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The Infinite Possibilities of Online Sustainability Reporting

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Elaine Cohen explores the changes that are taking place in sustainability report and makes an assessment on the implications of those changes on organization sustainability. She provides a list of characteristics of what she thinks are needed in an effective online sustainability report that is transparent, engages the reader and opens up a dialogue.

by Elaine Cohen is the Joint CEO of BeyondBusiness Ltd

Online sustainability reporting is evolving rapidly. No longer does the plain old downloadable PDF represent the state-of-the-art of transparent

presentation of sustainability performance. No longer must we wait it out for the last megabyte to appear on our screen and we can start to read the CEO statement with glee (see [Wainwright Bank's 2008 13 MB download report](#)). These days, we should expect to be enticed, attracted and engaged by more attractive presentation of metrics and people telling their sustainability stories. We are offered different ways to control the data such as DIY report builders (see [Philips report for 2008](#)) or nice ebooks to read as we curl up in an armchair with our laptops (see [Deutsche Bank 2008 report](#) or the spectacular [SeventhGeneration 2008 report](#)). We can see videos of Company Managers telling it as it is ([hear Gap Inc CEO walk his talk in the 2008 Report](#)), see a range of podcasts (see [Bayer 2008](#)), or even take a tour on an interactive map to the hub of csr activity that the Company is engaged in at a specific location (see [Cisco 2009 Report](#)). Some Companies offer only a summary report as a download (see [Unilever 2008](#)) whilst others offer a regular array of local or localized reports (see [Vodafone](#) and [Telefonica](#)) or alternative language versions (See [Fedex 2008](#)). Some Companies do more than just report on CSR, they move towards engagement and interaction using blogs (see the [Intel CSR blog](#)) or fully-fledged websites to host genuine dialogue (see [Voices of Challenge by Timberland on their 2007-2008 Report](#)) or interactive polls so that we can demonstrate we are still awake as we read (see [Adidas 2008 Report](#)) (Adidas even asked the verrrrrrrrry risky poll question "Are Sustainability Reports useful?" and to date 85% of the responders said YES!! (Hah! Vindicated at last!! hope it wasn't just the report writer and consultant who voted!). Some reporters ask for feedback ([BMW 2008 Report](#)) and some make it worth your while by offering a PRIZE for providing feedback (see [Beiersdorf 2008](#), who also got really caught up in the online sustainability fever and urge you to take their [Sustainability Quiz](#) – oops, no prizes for winning that – wonder why?!). [Nexxar.com](#), who we partner with on reporting, as they are the leading online reporting technology and presentation specialists in Europe, produce magnificent interactive charts that you can sit playing around with forever (see [Royal Dutch Shell 2008](#)).

There have been some reviews of online report presentation – by [Radley Yeldar](#) in April 2009, [Nexxar.com](#) in July 2009, and more recently by [AltaTerra Research](#) in a report called "Greening the Company Website: A new Era in Sustainability Reporting". This last review covers more than just presentation – it provides an evaluation of the substance, accessibility and navigation capabilities of 60 leading Companies and their online reports (though the focus is mainly on environmental information). [Timberland](#) scored highest, with a group of others including [Alcoa](#), [BASF](#), [Centrica](#), [Kingfisher](#), [TNT](#) and [BT](#) coming up close behind. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the highest scoring attributes for online presentation was navigationability (my new word for 2010), whilst the provision of data substance and timeliness scored lowest. The research also reviews the degree of assurance of online data (something we have tended to expect only from printed reports). Another interesting insight from this research is that the Companies who tend to rank high in other sustainability indices are not necessarily the ones who present their reports best online. This is not dissimilar to what we found last year when we produced the [Transparency Index – an evaluation of the sustainability transparency of the leading Companies quoted on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange](#).

So, what this all about? What's the deal with reporting formats and online creativity? Does this really make a company more sustainable? Do all these formats really make reading reports easier, better, orgasmic? What are the factors that lead us to select a certain format over another format? And what does the reporting blog like to see?

Well, it's all about which wall your ladder is standing against, to paraphrase the Seven Habits guru, Dr Stephen Covey. It's wonderful to have a magnificently navigable report, but if my ladder is against a wall that requires data (positive and less positive), on time, in context and with appropriate commentary, then the most

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creative online extravaganza won't be effective for me, even if I climb to the top rung.

As far as online is concerned, I want to see the material issues prominently presented, and I want to navigate the website seamlessly without having to open up link after link in new windows that ultimately crash my mind, not to mention my PC. I want data against the most important indicators, GRI or otherwise. I want the ability to ask questions and provide feedback ... and get answers, not just push a questionnaire into a black hole (as I did with the [Avon Report](#) some time ago and never got any form of acknowledgment or response). I want to be able to download something, perhaps just a summary, so that I can use the report as a reference without being online, or so that I can annotate and bookmark the PDF, one of my numerous report-reading habits. I would be happy to engage in open dialogue provided I can see the dialogue of others as well, which is a true tribute to transparency and bold engagement – but I would also like to see company employees engaging in this dialogue with external readers – no one I know does really well yet (I think Intel is the closest).

In other words (well, in the same words, but shorter), **I want to see online reporting leading us to a level of true substantive material transparent reporting, and true engagement and dialogue.** Online presentation is a TOOL to help achieve this, not an objective in itself. Professional presentation can undoubtedly attract readership and make the report more palatable, even attractive, but let's not forget that the horse pulls the cart and the wall holds up the ladder. Haha. I was tempted to write : The Monkey rules the Chunky, but I thought that might be a bit obscure for all of you who are vanilla-only consumers.

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Author: [Elaine_Cohen](#) (19 Articles)



Elaine Cohen is the Joint CEO of [BeyondBusiness Ltd](#), a leading CSR consulting and reporting firm, offering a wide range of consulting services for the strategic development of social and environmental responsibility of businesses, reporting and assurance using the GRI and Accountability frameworks, and reporting on application of Global Compact principles. Elaine writes a blog on [CSR reporting](#), expert CSR report reviews for [CorporateRegister.com](#), tweets on CSR topics at [@elainecohen](#) and has specialist knowledge of governance, ethics, diversity, advancement of women, responsible workplace and use of social media for csr communications.

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