THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MILLENNIALS, SUSTAINABILITY, AND COMPANY RESEARCH

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In addition to the traditional criteria used when evaluating a company or supplier, such as history, financials, and competitors, inclusion of reputation should be treated with the same weight of importance. It is becoming more and more evident that companies that embrace sustainable philosophies and ethical practices achieve competitive advantage in many ways. The most important, one can argue, is the fact that civic-minded companies attract top talent. In June, the *Star Tribune* reported, based on a national survey of millennials, that 3M has jumped to the #1 spot as the most preferred potential workplace, replacing Google. CEO Inge Thulin states, "younger employees and applicants have noted 3M's sustainability projects and its three-to-12-month leadership development program," in addition to its "commitment to geographic, linguistic and ethnic diversity."

Consumers and potential business partners are increasingly making decisions about purchases or partnerships based on a company's ethical (or non-ethical) practices. A recent CNBC story about millennials and the decreasing interest in diamond engagement rings illustrates the impact that sustainable practices can have on an industry. In the article, Bank of America Merrill Lynch analyst Ashley Wallace states: "Millennial consumers have distinctive preferences, which in many ways diverge from previous generations…They tend to be more value conscious, more concerned with sustainability and ethical production, and often value unique and individual products versus items that are standardized and mass-produced."

A recent Nielsen study found that millennials, even more than Generation Z and Baby Boomers, "continue to be most willing to pay extra for sustainable offerings—almost three-out-of-four respondents in the latest findings, up from approximately half in 2014."

Researching a company's reputation for ethical practices can encompass many components. These include sustainability practices, quality of products or services, treatment of employees and workplace practices, civic and social focus, supply chain practices, and executive-level activities. Scanning news articles, especially those originating from local sources connected to the company, such as where it is headquartered or where sourcing activity takes place is an important part of researching reputation. There are many organizations, watchdog groups and CSR (corporate social responsibility) data providers that monitor companies and report on their ethical practices.

Here are selected resources to consider when researching:

Corporate Research Project (open access) – assists community, environmental, and labor organizations in researching companies and industries. The Project identifies information that can be used to advance corporate accountability campaigns. Their excellent research tools include:
Violation Tracker, wide-ranging database on corporate misconduct
Corporate Rap Sheets, detailed dossiers on some of the worst corporate actors
Guide to Strategic Corporate Research, an exhaustive guide to online sources
Dirt Diggers Digest, a weekly blog on corporate misconduct and how to research it

Corporate Register (open access) – global online directory of corporate responsibility reports, past and present

CorpWatch (open access) – its mission is to provide "non-profit investigative research and journalism to expose corporate malfeasance and to advocate for multinational corporate accountability and transparency"

CR Magazine: The 100 Best Corporate Citizens (open access) – using data gleaned from publicly available information companies are ranked via seven categories: Environment, Climate change, Employee relations, Human rights, Corporate governance, Financial performance, Philanthropy & community support

CSRHub – provides access to corporate social responsibility and sustainability information and ratings on major companies in North America, Europe and Asia (ratings are open access)

Ethisphere's "The World's Most Ethical Companies" designation (open access) – honors companies that excel in three areas – promoting ethical business standards and practices internally, enabling managers and employees to make good choices, and shaping future industry standards by introducing tomorrow's best practices today

RepRisk – provides ESG (environmental, social and governance) risk business intelligence services; RepRisk monitors independent third-party sources along with blogs and social media and provides a RepRisk Index (RRI) analysis

US REPTRAK® 100 (open access) – outlines what the best companies are doing to build reputation and support with consumers in the US in 2016

Better Business Bureau (BBB, open access) – perhaps more useful for smaller businesses, BBB helps people find and recommend businesses, brands and charities they can trust

Glassdoor (open access) – crowdsourced data, shared by employees, covering company reviews, CEO approval ratings, salary reports, interview reviews and questions, benefits reviews and more provides an insider's view of a company