

RETAILERS' SUSTAINABLE COMMUNICATIONS. CASE STUDY ON THE ROMANIAN MARKET

Brîndușa Mariana BEJAN

*Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Cluj-Napoca, 400591, Romania
brandusa.bejan@econ.ubbcluj.ro*

Abstract

Pollution has become a common problem nowadays. Constantly, both individuals and large organizations are exposed to the negative effects of this phenomenon, a fact that implies finding solutions to prevent and combat the consequences of pollution. Based on these considerations, the concern of individuals towards sustainability and the principles associated with this concept has increased.

Identifying a consumer need to protect the environment, retailers considered that the implementation of sustainable principles in all stages of production processes, respectively in business strategies, is not only a first element of differentiation but also constitutes satisfaction of customers' needs and wishes. Thus, in recent years, especially in the field of consumer products, we are not only faced with the appearance of organic or green products, but also with an increase in the desire of retailers to get involved in the life of the community and to carry out social responsibility campaigns.

Currently, companies inform consumers about the sustainable actions they carry out through annual Sustainability Reports, which are carried out by international reporting standards, the best known of which is the Global Reporting Initiative.

In this article, we aimed to carry out a comparative analysis of the sustainable communication strategy that three of the retailers operating in the field of consumer goods in Romania have: Lidl Group, Kaufland Group, and Profi Rom.

Key words: *retail field, Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), sustainable principles, communication strategy, sustainability*

JEL Classification: *Q01, Q56*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability involves "meeting the present needs of people without compromising the future of future generations" (WCED, 1987). Thus, it is desired that future consumers have access to the same resources as individuals who are part of society today.

The development of pollution has generated a paradigm shift, both among consumers and large organizations. Current society, as well as the legislative environment, require organizations to adopt and implement a series of concrete measures that allow the preservation of the environment and the protection of natural resources, especially those that are exhaustible. The discovery of alternative options that correspond to the implicit and explicit needs of the population was the central point in defining the mission of the big companies operating on the market.

The changes demanded by individuals have had major effects, especially among retail companies. Considering the new preferences of consumers, they aimed for sustainable principles to be found both in the production process of the items marketed by retailers and in the final product. So, the big retailers had to adopt a new vision for the company and modify their business strategies by including sustainable principles.

In retail, sustainability has become the focal point in defining business strategies. Thus, companies recognize the importance of applying sustainable principles not only from the desire to protect the environment but also from an economic and social perspective. Once these aspects are included in the business model, it became a necessity to communicate these practices so that consumers are aware of their existence and can act accordingly, often with individuals preferring retailers that have environmentally friendly behavior.

The sustainable communication of retailers is also regulated by the legislative framework. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is one of the most recognized sustainability reporting standards (GRI, 2020). The retail sector uses this communication practice to convey, equally, the impact they have from an economic, social, and environmental point of view (Baxter et al., 2020).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The implications of sustainability on society and the retail field

In the context of the implementation of large-scale changes, retailers also analyzed the effectiveness of production, aiming to avoid a downward trend. Both labor productivity and effectiveness have become difficult concepts to measure due to the wide range of services offered by retail companies (Yu & Ramanathan). Another challenge was encountered by organizations operating in states where there were major political changes. For example, the transition from a centralized to a market economy (China) led to an increase in sales for most retail companies. Thus, for these organizations, political change led to a territorial expansion of business as well as much higher production (Yu & Ramakrishnan, 2009).

In the current context, companies have been forced to ensure not only a constant level of production, so that there are no interruptions in the supply of items intended to satisfy the needs of consumers, but also to implement sustainable principles in the production process and all its associated stages.

The desire not to have affected the level of production spilled over into the business strategies of the organizations. Ensuring a constant flow of products to be placed on the shelves of large stores, the items being intended to satisfy consumer needs, is not the only concern of large retailers. In recent years, they have had to pay attention to respecting ethical principles and sustainability (Alvarez-Rodriguez et al., 2019). Initially, the implementation of aspects related to sustainability in the production process and the final articles addressed to consumers represented a way of obtaining a competitive advantage (Alvarez-Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Michaelis (2003) argued that large companies hold a central role in the transition between sustainable production and consumption. This aspect leads to the regulation of the activities carried out by the large retailers operating in the market. In this context, a paradigm shift has been identified, especially regarding the way organizations prefer to communicate. Thus, retailers pursued continuous and up-to-date information of consumers as well as stakeholders (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

The paradigm shift transcends the boundaries of communication so that companies' social responsibility and the campaigns they engage in are correlated with customer choices (Harrison et al., 2005; Sassatelli, 2007). So, part of the responsibility of the companies is taken over by the consumers, who have more duties. These include the way they choose products from store shelves (Ehgartner, 2018) (the demand for green products implies a higher level of production and a change in the business strategy of the manufacturing company) or pro-active or active behavior which I demonstrate by reporting on the involvement of companies in actions that support the communities in which they operate.

The implementation of sustainable principles in the business strategy of large organizations does not only imply a change in the products offered on the market but respectively an expansion of the social responsibilities assumed by the companies. The first aspect that generates a significant impact on the consumer is how he carries out the purchase process. Some research carried out over time has demonstrated that responsible consumption is based on rational choices, planned by the consumer (Spaargaren, 2011). In contrast, some customers are loyal to impulsive consumption, buying products subject to promotional discounts or promotional campaigns (Warde, 2005). In this case, it is difficult for marketers to identify a major difference that exists between the two types of consumers, a discrepancy that leads to planned or impulsive consumption.

From a sustainability perspective, the retail industry is among the areas that contribute the most to the occurrence of pollution (Ferreira et al., 2019). According to consumers, large organizations have the necessary resources to combat pollution problems and make the transition to a sustainable approach (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). Campaigns initiated by consumers and how they campaign for the implementation of sustainable principles have generated a high level of pressure felt by large organizations to adopt sustainable business strategies, which consider reducing the negative impact that the production of the goods and services offered has on the environment (Smith & Perks, 2010). Studies carried out in recent years have shown that the retail sector is a global economic powerhouse, which in 2008 had a growth rate of 3.8% (revenues of approximately USD 22.6 trillion) and whose revenues for the year 2019 were approximated to \$28 trillion (BusinessWire, 2016). Globally, the retail sector accounts for approximately 31% of the Gross Domestic Product (Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018).

Through the production of goods, it facilitates the satisfaction of consumer needs and wants, but also influences consumer behavior by providing consumption patterns. Thus, through the processes, raw materials, and materials it uses, this field can affect the good running of society in a much more visible way compared to other key areas of the economy. The analysis of the retail sector shows us that it does not only include companies that satisfy the needs of the population. In this field, we also include companies that supply materials for the construction or technological field. Thus, through the influence exerted at the level of an economy and its key areas, retail companies can influence the behavior of customers, the beneficial aspect being represented by their education to acquire a behavior aligned with sustainable principles (Ferreira et al., 2019).

2.2 Sustainable communication of retailers

In retail, sustainable communication has become an increasingly important aspect, as companies identify

the need to adopt sustainable practices from a social, economic, and environmental point of view. This type of communication involves strategies such as promoting sustainable products, educating customers on the importance of sustainability, and involving stakeholders to promote environmentally friendly initiatives (Chen et al., 2019).

In this regard, an effective strategy is the use of ecological labels and certifications such as Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Fair Trade Certified labels. These labels indicate that products have been made sustainably and help consumers make informed choices, encouraging companies to adopt sustainable practices (Kim et al., 2018).

Another strategy used to educate customers involves displaying sustainability information in stores or on the packaging. Retailers can provide information on the impact their products have on the environment, how they are made, and how they can be disposed of responsibly. By displaying the information in stores or on the packaging, customers can make responsible and sustainable choices (Chen, 2019).

Interaction with stakeholders, including suppliers and employees, is an important part of a sustainable communication strategy. Retailers can encourage stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices and provide employee training to promote this paradigm in the workplace. Engaging with customers through social media, events, or other communication channels can be another way to promote sustainable principles and raise awareness of pollution issues (Kim et al., 2018).

The adoption, in the retail field, of sustainable communication practices generates numerous benefits. First, involvement in social responsibility campaigns can increase the notoriety a retailer has, attracting consumers who are willing to pay more for "green" products. It can also help increase customer loyalty, as they are more likely to return to businesses that share their values. Second, this type of communication can facilitate cost reduction by adopting sustainable practices such as reducing waste, improving energy efficiency, and reducing water consumption. Sustainable communication allows retailers to comply with legislative regulations, as well as the provisions established by professional associations in the field, Government, and non-governmental organizations, which, in the future, can facilitate access to new markets, an increase in sales and notoriety (Chen et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018).

In conclusion, by implementing sustainable communications, retailers can contribute to a better future while increasing their competitiveness and profitability.

In retail, the best-known international sustainability reporting standard is the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) (GRI, 2020). GRI is also used to report a retailer's economic, social, and environmental impact (Baxter et al., 2020).

The Global Reporting Initiative was established in 1967, initially as a non-profit organization with the mission of promoting sustainable business practices globally (GRI, 2020). The GRI framework provides a structured approach to reporting on sustainable principles, which includes standardized indicators that measure and report a company's performance (Baxter et al., 2020). The framework has evolved over the years to become the most widely adopted sustainability reporting standard in the world (GRI, 2020).

The retail sector, known for its impact on the environment, has admitted the importance of reporting sustainability principles, and adopting, on a large scale, the GRI framework (Baxter et al., 2020). According to a GRI report, more than 250 retail companies worldwide reported using the GRI framework in 2020, an increase from the previous year (GRI, 2020).

By adopting the GRI framework, retailers have numerous benefits. First, reporting on sustainable principles can help companies identify areas that need improvement and set sustainable goals along these lines (Baxter et al., 2020). Second, it can help companies develop trust and credibility in their relationship with stakeholders by providing them with transparent and valid data (GRI, 2020). Finally, reporting sustainable principles can help companies comply with legal provisions and meet the expectations of customers, investors, and other stakeholders (Baxter et al., 2020).

III. METHODOLOGY

For the case study, retailers from the fast-moving consumer goods industry were considered. Products in this sector are characterized by a fairly low price, which generates quite high sales (Kenton, 2021).

Thus, we took into account the first three retailers operating in the Romanian market, according to the hierarchy made in 2022: Lidl, Kaufland, and Profi Rom Food. Considering the available financial data, they had the highest sales on the market, being in the customers' preferences, so they can influence their sustainable behavior (Bădescu, 2022).

The information presented is collected from the documents provided by the companies under consideration, as well as based on the existing data on the websites of the retailers. The information mentioned in the following is based on the annual reports of the organizations (strategic elements and Sustainability Report) for the years 2021 – 2022. The purpose of these documents is to ensure the connection between the company and the stakeholders. Annual reports made available to the general public by large organizations are among the most

important means of communication, providing information from the "inside" of the company (Keay & Iqbal, 2018).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

▪ **Lidl**

The first retailer analyzed is Lidl, part of the Schwartz group (Group. Schwartz, 2022). The sustainability policy starts at the group level. The slogan "Good for the planet", "good for people", "good for you" describes the three main axes on which the retailer acts in the sphere of sustainability (Figure no. 1) (Lidl.com, 2022).

When analyzing the impact on the planet, they consider not only the needs and wants of future generations of consumers, but also the quality and availability of Lidl products. Thus, they support social responsibility campaigns aimed at protecting biodiversity and the climate, aiming for efficient use of resources (Lidl.com, 2022).

From a people care perspective, the retailer is concerned with the integrity of both customers and employees. For the last mentioned category, they have adopted a code of conduct that regulates working conditions, respecting the fundamental rights of citizens and avoiding the existence of situations that can represent a potential source of risks (Lidl.com, 2022).

From the perspective of care for citizens, Lidl promotes balanced consumption, encouraging citizens to adopt a healthy lifestyle, favoring this aspect also through the range of products they make available (Lidl.com, 2022).



Figure 1 – Sustainability in Lidl

Source: (Lidl.com, 2022)

In Romania, in 2021, the fourth Lidl sustainability report was presented, made about the GRI standards. Actions aimed at protecting the environment included benefits for both the community and the company. From the perspective of streamlining processes and minimizing costs, 98% of the electricity used in Lidl stores comes from renewable resources, and 44% of the stores are remotely monitored for water consumption (Lidl.ro, 2022).

Supporting a healthy lifestyle and the development of the local economy, in 2021, the purchase of Romanian fruits and vegetables continued, as well as the facilitation of exports of products from Romanian suppliers to other Lidl stores in Europe (Lidl.ro, 2022).

In terms of community aid, in 2021 530 tons of food products and 208 tons of non-food items were donated, these being intended, mainly for food banks and the disadvantaged population (Lidl.ro, 2022).

Also, during the year, 53,522 tons of waste were collected, which were sent to recycling centers and avoiding the risk of reaching the environment, thus contributing to the continuation of pollution. At the same time, the amount of plastic used for meat casseroles and packaging meat products was reduced by 200 tons (Lidl.ro, 2022).

So, based on the previously presented data, we can mention that the sustainability policy of the Schwartz group is respected at the level of Lidl stores, they aim to reward the community that has contributed to achieving success in the market.

▪ **Kaufland**

Although Kaufland is part of the Schwartz Group (Group. Schwartz, 2022), its approach to sustainability is slightly different from Lidl's approach. Thus, in the sustainability report published in 2022, Kaufland presents the new project carried out - "RESET Plastic" (figure no. 2).



Figure 2 – REset plastic-Kaufland

Source: (Kaufland.ro, 2021)

Kaufland places greater importance on reducing the amount of plastic on the market, while also preventing this waste from being thrown into nature and aiming to reduce pollution. Caring for the environment can also be seen through other sustainable practices. For example, in Romania, 44 of the stores have charging stations for electric cars. Also, many shops were equipped with photovoltaic panels. From the perspective of the objectives, the group aims to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 55% in the next 7 years (Kaufland.ro, 2021).

In 2022, Kaufland Romania was designated "the most transparent and performing company in the direction of sustainability", receiving the title following the way of communication of the "economic, social and environmental impact". Therefore, the sustainable actions undertaken by the company were recognized and appreciated, and the company is at the top of the most sustainable organizations in the country, obtaining a score of 97 points out of a maximum of 100 (Kaufland.ro, 2022).

The sustainability report made by Kaufland Romania following the principles of the Global Reporting Initiative was rewarded with the Gold Level award, which attests to the recognition of the efforts undertaken in the creation of the document (Kaufland.ro, 2022).

Kaufland's sustainable actions are also aimed at employees. In 2021, the number of employees with disabilities increased by 19%, being an employer that mainly supports the presence of women in the labor market (Kaufland.ro, 2022).

From the perspective of the range of products, in 2021 there was a collaboration with over 2,500 local suppliers of products and services, with approximately 19,800 items from the total of 23,900 food products being of national origin (Kaufland.ro, 2022).

In terms of community support, more than 10.8 million pieces of recyclable packaging were collected with the help of the waste collection machines installed in the parking lots. Also, two funding programs ("Start ONG" and "In good condition") have been launched that offer non-refundable grants to non-governmental organizations.

Therefore, Kaufland, part of the Schwartz group, engages in sustainable practices, both to provide a cleaner environment for future generations, but also to defend the interests of stakeholders and reward the communities that have contributed to the development of the business.

▪ **Profi Rom**

The last retailer considered for this comparative analysis is Profi Romania. The reason underlying this desire resides in the fact that this company is of national origin and it is interesting to observe the existence of alignment with the sustainable practices undertaken by other competitors on the market.

The quality of Profi products and the organizational behavior of the retailer were rewarded in 2019, when they were named suppliers of the Royal House of Romania, both for food and non-food products (Profi.ro, 2022).

The Profi Rom sustainability report was made using the GRI reporting standards, mentioning the main axes pursued by the retailer in the Romanian market. The sustainable principles applied by the company are reflected even during transport. To reduce carbon dioxide emissions, in 2021, the company's road fleet was made up of Euro 4, Euro 5, and Euro 6 cars, during this period five CNG (compressed natural gas) trucks were also added (Profi.ro, 2021).

Similarly, Profi aims to reduce the consumption of natural gas and electricity, for the latter already opting for the implementation of solar panels. At the same time, they opted for the replacement of existing technologies

in cold installations with more ecological refrigerants (Profi.ro, 2021).

Based on the desire to protect the environment, they developed the 3R concept for waste management, for plastic, paper-cardboard, metal, and glass packaging, registering a significant increase in collected quantities. It also tries to reduce food waste by applying the "First In, First Out" principle, which allows optimal marketing of products (Profi.ro, 2021).

About internal customers, Profi respects the fundamental rights of people, supporting the gender diversity of employees. There is also an open policy for employees with disabilities, with all the retailer's staff benefiting from a remuneration system that includes numerous bonuses.

Rewarding the community began with the development of the project "Good deeds done by Profi" which enabled the financing and support of projects in different fields (social responsibility campaigns, projects aimed at improving the educational environment, the support given to the field of health, etc.) (Profi.ro, 2021).

So, although we are discussing a company present only at the national level, from a sustainable point of view, Profi Rom can be considered a formidable opponent for the large groups of retailers operating in the Romanian market.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The research aims to identify the degree of transparency of retailers, respectively the follow-up of the communication strategy regarding the sustainable principles implemented by three Romanian companies: Lidl, Kaufland, and Profi Rom.

The first two retailers considered are part of the Schwartz Group, which has an extensive international presence. However, both retailers were considered because the way of business management and marketing strategy adopted is different.

Lidl, perceived as a family store, with a wide range of products, at low prices and numerous own brands, ranks first in the list of retailers in our country, closely followed by the retailer Kaufland. Positioning itself as the store aimed at a middle-income audience, paying more attention to merchandising, Kaufland recorded significant financial growth compared to previous years.

Following the documentary research carried out, the two companies demonstrate a high level of transparency, Kaufland also receiving a distinction to accredit this aspect. Thus, in the framework of the sustainability reports made according to the GRI standards, the actions carried out and aimed at the recycling of waste, the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions and the consumption of electricity and natural gas, the minimization of food waste and the implementation in community life by supporting social projects or running social responsibility campaigns. It is also important to note that the sustainability reports of the two retailers are subordinated to the overall business strategy of the Schwartz Group.

The Profi retailer was included in this research based on the desire to compare the practices of an internationally recognized group with a retailer that enjoys notoriety only in the Romanian market. Although we are talking about the national company, they publish the sustainability report according to the GRI standards mentioning the efforts they make to implement sustainable principles.

Profi mentions the directions in which it acts, emphasizing the satisfaction and well-being of internal as well as external customers. The sustainability report mentions the ongoing concern for employees, as well as the impact they have on the community, through the social projects they support or have initiated.

From a recommendation perspective, we believe that the efforts of companies should be brought to the attention of customers more frequently. Sustainability reports are available online and on retailers' websites, but are only found by consumers if they have a particular interest and engage in a search for this information.

The waste collection part is brought to the customers' attention through the devices located inside the stores or in the parking lots. However, we think that social projects should also be more promoted because they can also find support from customers.

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