

COMMUNICATION IN THE AGE OF SUSTAINABILITY



BY **DIMITRI LORINGETT**

LUCA M. VISCONTI HOLDS A PH.D. IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT FROM BOCCONI UNIVERSITY. IN 2017, HE WAS APPOINTED FULL PROFESSOR OF MARKETING AT THE USI FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND SOCIETY, WHERE HE REDESIGNED AND CO-DIRECTS THE MASTER IN MARKETING AND TRANSFORMATIVE ECONOMY. AS OF SEPTEMBER 2020, HE ALSO SERVES AS FACULTY DEAN. PROF. VISCONTI, WHO IS ALSO AFFILIATED TO ESCP BUSINESS SCHOOL IN PARIS, INVESTIGATES THE INTERSECTIONS OF CONSUMPTION, MARKETS, AND CULTURE (CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY). IN PARTICULAR, HIS WORK FOCUSES ON BRANDING, LUXURY, STORYTELLING, MARKET VULNERABILITY, AND CONSUMER AND SOCIETAL WELLBEING.



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The practice of marketing, which originated in 1930 as the scientific attempt of keeping market functioning efficient, has relentlessly changed to reflect structural transformations in markets, production, logistics, and technology. It has also undertaken substantial transformations to incorporate instances of an increasing number of organisations' counterparts (what we call 'stakeholders'), lately including the environment. Though not talkative, the planet has its own ways to manifest discontent. While some experts estimate we have already gone too far to imagine actionable solutions, some companies react either moving their centres of interest to safer contexts, or revisiting their conducts and exploring more sustainable ways to run the business. Sustainability has quickly shifted from an esoteric word to one of today's most popular buzzwords. Its broad usage, however, does not imply that we know what we are talking about, nor that the term is already filled with substance. Relying upon a critical interpretation of marketing and of communication sciences, Prof. Luca M. Visconti provides insights and examples to understand this conundrum and sheds some light on the holistic approach required by communication experts of today and tomorrow.



Professor Visconti,
**is it possible to combine
economic wealth with
environmental health?**

«Managing the balance between productivity and sustainability is not an easy feat. In extreme terms, the best way to be sustainable is by producing and consuming less and therefore by selling less. Patagonia Inc., the renowned U.S. outdoor clothing company, made waves back in 2011 for saying "Don't buy this jacket", at the occasion of an audacious Black Friday advertising campaign. What we observe today

is that firms, which are generally aware of the importance of defining ways to be more socially responsible and sustainable, are focussing on their supply chains with considerations about the impact they have in terms of social and environmental costs. Of course, certain firms can be more impactful than others, in relative terms, and this usually occurs when they critically consider how their specific business affects the environment. For instance, companies like Finish (household detergents) or L'Oréal (cosmetics) are developing ways to reduce water consumption and pollution, whereas a fast food chain like Burger King is testing new diets for cattle to cut 30% of biogas emissions. Another interesting example is Prada, the Italian fashion brand, which by its Group Sustainability Policy has - among other things - invested in the architecture of its facilities to create 'beautiful' factories that are harmoniously integrated in the local community and create social- and culture-friendly environments for employees and workers. That said, I believe that a more substantial revision of companies' revenue models is needed, for instance, by turning part of a manufacturer's offering from products to services or experiences that we will pay for».

How can we distinguish genuine actions from 'shop window dressing' (or greenwashing)?

«Quite often, a good proxy to spot which companies or organisations are genuinely committed to sustainability is when they started acting. CSR (corporate social responsibility) and sustainability have not always been fashionable. Hence, forerunners are more likely to incarnate a strong drive in the field. Among global firms, IKEA has early on undertaken diversity and inclusivity as key elements of its HR policies. Also, as a manufacturer of household furniture, it has long invested to become at the end of 2019 about 97% forest positive (i.e., using

wood from sustainable sources) and started actions to use water more responsibly. Similarly, Freitag came up with the idea for its renowned messenger bag driven by a growing concern (waste materials). However, I see their story more as a business opportunity, though clearly smart and, ultimately, a win-win business model. Beyond forerunners, we can also detect good-spirited organisations among the later adopters. This is the case, for example, of family-owned enterprises going through generational changes, where the young heirs may not only be more aware and sensitive to these issues, but also understand the importance of adopting genuine sustainable business models to manage the company for the following generation(s). Regardless of generational transitions, then, other major companies may also discover the value and virtue of sustainability. Though a later discovery, their approach may nonetheless be genuine. Another proxy to inspect motivations in being (and claiming to be) sustainable consists in how specific is a company's approach to CSR. Organisations with a clear and personal take on it are, in my opinion, more likely to be truly motivated. For example, Prada with its ethic-cultural rapport with local communities, KERING (luxury conglomerate) with its dedication to biodiversity, or Loro Piana (cashmere) with its rationing of production not to impact on deforestation. That said, firms may act out of mere opportunism, and thus participate in 'greenwashing'. Fortunately, today greenwashing is easier to detect because more and more firms committing to the sustainability cause are adopting very specific approaches, if anything else, to distinguish themselves from their competitors».

Could we say that it's better late than never?

«If we combine organisations' genuine intentions with a pinch of pragmatism,

one may argue that a socially responsible business model should first work. To some extent, in fact, it's the overall result that counts. If we were to frame which alternative situations an organisation may face, I find it useful to cross two separate criteria, one is the genuineness of intentions, and the other is the effectiveness of the actions taken. When ineffectiveness is combined with 'empty' intentions, then it is real greenwashing. Conversely, we are in front of CSR 'gurus' when effectiveness and real intentions are combined. Then, there is the situation between the two, when you have very good intentions but little effectiveness, or less solid intentions but very good effectiveness. Here, we face a moral and practical dilemma. Should we sanction more an organisation true in its intentions but miserable in its results, or another organisation that acts well though driven by opportunism? I have no definite answer to the question, but from a consumer's viewpoint I would support the former (following my empathy for the 'underdog'...), whereas from a policy maker's perspective I would go with the second, since I would put community interest first».

As the new Faculty Dean, how do you see your students faced with the new global challenges of communication in the age of sustainability?

«In December 2019, the name of the Faculty changed from Communication Sciences to Communication, Culture and Society. Such change does not reflect a change in 'who we are', yet in where we want to go and with whom. It also comprises a change in the kind of students we would like to attract and educate. And sustainability and CSR have lot to do with it. Since inception, in 1996, we have kept our multidisciplinary attitude and, over time, reached a spectrum of expertise as varied as philosophy, literature, linguistics and argu-

mentation, humanities, media and media management, information and communications technology, marketing, and communication in the public, health, and corporate domains. With no hesitation, this Faculty is the most interdisciplinary of USI and fairly unique worldwide. Also, we remain true to our interest in and way of interpreting communication. At USI, we have never considered communication as 'part of', 'a subset of' or an ancillary tool of something else. Rather, communication has always comprised 'the rest'. Cultural, economic, media, and technological transformations have largely confirmed our intuition and faith. Today, whatever the expertise, we are all confronted with a society that is largely conversational, where communication is an essential means to be in the market and society. It is no longer enough to produce quality media content, to champion

quality literature or philosophical essays, to make quality product or public service. This quality needs to be part of the general conversation, not only in the sake of commercial interest but also as an act of generosity, sharing, and confrontation.

Our change in name thus aims at acknowledging that such a widespread and complex vision of communication needs to connect it to societal and cultural phenomena. Former focus on the scientific nature of our discipline had, for me, two relevant limits. First, addressed as science, communication runs the risk of remaining isolated from the rest, an ivory tower, so to say. Our future, however, implies to open to the external world, where communication takes place and acquires meaning. A second limit of addressing our discipline as science concerns our students. At our Faculty, in fact, we strive to educate students not

only to become 'experts', 'technicians' in their respective fields. While depth of expertise remains essential, we seek to train our students to be capable of establishing links, to develop comprehensive and critical understanding of their professional contexts, and to be passionate and qualified interlocutors. Technical expertise must go hand in hand with professional ethics, interest for the people participating not only in what we do, but also in the effects of our activity. As such, the objective of those who enrol in and graduate from this Faculty is to have a more comprehensive, critical reading of reality, and to become more aware of how their decisions, whatever they may be, are not only technical but also a matter of understanding how a certain result shall be achieved - the famous 'means to an end - and what are the effects that we may not measure yet consider of these decisions'». 