Science-in-the-box or a commitment towards more transparency

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The concept - What we do, how we do it, and where to find it easily.

The website we now call Science-in-the-Box (SIB), www.scienceinthebox.com, was a response to Procter and Gamble’s (P&G) perceived need to communicate product safety information to the market. P&G Fabric and Home Care, Western Europe, developed the SIB website in 2002.

P&G has developed the characteristics of the SIB site through an evolutionary process and as a result of information and opinions gleaned from discussions with its stakeholders. P&G’s stakeholders include a diverse range of representatives from scientific research institutes, policymakers, journalists, industrial organisations, and consumer organisations to representatives of environmental and social Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

The stakeholders signalled three key messages to P&G about the nature of safety communications: safety information about consumer good products should be very easily accessible; P&G must clearly express ‘what it does’ to ensure both human and environmental safety of its products; and finally P&G must explain ‘how it does it’.

P&G took the view that, in order to maximize value, these three points should be expressed in a way that would appeal to the broadest possible demographic. This was an interesting challenge, not least because it was the first time that P&G had placed such a broad source of easily available safety and technical information in one place. Secondly, it was not self-evident how information in one place should be presented to appeal to a range of stakeholders, from the uninformed non-scientist through to the surfactant chemist.


The SIB website has to follow a very different communications pattern to that of most branded websites. SIB must be perceived as unbiased and trustworthy source of information. In comparison, a typical brand website must focus upon a brand’s ‘promise’, its emotional appeal to its stakeholders and the attractive presentation of

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consumer benefits. It is the view of P&G’s team that the most valuable users of SIB are probably the ones whose interaction with the site changes their attitude (or understanding) towards P&G commitment to sustainable development in general and toward the depth of science that goes into its products.

As such, some of our stakeholders tend to be highly suspicious about anything that gives them the impression their counter party is trying to direct their attitude. And as they are not accustomed to open dialogue with industry, the stakeholders using SIB may distrust the site initially. These users will only adapt their attitude if they develop enough trust in the information sources on the site, the methodologies associated with creating those information sources and the way in which they are presented.

1.1 A commitment to more transparency.

The first step towards the development of the SIB site occurred in 1997, when Procter and Gamble and IMSA Amsterdam\(^2\) took the initiative to hold a discussion on the environmental performance of P&G products in the European market. The aim of the discussion was to identify how to communicate P&G’s best environmental product performance. This discussion triggered a number of important events for P&G.

On the basis of the outcome of peer review, performed by an international expert group, of P&G’s current eco-labelling and environmental management systems (Hindle/DeSmet/White/Owens 1996, White/DeSmet/Owens/Hindle 1995), the company was left with a conundrum:

“How can P&G improve information flow to consumers in respect of its increased environmental performance and the improved environmental compatibility of its products; whilst at the same time maintaining the message of functional performance of those products and keeping the path flexible for future product development?”

In order to resolve this conundrum P&G had to understand the perceptions and experiences of its environmental performance from the perspective of European communications experts including representatives from governments, national authorities, consumers organizations, scientists, media and NGOs. Through a dialogue with this group, the company aimed to identify a methodical approach that would solve its environmental performance communications challenge now, and in the future.

The company clearly understood that there was an increasing need for information on environmental product performance. This need applied to individual prod-

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ucts as much as it did to the company’s performance across the board. P&G recog-
nized that the status quo would not suffice.

1.2 Listening is more important than persuasion:

In 1998, both P&G and IMSA employees interviewed approximately 50 experts and
representatives of stakeholder organizations. By means of stakeholder interaction,
our team was able to learn and understand how our products are viewed and whether
or not they are accepted by professionals. From which, we concluded that an empha-
sis on listening is far more important than a focus on talking and convincing in re-
spect of environmental performance communication at this point in our strategy.

The interviews yielded a wealth of insights, both on eco-labeling and on commu-
icating the environmental performance of products in a more general sense. A
number of interviewees pleaded for both industry and governmental authorities to
stimulate the development of strategies for communicating environmental perform-
ance.

In March 1999, a two-day workshop was held in Limelette, near Brussels, in
which some 30 representatives of organizations from eight European countries par-
ticipated. These all belonged to the previously consulted stakeholders. They were
selected for their involvement in communicating environmental performance of
products to consumers, be it by ecolabelling or by other means. The workshop ad-
dressed these deeper levels by broadening the discussion from ecolabels to commu-
ication of environmental performance. At the end of this workshop, P&G Europe,
made a pledge for more transparency about activities regarding the environmental
and social field in Europe. P&G Europe committed the following:

- As a first step, we will organize a follow up conference for Forum participants,
in which it will give insight into the way the company works and thinks in this
field. This forum took place in Brussels in 1999 and led to the publication of 4
peer-reviewed articles Saouter/White 2002, Saouter/VanHoof 2002,
Saouter/VanHoof/Pittinger/Feijtel 2001, Saouter/VanHoof/Feijtel/Owens 2002)
- We will identify ways to package relevant information about P&G's activities,
which satisfies the different needs of stakeholders. One of the idea was a web-
site, which builds up from simple information at the first page to more detailed
information there under. This is our http://www.scienceinthebox.com web-
site.
- Adopt an innovative strategy, i.e. involve stakeholders at a much earlier stage of
product development. The challenge is to find ways to do this, which combine
the company's need for confidentiality with stakeholders' need for independ-
ence.
2. The creation of the first P&G external science site: www.scienceinthebox.com

P&G's European Headquarters in Geneva drove the creation of the SIB Website in 2002. The SIB website is one of a number of core elements in our environmental performance communications strategy.

A global team of P&G experts pulled together a comprehensive information set that offers insight into P&G R&D activities in a transparent, factual manner. The SIB site has not yet been extensively promoted but site visits have picked up momentum rapidly since inception with a large percentage of unique users.

For the first time in company history, P&G has offered unparalleled range of R&D information in respect of Sustainability, Safety and Products in conjunction with a variety of scientific publications freely available on the internet.

Since September 2002, 221,785 people visited the English site since Nov 2002 while 58,091 visited the French site, accounting for 1,530,178 page views. The geographical breakdown of site visitors is UK 22%, France 18%, USA 17%, Switzerland 9%, Canada 8%, and 5% from each of Belgium, Italy and Germany. The value of the site for our stakeholders can also be measured via the usage of the PDF articles available on the site. As can be seen on the table 1, the most popular documents are those related to product safety data sheets, but our 2001 sustainability report is also quite popular.

It should be noted that the site is currently available in two languages (English and French), with more planned to reflect our specific stakeholder geographic breakdown (Spanish version will be open to public early fall 2004 followed by an Italian version). Other languages are expected to follow.

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<th>Total download</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainability Report 2001</td>
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<td>Detergent LCA (Part 1)</td>
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<td>Detergent Risk Assessment (Part 2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>P&amp;G detergent comparison (LCA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oleo versus petro chemical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Product Safety Data Sheet</td>
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Table 1: Total download of the various reports (PDF format) available on the site. A download corresponds here to a click on the link provided.
2.1 Multi-layered information for multiple audiences in a multi-channel media world.

Information on the site is presented in layers of increased complexity: the first layer being more for the layman and the deeper layers for the scientist looking for very technical information. This structure is not always respected, but these are the general rules the site follows.

On the right side of the page, cross-links to other sections of the site or to external websites allow visitors to complement their research. On the first level, text is usually kept to one screen size, while for information that is more technical, coverage can extend to several pages. To allow people to use the information, all the pages can be easily printed via the ‘Print page’ function that formats the html page into a ready to print version.

The site today also contains more than 170 PDF documents; including articles on interesting topics, product safety data sheets or ingredient safety information. However, to maximize the accessibility and use of the information, we have created PDFs on certain topics from the site content. These constitute stand-alone articles that users can download and use for their own professional activities.

In some instances, the same information is presented in three to four different formats. Those are: a summary of the most important facts, backed up by a more detailed PDF file that contains more easy to read information, which is in turn backed up by a peer-reviewed publication. Where possible, we have also bought or obtained the right to post relevant journal articles online.

A powerful database has now been integrated into the SIB site to help users find the right P&G scientific publication. Today, more than 550 publications on environmental safety are available on the site and can be searched by authors’ names, year of publication, specific journal or key words. In the near future, human safety publications will be added.

2.2 The first online survey in 2003

A SIB site online survey was carried out in 2003 with a sample size of 80 participants. It was conducted in preparation for a planned site re-design and showed that the overall reaction of stakeholders to the site was positive. Of the total number of sample respondents, 77% intended to revisit the site, 69% intended to recommend the site to others and 59% expressed a liking of the site.

The success of the SIB site, reflected in the results of the above online survey, led to a decision to broaden its content. We also concluded that we needed to create further opportunities for dialogue on the site and aimed to achieve this through increased functionality.
The re-designed version of online SIB went live in October 2003. Grey Interactive executed the site re-design with significant site expansion as a key element of the brief. The other objectives were to increase usability, orientation, design, appeal and site interactivity. The site’s expansion demanded a new level of scalability in conjunction with ease of maintenance.

The above design objectives targeted the cognitive demands of the users. Nevertheless, it was also important to address the emotional appeal of the site. This has now been addressed and by a picture and illustration concept, the purpose of which is to underpin brand perception and P&G’s communication objectives.

2.3 The second online survey, 2004.

A second, 2004 online survey showed findings that are totally consistent with the results achieved in the summer 2003 survey referred to above. In summary:

- Science in the Box positively impacts the way users see P&G and its commitment toward sustainable development in general and human and environmental safety of its products in particular.
- The main users of the site are ‘interested consumers’ and clusters of ‘teacher-student-scientists’ (main user is defined as users who are taking the time to answer survey or ask questions, professionals usually do not do this)
- “Most interesting” and visited pages are ‘Product information and Safety’
- Availability of local languages is important to drive usage
- There is low usage of the online survey tools by professionals to gauge their interest (NB: we are now using other tools for the professionals group. For further information, please refer to the stakeholder workshop analysis)


3.1 The Netherlands Case Study

On 20th November 2003 a workshop event with NGOs and consumer group representatives was held in the Netherlands. It collected feedback on functionality, design, role and value of the redesigned site. The following core findings were unearthed.

- Stakeholder appreciation for SIB initiative: Overall, the SIB website seemed to be highly appreciated and held as a good corporate example of an advanced and easily accessible stakeholder information system
• Unanimously positive score for SIB: On average, from a scale of 0-10 (where 0 is most negative and 10 is most positive), participants scored SIB at 7.5 (n=14). All parts of the site received a similarly high appraisal.

• SIB was seen to contribute most to stakeholder perceptions of P&G corporate transparency: Participating stakeholders rated P&G’s overall transparency at 7.0 (n=9) described as “sufficient/good”. During in-depth analysis, SIB (24.2%) and the sustainability report (19.8%) were seen to contribute most highly to these perceptions.

• SIB perceived strengths: Stakeholders were impressed with the site’s completeness and openness; for providing well-balanced content; covering issues in sufficient depth (compared to competitor sites) and for being user-friendly.

• Five major improvement opportunities were identified: Increasing perceived responsiveness on 1) topical and 2) less positive issues, 3) enhancing the credibility of the content, 4) expanding the format to other product groups, and 5) raising awareness of the site.

As a result of the workshop, additional modifications have been made to the site. There are plans to replicate the Netherlands workshop in order to build on views and comments in preparation for rollout in other markets – notably, France and Italy.

3.2 The Media Audit

In May and June 2004, the agency MS&L conducted on behalf of P&G a pan-European media audit of 57 media in five markets – with representation from UK, France, Germany, Spain and Sweden. The aims of the audit were to understand attitudes towards the site, and to shape future recommendations aimed at enhancing the site’s media usage.

A broad mix of consumer, education, environmental and science journalists participated in two separate telephone interviews – one before visiting SIB to establish current reference sources, best practice and prompted recall of SIB and a detailed follow up after having spent 20 minutes or more referencing the site for themselves.

Each audit was based on a central questionnaire designed to collate opinions on the site content and format, linked to its editorial usefulness, strengths, weaknesses, suggested improvements and likelihood of revisiting. The following core findings were revealed:

• The Internet is a primary research tool for 75% of all media – rising to 90% of environmental and 88% of science writers. Interestingly, it was these more technical writers who expressed most interest in the SIB concept and who were
more likely to agree that content online helped address their immediate editorial needs

- 10% were aware of the site before the media audit and as a result of being made aware of the site, 37% of media questioned said they would revisit the site in the future
- Perceived strengths: concept, credibility, scale (breadth) of information covered, and ease of use
- Nearly a quarter (23%) of media questioned admitted to seeing P&G in a more favourable light in response to visiting SIB. Considering the highly cynical nature of the audience, this figure seems supportive.

4. Conclusion

Today SIB could be described as a highly informative source of safety information about P&G laundry and cleaning products. The overall positive impact achieved with our European stakeholders has been obtained because of our commitment to share information that we used to consider initially as ‘for internal use only’. We refer here for example to ingredient safety data or product safety data sheet. Although all these informations were already in the public domain in one way or an other, the fact to increase accessibility and visibility via a website was considered as risky. The willingness to share this specific information had actually created the success of SIB. SIB started as an experiment to establish a better dialogue with our external stakeholders, it is now a well established communication vehicle that we will continue to use and leverage.

Bibliography


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