environmental action program
- It is interpreted as a mainly technical concept
- The discourse is dominated by experts on sectoral and technical solutions

(Leitschuh-Fecht 2002)

These aspects lead to a need of inventing new values for sustainability, which have to be formulated, reflected, and changed. The question is "how" to communicate and integrate cultural aspects.

One of the major problems in the context of sustainability is how to communicate and inform about the targets. A communication strategy could base on three tasks:

- focusing on the content of sustainability,
- elaborating cultivation aspects, and
- emotionalising cultural values.

One strategy to deal with these aspects could be to force emotional relation and production. New impulses are necessary to work on communication of sustainability with employment of modern media (film, media, commercials, internet).

Based on the given assumption a strategy could be developed to focus sustainability on a paradigmatic and innovative nucleus and connect it with real development in society. Through personal engagement an emotional background could be developed and fascinate further people.

Transferring the statements of sustainability through marketing, art, and media should characterise the relationship between sustainability and culture. In addition, the question has to be raised which social and cultural interpretation of the present is produced by the appreciation of event marketing. The relation to the targets of a sustainable development needs to be defined.

Finally, it has to be clarified, if the participation in special events leads to new orientations in daily life.

Integration of sustainability into marketing strategies – events as a new instrument?

Cultural aspects could act as a cross section subject in a new strategy to reach the target of sustainability. This strategy has to develop opportunities for the practical integration of these aspects. Moreover, the rising significance of marketing in Western societies is to be taken into account. Values like emotionality, exceptionality, sense of community and self-production are objects of public dispositions and as a result open for cultural interpretations. A playful setting like computer games, leisure parks, movies or, as the focus of the research indicates, events are supplied as produced illusion constructions. These special kinds of reality coupled with a rational behaviour constitute a new value system with own benefits of orientation.

Events are playing an increasing role in the demand of communication services with a sense of adventure and are influenced by the following factors:

- Parallel development of market saturation and similar quality standards by an identical use of many products
- Functional similarities of consumable products lead to less options to differentiate their use
- The uniqueness and speciality of many products could be created through a emotionalised standpoint

These arguments illustrate the rising significance of event marketing in business communication strategies. The new communication policy of enterprises need to link consumption with a special brand. Therefore, a strategy is required to develop an emotionalised positioning at the market. Besides product placement, event marketing could be identified as an establishment of new communication instruments. Event marketing could be defined as a production of events with planning, organisation, and control as part of the business communication. Through event-oriented business or product concentrated public function it is possible to cause emotional and physical appeals.

Event marketing could be differentiated into three dimensions:

- type of interaction
- target group, and
- setting.

Events could be defined as public arrangements with an emotional impact, active involvement of the consumer, and unique configuration. The outstanding disposition is one of the major characters of an event. Furthermore, events could be differentiated based on the kind of activity and the realisation. Often events focus only on one subject.

The concept of an event comprises a broad spectrum, including for example the fields of sports and leisure. According to the main subject the paper focuses on the communication strategy of business. Consequently, it is marketing events, which will be observed.

Marketing events could be defined as follows:

- Initiated by a company and planned by professional agencies; realised activity without a merchandising approach
- The message of advertising should be created as a real incident, e.g. production of brands
- Concentration on specific target groups
- Inter-action oriented sequence of events

Based on these general criteria of marketing events it is crucial to raise the question how to use these strategy to communicate new values of sustainability and draw the main interfaces.

Main target of marketing events is to stabilise the position of the brand and create a special image of the product for the consumers. Marketing events act as an interface between the created world of events and daily routines. The target is to create a successful inter-linkage by dialogue-oriented offers.

Through a multi-level perspective it is possible to describe the context of an event culture more comprehensively: this perspective reveals a societal level, a level of business organisation and a product level, all of them interacting with each other. The analysis helps to understand the change and to map out strategies for a better connection between a culture of event and a culture of sustainability.

Society

The development of new marketing strategies takes place against the background of a cultural shift in society. More and more emotions are part of the daily life and the public culture. These emotions are about to become an important part of company representation. Furthermore, the public increasingly demands new business values. Non-commercial factors become more and more important. Through public pressure companies start to integrate values like social and environmental responsibility into their business strategy. Especially bigger companies have started to communicate with other stakeholders like NGOs or unions about their strategy and the integration of sustainable ideas.

One example is the platform of Econsense: This platform is constituted by German companies and organisations, which share a common vision on the concept of sustainability and its integration into their business strategies (<http://www.econsense.de>). Above all, the forum is designed to offer a platform for a stakeholder dialogue. It addresses a wide range of companies and business networks, politicians as well as NGOs, the scientific community and the general public.

This development could help to dissolve the contradiction between an increasing consumption-oriented society and options to impart sustainability within the scope of an event culture.

Business organisation

A better integration of organisational culture could build the basis for integrating new values like sustainability into a company. Identifying or creating values and norms are guidelines for the company members to decide between wrong and correct behaviour. A circle model of Hatch described an option for further company development and a way for integrating new values. He divided the process into four steps:

Basic assumption – values – artefact – symbol

Basic assumption for a company, in our case sustainability, manifest values and could be realised by activities, structures etc. as artefacts. Cultural artefacts, like events could be created symbols, which could be interpreted based again on the basic assumption. In other words, by a cultural dynamic inside a company, sustainability could be communicated via events, provided that the business has an open discussion culture and is able to integrate new ideas.

The identified cultural dynamic in an enterprise leads us to the question of the factors of success for a company and to develop opportunities for integrating sustainability. Peters and Waterman argue that the soft skills are the main factors to change the communication strategy. In their 7S-Model (strategy, structure, systems, skills, staff, style, shared values) they explain the main elements to describe a company. This model could be used as a background for an analysis of an enterprise. Peters and Waterman divide the elements into hard and soft skills. Generally speaking, the hard skills, like structure and systems are often recognized as the main factors for future planning, norms, and organisation. However, the soft skills, like style, skills and staff have often a strong influence on the hard structure and strategy. Changing processes, many enterprises concentrate only on the hard `S`. The authors argue instead that the soft skills support the success of a new strategy, since new structures could develop better when supported by a common understanding. In order to integrate the idea of sustainability and event culture soft skills have to be focused on. It has, even though, to be clarified that a change of system of values takes time. A shift inside the company is not necessarily communicated to the customers, either.

A further question is how to create a learning structure inside the company. Crozier and Friedberg suggested an actor-oriented view to understand the organisation. Through an understanding of a loosely coupled system it is possible to create a broad understanding of the company as a multi-cultural organisation with multiple preferences. Inside a company subsystems could create such a development. This could help to find new partners for reaching the targets. Nevertheless, this re-structuring has to cope with problems that every new and innovative culture is exposed to: It stands opposite the actual business culture and could lead to massive resistance. The linkage of sustainability targets to existing values can avoid these situations.

The strategy of corporate governance could foster the integration of ideas like sustainability. Corporate governance means to create cognitive inter-action models and involves different stakeholders in developing their future strategy. The focus is on a sustainable production and use of the product. Therefore, the analysis covers the whole production chain. Within a corporate governance strategy addressing in emotional ways could play different roles for different stakeholders.

Hence, corporate events (like company do) could play a new role in developing processes of common understanding and identification. Moreover, they could be used for integrating sustainability into the common understanding by an emotionalised way of communication.

Product

One marketing strategy for products focuses on the phenomena of settled symbolic. That means the product is not consumed due to its material value. Its use is rather associated with features like attractiveness, youthfulness, and athleticism. This development could be taken up for the transfer of values by a special event. So events could play a role as symbols for identity. Thus, unlike the classical primary function, as conveyed by sales promotion, events are used as a carrier for a secondary function regarding social relevance and a

separate socio-cultural use. Events create a link between the basic use and the additional use of a product. Therefore events could have an own charisma.

Resume

The paper tries to connect the culture of sustainability and the event culture against the background of business and marketing strategy. By integrating the cultural dimension into the sustainable triangle it is shown that there is a need to integrate new values in the society. Companies play a major role in today's life and have the responsibility to influence and integrate the idea of sustainability. In Western societies a process started that exerts more pressure on the companies and causes them to integrate new values like environmental and social responsibility. Therefore a concept of sustainability could be developed of the progress into more responsibility.

There are chances to integrate new values in a company, however a lot of obstacles and resistance exist. It is crucial to couple the ideas of sustainability with existing values inside the company. Furthermore, it is clear that it takes a long time to integrate new values in a company. The emphasis on soft skills and an actor-led strategy are parts of this strategy. Even if there is a new thinking inside the company, a corresponding communication towards the customers is not self-evident. This reveals the long way from the idea of sustainability to its integration in company events.

As part of the marketing strategy, events become more and more important to support values of the products. So there is an opportunity for the companies to transport the values of the product as well as the emotion, which should be associated with the product. During the last years marketing business tries to create a special emotional perception of specific products. Using this interface to integrate values of sustainability could add value to the product and can, therefore, be useful for the company. There could be a conflict between an unsustainable product itself and the message. Only if the company is reliable, the message will be successful in the market competition.

At the moment, more and more companies discuss a sustainable strategy, but mainly introduce the idea in big journals and in a more scientific way. The alternative of an esthetical transfer of values is rarely used. Through creating a link between culture of events and culture of sustainability, new values of sustainability could be a possibility to direct new attention to a product.

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