

# When Suits Meet Roots: The Antecedents and Consequences of Community Engagement Strategy

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**ABSTRACT.** Understanding firms' interfaces with the community has become a familiar strategic concern for both firms and non-profit organizations. However, it is still not clear when different community engagement strategies are appropriate or how such strategies might benefit the firm and community. In this review, we examine when, how and why firms benefit from community engagement strategies through a systematic review of over 200 academic and practitioner knowledge sources on the antecedents and consequences of community engagement strategy. We analytically describe evidence on the rise of the community engagement strategy literature over time, its geographical spread and methodological evolution. A foundational concept underlying many studies is the 'continuum of community engagement'. We build on this continuum to develop a typology of three engagement strategies: transactional, transitional and transformational engagement. By identifying the antecedents and outcomes of the three strategies, we find that the payoffs from engagement are largely longer-term enhanced firm legitimacy, rather than immediate cost-benefit improvements. We use our systematic review to draw implications for future research and managerial practice.

**KEY WORDS:** citizens, community engagement, community groups, corporate philanthropy, social partnerships, social strategy, stakeholder engagement, systematic review

## Introduction

Understanding a firm's interface with the community has become a familiar strategic concern for both firms and non-profit organizations (Crane, 2000; Westley and Vredenburg, 1997). Firms can gain

legitimacy, manage social risk and even co-develop innovative solutions to social problems with community members through a well-designed community engagement strategy (e.g. Carey et al., 2007; Lowndes et al., 2001). For communities, firms offer access to charitable dollars, employee volunteers, training, capacity building, influencing projects and substantive improvement to social problems (e.g. O'Regan and Oster, 2000). However, such benefits are not always achieved by either firms or their community partners. It is still not clear when different community engagement strategies are appropriate or how such strategies might provide net benefits.

Community engagement strategy is the pattern of activities implemented by firms to work collaboratively with and through groups of people to address issues affecting the social well-being of those people (Fawcett et al., 1995; Scantlebury, 2003). Examples include Pfizer's 'Amigos en Salud' (Friends in Health) project that provides culturally relevant tools to help Latino patients manage diabetes and related complications, Weyerhaeuser's forest management joint ventures with First Nations bands, and Hook & Ladder Brewing Co.'s philanthropic support of local fire-fighters through the donation of 'A Penny for Every Pint'. In each of these cases, community engagement strategy is a key component within the firm's broader social strategy, the firm's resource allocation plan for addressing both social objectives and competitive needs (Bowen, 2007).

Community engagement strategy is the subset of a firm's corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities that are directed towards individual citizens and community groups. As we will discuss further below, a community is a set of citizens drawn

together by geography, interaction or identity (Lee and Newby, 1983), and may consist of individual citizens or of groups of citizens organized to represent their shared interests (Crane et al., 2004). Community engagement can be a significant activity within the firms' broader stakeholder management programs, but with a narrower scope: while community members are often firm stakeholders, not all stakeholders are communities. Community engagement strategy addresses communities that are drawn together by shared social well-being, and not other stakeholders such as 'the financial community' or 'the institutional investment community'. It is also distinct from 'relationship marketing' where the primary focus is on engaging with various stakeholder groups, including 'community', to retain customers rather than social improvements *per se* (Payne et al., 2003).

Our understanding of successful community engagement strategy is limited by at least three problems with the current literature. First, since research on community engagement has been driven mainly by understanding the phenomenon rather than by deductive extensions of disciplinary theories, researchers have drawn on a wide range of perspectives, experiences and literatures. While basing research on phenomena is not necessarily problematic, one consequence is that community engagement research is scattered across a wide range of disciplines. Research in the strategic management discipline, for example, would miss important insights from understanding citizen participation in public policy (e.g. Boxelaar et al., 2006; Freeman, 1984), employee empowerment within human resource management (e.g. Barnett, 2002; Newenham-Kahindi, 2009a), community readiness within social work (e.g. Hashagan, 2002) or experientially grounded practitioner tool kits (e.g. Altria Inc., 2004). It is time to consolidate our knowledge of emergent norms and best practices in community engagement strategy across fields.

Second, there is often a disconnect between the rhetoric and reality of community engagement strategy that is misrecognized by both researchers and managers. The literature is replete with concepts such as 'partnership' and 'collaboration', but these are used inconsistently and can denote a wide range of (in)action, making comparisons between strategies difficult (e.g. Googins and Rochlin, 2000). Third,

any one study, however well conceived, can only yield insights on a limited range of community engagement actions and consequences. It is common to focus on a particular phenomenon such as corporate philanthropy, employee volunteering, project planning consultation or collaboration with NGOs, and later to label this a 'community engagement strategy'. We are so far missing a compelling map of the intellectual terrain, linking antecedents with appropriate actions and the likely performance consequences of various community engagement strategies.

In this review, we examine the antecedents and consequences of community engagement strategies through a systematic review of over 200 academic and practitioner knowledge sources. Our review is distinctive in two ways: (1) we move beyond single discipline-based reviews in strategy, non-profit management or public policy to review all the available literature and (2) we focus our review on community engagement actions rather than strategy statements in order to get underneath the symbolic dimensions and understand actual performance impacts.

The overarching research question for our systematic review is: what are the antecedents and consequences of community engagement strategy? We will use the answers from this analysis to examine when and how community engagement strategy provides benefits to firms and communities. We will start by outlining our systematic review procedure. We will then provide analytic descriptions of trends in the community engagement strategy literature, highlighting publication outlets, geographic, methodological and disciplinary scope of the literature. We develop a typology of three engagement strategies: transactional, transitional and transformational engagement, and analyse the antecedents and consequences of community engagement strategy. We will use our systematic review to generate implications for future research and management practice.

### **Methodology: a systematic review**

Our aim in conducting a systematic review of the community engagement literature was to map and assess the existing intellectual territory, and to

provide an evidence-based answer to our research questions based on existing knowledge (Tranfield et al., 2003). Although systematic reviews are common in the medical and social policy arenas (Cook et al., 1997; Dixon-Woods et al., 2005), they are becoming increasingly popular in the management literature (Doldor, 2007; Pittaway et al., 2004). The primary advantage of systematic reviews is that they move beyond a traditional narrative review to adopt a replicable and transparent process by providing an audit trail of the reviewers' decisions, procedures and conclusions.

Given our desire to provide evidence-based conclusions on best practices in community engagement, we would have ideally liked to conduct an aggregative synthesis (Rousseau et al., 2008). Using meta-analytic techniques to cumulate similar quantitative studies could have increased the effective sample size of studies on the relationships between different community engagement strategies and performance (Hunter and Schmidt, 1995). However, given the lack of sufficiently similar quantitative effect sizes in this literature, an aggregative synthesis was not possible.

Instead, we aimed for an explanatory synthesis, adopting a critical realist approach to explain how, and under what circumstances, firms enact community engagement strategies (Rousseau et al., 2008). A critical realist approach allows us to accept that there is an objectively knowable set of norms associated with community engagement that are constructed out of researchers' and practitioners' experiences and practices. This applies both to the research sources we examined and to our own review. Thus, our intention in this review was to look across the community engagement literature to discern common patterns of perception that might provide insight into the underlying drivers and payoffs. While it is impossible to eradicate selection and interpretation bias using this approach, we attempted to be transparent in our literature gathering and analysis by adopting a systematic process. One of the challenges of this approach is that accepted methodology is currently under-developed. However, this approach did enable us to gather data from fragmented and methodologically diverse fields on the antecedents and consequences of community engagement strategy.

#### *Systematic review procedure*

In order to identify academic sources for our review, we began by searching academic literature databases *ABI Inform*, *Academic Search Premier* and *Business Source Premier* using the following keywords and variants: community, community groups, NGOs, stakeholders, community engagement, domain-based governance, cross-sector partnership, social partnership, inter-sectoral partnership, collaborative governance, cross-sector management, sustainable communities, community embeddedness, community enterprise, citizen engagement, community investment and community involvement. After eliminating duplicates, we were left with 586 citations.

In an attempt to be as inclusive as possible in our knowledge synthesis, we extended our search beyond conventional academic sources to include practitioner toolkits, reports and unpublished material. We identified relevant practitioner literature through: (a) searching for teaching cases in the *European Case Clearing House* database using the same keywords as for the academic literature (includes teaching cases published by business schools such as Harvard and Ivey, and *Case Research Journal*); (b) identifying sources found through attendance at practitioner-targeted events, September 2007–March 2008; (c) hand searching the top 50 Google hits on community engagement for relevant reports and (d) including other literature recommended to the research team. These search procedures for practitioner sources likely lead to a somewhat idiosyncratic, and potentially biased, set of practitioner sources. However, we judged that the added value to our database of including these sources outweighed the negative effects of using a process of identifying these sources which is not completely replicable. We identified 65 sources in this process, mostly in the form of teaching cases, community engagement toolkits and government reports.

In the next step, we screened for inclusion. Our criterion for inclusion was that the citation apparently contains insights on one or more antecedents, behaviours or consequences of community engagement strategies. Due to the very large number of sources, we conducted the relevance screen based on the title and abstract of the citation only. Our inclusion or exclusion decisions were double-coded by two evaluators, with a final round inter-rater

reliability for academic sources of 0.94. Discrepancies were resolved by negotiation, and often led to the refinement of our understanding of the research questions. We would also have liked to screen for source quality at this stage so that only sources containing sound evidence-based findings on community engagement strategy would be included. However, given the preponderance of conceptual or anecdotal case studies on community engagement, it was not feasible to screen for evidence-based studies.

The 445 citations rejected in this step consisted of citations matching the keywords and criteria used in our literature searches, but were not directly related with community engagement strategy. Examples include literature on: general partnerships and inter-organizational relationships; virtue ethics and/or moral philosophy theory; sources addressing primary stakeholders such as employees and/or customers only; general CSR; stakeholders as drivers or pressures predicting another dependent variable (e.g. environmental performance); NGO governance models; employee engagement and stakeholder capitalism.

We proceeded to code the 206 included sources for content. One evaluator coded the content based on the full source (i.e. paper, report, chapter, case, etc.). Each academic source was coded for the following content: primary discipline (strategy, HR, accounting/performance management and public policy); publication outlet and originator (written by academic, consultant, government, etc.); methodological approach (conceptual, case study, large sample survey and mixed); geographic region or country discussed; industry sector; implied definition of community (individual citizens or community groups); engagement methods (philanthropy, employee volunteering, dialogue, joint decision-making, etc.); metrics or measurements used (if any); keywords and other research notes (free text). We used the coding to generate the descriptive tables and cross-tabulations below, and as a starting point for our explanatory synthesis.

### Results of the systematic review

#### *The shape of existing knowledge on community engagement*

In this section, we provide an analytic description of the shape of our extant knowledge on community

engagement, highlighting publication outlets, geographic, methodological and disciplinary scope of the extant literature.

Our literature search uncovered sources on community engagement published by nearly 100 different outlets and publications. Over 170 of the 206 sources were written by academics. As Table I indicates, most of the sources were published in academic journal articles. The two leading outlets were the *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Business and Society*, which together published around one quarter of all of the sources included in this review. Knowledge on community engagement is also shared in general business journals (such as *Organization Science*), especially those aimed primarily at practitioners (such as *Long Range Planning* and *European Management Journal*). Our search also identified sources from the broader community development (*Journal of Health & Human Services Administration*) and non-profit management (*Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*) journals.

Figure 1 shows the explosive growth in community engagement knowledge dissemination over the last few years. There has been significant scholarly and practitioner attention on community engagement issues since about 2000. More interesting is the distribution of this literature by primary

TABLE I  
Most popular publication outlets for community engagement research

Publication outlet	Number of included citations
Journal of Business Ethics	33
Business and Society	20
Long Range Planning	7
Business Ethics Quarterly	6
Organization Science	6
European Management Journal	5
Academy of Management Journal	4
Business Ethics: A European Review	4
Journal of Health & Human Services Administration	4
Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly	4

*Note:* Contains all outlets that published more than four sources.

## Community Engagement Strategy

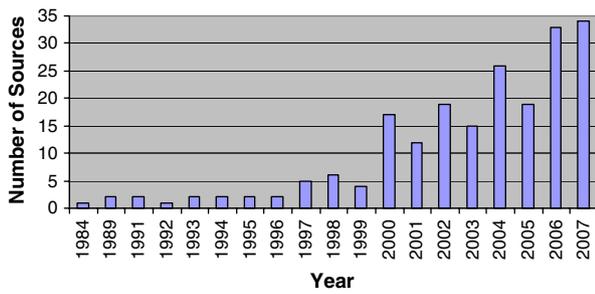


Figure 1. Number of sources published in each year.

geographic region (see Table II), and by methodology over time (see Table III). From an early focus in North America, community engagement knowledge has been derived from an increasing diversity of national contexts. Most recently, researchers have begun to examine the potential for community engagement in the poorest countries in the world, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Gabriel, 2006; Kistruck and Beamish, 2009; Newenham-Kahindi, 2009b; Rein and Stott, 2009), and in the Asian emerging economies (e.g. Foo, 2007). Also of note is the large number of sources originating from the UK (26) and Australia (11) in the 2003–2007 time period, reflecting government policy changes mandating, or at least encouraging, community involvement and participation in these jurisdictions.

As shown in Table III, almost half of all the sources (46%) identified were conceptual papers based on theory, argument or the author’s experience. Of the case studies and small sample sources, most were unsystematic or anecdotally based. Very few would meet the standards imposed by Yin (1994), Miles and Huberman (1994) or Eisenhardt (1989) on how to draw methodologically sound conclusions from case study research [but see Huxham and Vangen (2000), Voss et al. (2000) or Harvey and Schaefer (2001) as illustrative exceptions]. There has been a recent upswing in the number of large sample studies of community engagement since 2003. These large sample surveys tend to be empirical studies on the antecedents and consequences of corporate philanthropy (Brammer and Millington, 2003, 2005; Buchholtz et al., 1999), perhaps because philanthropy is easier to quantify than deeper forms of engagement. Thus, while it might have been possible to undertake an aggregative review of corporate philanthropy as an illustrative community engagement strategy, the methodological diversity and immaturity of the broader community engagement literature supports our decision to undertake an explanatory, rather than an aggregative synthesis.

Having examined the descriptive evidence on the rise of community engagement strategy literature over time, and its geographical spread and methodological evolution, we will now go onto address our

TABLE II  
Geographical distribution of community engagement research over time

Time period	North America	European Union	Least developed countries	Emerging economies	Total
Pre 1992	4	0	0	0	4
	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
1993–1997	4	2	0	0	6
	67%	33%	0%	0%	100%
1998–2002	24	11	4	0	39
	62%	28%	10%	0%	100%
2003–2007	31	38	11	3	83
	37%	46%	13%	4%	100%
Total	63	51	15	3	132
	48%	39%	11%	2%	100%

Note: Not all sources could be coded with clear geographical boundaries and the geographic region categories are not exhaustive. ‘Least Developed Countries’ (LDCs) were defined by the United Nations’ list. ‘Emerging Economies’ are defined by the BRIC Countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China.

TABLE III  
Methodologies used to examine community engagement over time

Time period	Conceptual papers	Case studies and small samples	Large samples	Mixed methods	Total
Pre 1992	3 75%	1 25%	0 0%	0 0%	4 100%
1993–1997	9 82%	1 9%	1 9%	0 0%	11 100%
1998–2002	22 42%	20 38%	9 17%	1 2%	52 99%
2003–2007	51 43%	41 35%	25 21%	1 1%	118 100%
Total	85 46%	63 34%	35 19%	2 1%	185 100%

Note: ‘Large samples’ include both surveys and studies based on secondary data

substantive findings on community engagement strategy.

#### *What is ‘community’?*

The first issue in evaluating community engagement strategy is to understand what ‘community’ is. This is not straightforward, since ‘communities’ may consist of individual citizens or of groups of citizens organized to represent a community’s shared interests (Crane et al., 2004). In developing definitions of community, most scholars have generally agreed that communities can be characterized by three factors: *geography*, *interaction* and *identity* (Lee and Newby, 1983). Communities primarily characterized by *geography* represent people residing within the same geographic region, but with no reference to the interaction among them. Communities primarily identified by regular *interaction* represent a set of social relationships that may or may not be place based. Communities characterized primarily by *identity* represent a group who share a sense of belonging, generally built upon a shared set of beliefs, values or experiences; however, the individuals need not live within the same physical locality. Given these different conceptions of community, it can be difficult to identify a community to engage with. Furthermore, different communities may interact with each other (Neville and Menguc, 2006; Unerman and Bennett,

2004), or it may be unclear who in the community has formal or informal authority or the resources to engage in particular processes (Hall and Vredenburg, 2005; Hardy and Phillips, 1998).

For the purposes of our knowledge synthesis, we took a broad approach to community within the boundary definition of individuals sharing social well-being. Rather than defining *ex ante* whether to focus on an individual citizen-based notion of community, or whether to focus on community groups, we coded our sources for the implied definition of community used *ex post* (see Table IV). These counts are based on implied definitions because comparatively few authors actually defined what they meant by community. More common was to focus on a particular phenomenon such as philanthropy, employee volunteering in community projects, or collaboration with community groups, and later to label this as some form of community engagement strategy.

As indicated in Table IV, the sources were roughly evenly split between those conceptualizing ‘community’ as consisting of individual citizens or the public generally (76 sources), and those conceptualizing community as a community group such as a school or community association (92 sources). This roughly even split between individual and group definitions of community is also manifested in sources primarily based on a human resources (14 individual compared with 14 group) or a

TABLE IV  
Implied definitions of ‘community’ employed by academic discipline

Primary discipline	Individual citizen	Community group	Both (or unclear)	Total
Strategy	17 18%	60 64%	16 17%	93 99%
Performance Management	8 35%	10 43%	5 22%	23 100%
Human resources	14 40%	14 40%	7 20%	35 100%
Public policy	37 70%	8 15%	8 15%	53 100%
Total	76 37%	92 45%	36 17%	204 100%

performance management disciplinary perspective (8 individual; 10 group). In contrast, public policy approaches emphasize communities of individual citizens (70% of sources), whereas strategy sources are weighted towards community groups (64%). The public policy tendency to treat community as geographically or socio-politically defined sets of independent citizens reflects the participatory citizenship emphasis of this literature (see, for example, the review introduced by Gates (2001)).

More surprising is the strategy literature’s heavy emphasis on a group-based definition of community. Despite the strategy literature’s identification of compelling reasons to embrace citizen-based participative systems (Crane et al., 2004; McCaffrey et al., 1995), most of the cases and research address firms’ interactions with specific social or community organizations (see, for example, Argenti, 2004; Austin, 2000). Clearly, there may be benefits to be gained from engaging with community groups, but this is not the public engagement or truly broad-based social engagement often discussed in theory in this literature (e.g. McCaffrey et al., 1995). There are two implications of this for understanding successful community engagement strategy. First, there is relatively little literature from which to draw inferences on optimal resource allocation and strategic benefits from individual citizen-based community engagement. Second, the strategy literature may have much to learn from best practice in individual citizen-based

community engagement as developed by governments and international regulatory bodies.

### *Three community engagement strategies*

A powerful concept underlying much of the literature is a ‘continuum of community engagement’. Engagement strategies can be ordered along a continuum ranging from least to most involved. As Figure 2 shows there are striking similarities between different versions of the continuum. Most note increasing levels of engagement from one-way information sharing, through two-way dialogue and collaboration, to community leadership. Academic labels for points along this continuum vary: Austin (2000) terms these as ‘philanthropic’, ‘transactional’ and ‘integrative’ engagement; Hardy and Philips (1998) identify ‘collaboration’, ‘compliance’, ‘contention’ and ‘contestation’; Alberic and van Lierop (2006) distinguish ‘inside-out’ transmission of information from firms to communities from ‘outside-in’ approaches which draw in community perspectives and Morsing and Schultz (2006) encourage moving from ‘informing’ and ‘responding’ to ‘involving’ communities in the engagement process.

Figure 2 shows illustrative versions of the community engagement continuum from government (Ministry of Social Development, 2007), an international training organization (International Associate

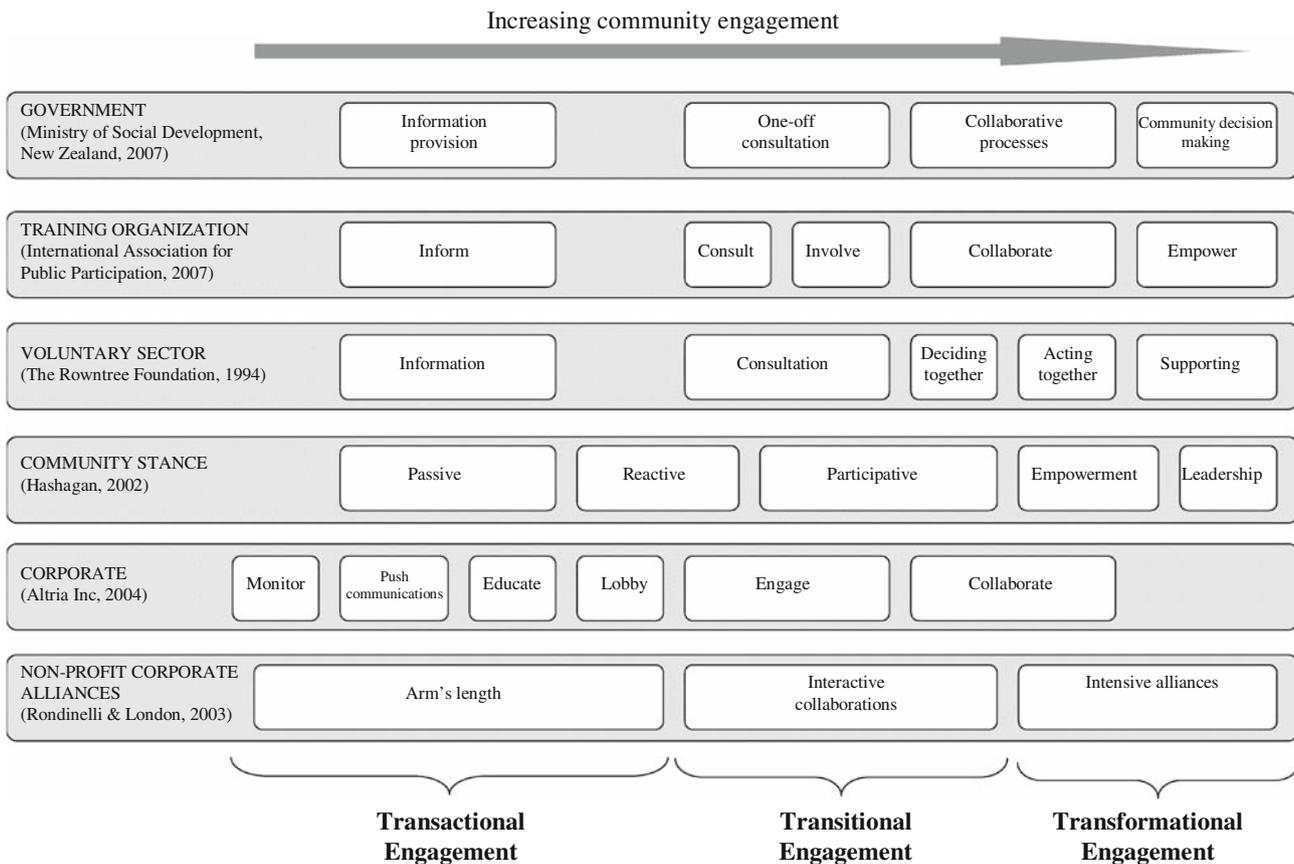


Figure 2. The continuum of community engagement.

for Public Participation, 2007), the voluntary sector (Wilcox, 1994), a corporate toolkit (Altria Corporate Services Inc., 2004), the community development literature (Barr and Hashagan, 2000; Tamarack, 2007) and non-profit corporate alliances (Rondinelli and London, 2003). Despite the wide variety of perspectives from which community engagement is approached across these sources, there are striking commonalities across the different versions of the continuum. All note increasing levels of community engagement from one-way information sharing, through two-way dialogue and collaboration, to community leadership or empowerment.

We borrow from the leadership and governance literature (Bass, 1990), and label these three strategies ‘transactional’, ‘transitional’ and ‘transformational’ engagement (see Table V). At the most basic level, firms may engage by providing information, employee volunteer time or philanthropic donations

(Gabriel, 2006; Saiia et al., 2003; van den Berg et al., 2004). Within this transactional strategy, firms communicate with communities on a transactional basis. Providing information can reduce the transaction cost of, for example, a planning approval process, or help to gain access to critical resources. Although these communication strategies may sometimes be indirect, as through a trade association public information program, communication within this mode is essentially one-way. As Figure 2 shows Altria’s corporate toolkit provides a range of tactics included within this transactional approach ranging from pushing communications through education to lobbying. Other examples include Scottish Power’s School to Work Programme which equips low academic achievers of high school age an opportunity to assess their own employability and to gain skills that will be useful to them in the future; or Alcan’s Cans for Habitat scheme which encourages

*Community Engagement Strategy*

TABLE V  
The three community engagement strategies

	Transactional engagement	Transitional engagement	Transformational engagement
Corporate stance	Community investment/ information “Giving back”	Community involvement “Building bridges”	Community integration “Changing society”
Illustrative tactics	Charitable donations Building local infrastructure Employee volunteering Information sessions	Stakeholder dialogues Public consultations Town hall meetings Cause-related marketing	Joint project management Joint decision-making Co-ownership
Communication	One-way: firm-to- community	Two-way: more firm- to-community than community-to-firm	Two-way: Community- to-firm as much as firm- to-community
Number of community partners	Many	Many	Few
Frequency of interaction	Occasional	Repeated	Frequent
Nature of trust	Limited	Evolutionary	Relational
Learning	Transferred from firm	Most transferred from firm, some transferred to firm	Jointly generated
Control over process	Firm	Firm	Shared
Benefits and outcomes	Distinct	Distinct	Joint
Illustrative studies	Brammer and Millington (2005) Gabriel (2006) Stern (2001)	Foo (2007) Maranville (1989) O’Regan and Oster (2000)	Parker and Selsky (2004) Tracey et al. (2005) Westley and Vredenburg (1991)

Habitat for Humanity local affiliates to recycle used beverage cans by providing dollar-for-dollar matching grants based on the value of cans recycled.

The community engagement literature identifies the donation of company financial resources (philanthropy), time (employee volunteering) and skills (training of community members) as further forms of transactional engagement. Transactional engagement is based on ‘giving back’ through community investment and information. Indeed one of the significant differences between the public policy-focused and the strategy-focused knowledge sources is the latter’s inclusion of non-informational forms of community transactions. While public participation literature focuses on information transmission and sharing, the strategy literature expands this to address the transmission and sharing of money, time and skills. These forms of engagement are based on

occasional interaction with a large number of partners. Most communication and learning is a one-way transfer from the firm, and the firm retains overall control of the engagement process. Benefits from the engagement can accrue to both firms and communities, but these benefits are separately accrued by both parties.

In contrast, transformational engagement is the most proactive corporate engagement strategy. This form of engagement is characterized by joint learning and sensemaking (Hart and Sharma, 2004; Payne and Gallon, 2004), the joint management of projects with communities (Natcher and Hickey, 2002; Newman et al., 2004) and community leadership in decision-making (Amnon, 2005; Rasche and Esser, 2006). Transformational engagement is distinctive because (1) organizations may achieve outcomes that were unattainable without the engagement of the

community and (2) the community takes a supported leadership role in framing problems and managing solutions. Thus, control over the engagement process is shared, and both process learning and benefits jointly emerge to both parties through the engagement process.

Transformational engagement moves beyond symbolic engagement activities (Bindu and Salk, 2006), and relies on authentic dialogue (Roulier, 2000) and critical reflectivity (Balmer et al., 2007). Transformational engagement requires the competency to engage participants through listening and understanding, the creation of a shared organizational language so that engagement makes sense to members of the organization, and a strong connection with moving beyond talk into action (Schouten and Remm, 2006). Frequent interaction with a small number of partners leads to the development of trust based on personal relationships and mutual understanding. Community needs and resources are fully integrated with the firm's decision-making processes.

An example of transformational engagement is Shell's 'strategic institutional relationship' with Living Earth, an environmental education and community development NGO. The two parties had formally been in partnership for 16 years, before deliberately reframing their relationship so as to allow more transformational outcomes. Shell recognized that this involved shifting their people's thinking and culture 'from viewing an organization in a traditional contractual arrangement, to formulating an equal and enduring partnership' ([www.shell.com](http://www.shell.com)). As Roger Hammond, Living Earth Foundation's development director put it, 'with Shell we are working with a company that is willing to share risks and work with us to build solutions in real-life situations. We are not dealing with public relation (PR) platitudes but are engaged in work that neither entity could achieve on its own. This is what we call a partnership'.

The intermediate, transitional engagement strategy is characterized by two-way communication, consultation and collaboration. This strategy is 'transitional' in the sense that firms move beyond the one-way communication of transactional approaches to engage in dialogue with communities, but do not yet reach the shared sensemaking and problem framing of transformational approaches. Similarly,

resources within transitional partnerships are seen as more than one-off transactional donations as they are shared within the collaboration, but control of the resources in these interactions remains with the firm rather than being fully shared with the community.

Many examples of transitional engagement strategies can be found in project planning processes. Epcor Utilities Inc., for example, used surveys and Community Advisory Task Groups (CAT-Gs) to consult on the future of the Rosedale power plant after it was decommissioned. Advantages of this transitional approach included reconciling conflicting community demands and maintaining a fragile community trust (Bansal and Ewart, 2007a, b). Epcor subsequently used this CAT-G approach at other facilities, including for the proposed introduction of Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technology at its existing Genesee power plant. Senior managers at the company commented that they believe that the Genesee project was selected by the province of Alberta to be one of three receiving significant public funding to develop CCS because of the company's consistent strategy of two-way, repeated interactions with community stakeholders and the firm's learning about local residents' mental models.

Some forms of collaboration and partnership are intended to be transformational, but end up being transitional in their implementation (Googins and Rochlin, 2000). Indeed, distinguishing between transformational and merely symbolic or transitional forms of engagement is a significant research challenge as researchers get beneath the surface of community partnerships to identify the extent to which authentic learning, leadership and empowerment have occurred within the process (Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Payne and Gallon, 2004).

Our analysis suggests that at least three criteria might be used in distinguishing transitional from transformational engagement. First, transformational engagement is only realistic with very few partners due to the intense organisational effort required by both parties. Engaging with many community partners may indicate that the process is more transitional than transformational. Second, the nature of trust differs between transitional and transformational approaches. Trust in transformational engagement is based on affect and personal relationships, whereas trust in transitional engagement is cognitive and evolves based on repeated interactions

between the parties (Chua et al., 2008). Thus, trust in transitional engagement is more fragile as either party may be managing interactions based on a tit-for-tat or similar strategy [see Axelrod (1984) for a fuller explanation of the evolution of cooperation]. Third, transformational engagement has the possibility of not only symmetrical, independent benefits to firms and communities from engagement, but also of conjoined benefits accruing to both parties. This key difference between transitional and transformational approaches will be discussed further below.

As Table VI shows the most studied form of engagement is transactional, followed by transitional and then transformational engagement. Despite the potential for learning and community empowerment inherent in the most proactive forms of engagement, most of the sources address one-way communication (26 sources), and two-way dialogue and consultation (38). Distinguishing between ‘collaboration and partnership’ and truly transformational engagement

was often difficult, reflecting the challenge of recognizing deep as opposed to superficial or symbolic firm strategies (Bowen and Dillabough, 2009).

We expected that the relatively low number of studies on transformational engagement was due to academic knowledge lagging practitioner experience over time. Conventional wisdom suggests that community engagement is evolving from managing responses to particular issues, to co-creating solutions to social challenges. We expected that the knowledge on transformational engagement had a later start than the earlier interest in transactional and transitional approaches, and that the lower count of transformational sources merely reflected this late start. Table VII suggests that this is not the case. Indeed, of the 11 sources with identifiable engagement strategies published before 1997, 10 papers deal with the more proactive forms of engagement. Early conceptual (e.g. Hood et al., 1993; Logsdon and Yuthas, 1997; Waddock, 1991) and case-based (e.g. Westley and Vredenburg, 1991, 1997) academic studies addressed deep engagement with community groups and individuals. However, by the 2003–2007 time period, studies of transformational engagement are far outweighed by transactional approaches. This may reflect a shift in the academic literature over time as conceptual calls-to-arms on engaging community in corporate decisions have gradually been surpassed by empirical studies focusing on the easiest forms of engagement to identify in practice and to measure. The availability of data might be the easiest explanation of the counterintuitive shift of knowledge generation efforts from transformational towards transactional engagement over time. As noted above, many of the latest empirical papers are large-scale surveys of the most easily quantifiable forms of community engagement (philanthropy, employee volunteering and training provision). Thus, this distribution of sources over time does not necessarily mean that interest in transformational approaches is waning, merely that it is more difficult to access, interpret and publish transformational engagement studies.

TABLE VI

Types of engagement behaviours addressed in the sources

	Number of sources
Transactional engagement	
One-way communication	26
Philanthropy	16
Community capacity building and training	12
Volunteering	5
Gathering input	4
Total	63
Transitional engagement	
Dialogue and consultation	38
Collaboration and partnership	22
Total	60
Transformational engagement	
Joint problem-solving	17
Joint management and projects	8
Joint decision-making	7
Learning and joint sense-making	4
Total	36

*Note:* Not all sources could be identified as addressing single engagement behaviours. Some were allocated to more than one category. Others explicitly addressed a range of engagement behaviours as outlined in the community engagement continuum above.

#### *The antecedents of community engagement strategy*

In order to distil which strategies are most appropriate in which situation, and their likely benefits,

TABLE VII  
Type of engagement knowledge sources over time

Time period	Transactional engagement	Transitional engagement	Transformational engagement	Total
Pre 1992	0	1	2	3
	0%	33%	67%	100%
1993–1997	1	4	3	8
	12%	50%	38%	100%
1998–2002	15	20	8	43
	35%	47%	18%	100%
2003–2007	47	35	23	105
	45%	33%	22%	100%
Total	63	60	36	159
	39%	38%	23%	100%

we coded all the sources for the antecedents and outcomes of community engagement strategy. Figure 3 shows three primary sets of interrelated antecedents to community engagement: national, community and organizational context.

The national institutional context includes factors like regulations (Albareda et al., 2007; Boxelaar et al., 2006), and the structure of social and political organization (McCaffrey et al., 1995) within a given national culture (Veser, 2004). Public policy might influence not only the process of community engagement (Boxelaar et al., 2006), but also identify substantive priority areas for including community concerns in organizational processes (Blake, 2007).

The institutional context interacts with the community context. For example, some institutional environments are more or less conducive to advanced community preparedness to engage in dialogue (Barr and Hashagan, 2000). Other relevant community context factors include the structure of community groups (Abzug and Webb, 1999), host community expectations (Eltham et al., 2008; Gabriel, 2006) and constituents' stances and attitudes (Harvey and Schaefer, 2001; Hays, 2007). Of particular importance here is the possibility of varying attitudes among communities towards engaging with corporations (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007), and the extent to which communities' priorities are similar (Wolfe and Putler, 2002) or divergent (Hardy et al., 2006; Vilanova, 2007). Recognizing the interdependence and interactions between

community groups may be a significant challenge in designing appropriate engagement processes (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007; Neville and Menguc, 2006).

The shared identity of community actors (Fiol and O'Connor, 2002), resources available to the community (Williams, 2003), the structure of community groups (Abzug and Webb, 1999) and the nature of the social issue being addressed (McCaffrey et al., 1995) also impact the nature and success of community engagement strategy.

The organizational context is itself located within the institutional environment, and may be framed by previous interactions with community (Barnett, 2007). Community engagement strategies are intended to fit with a firm's strategic position (Knox and Gruar, 2007), and be consonant with an organization's identity (Fukukawa et al., 2007).

More strategic approaches emphasize fit with a firm's resources (Buchholtz et al., 1999; Wagenet and Pfeffer, 2007), capabilities (Schouten and Remm, 2006), organizational structure (Brammer and Millington, 2003) and budgeting and strategic planning processes (O'Donnell, 2002). Other typical organizational characteristics addressed within the community engagement literature, and often included as control variables, include organizational performance, age and size (Shropshire and Hillman, 2007; Wicks and Berman, 2004).

In Figure 3, the institutional, organizational and community context are moderated by managerial

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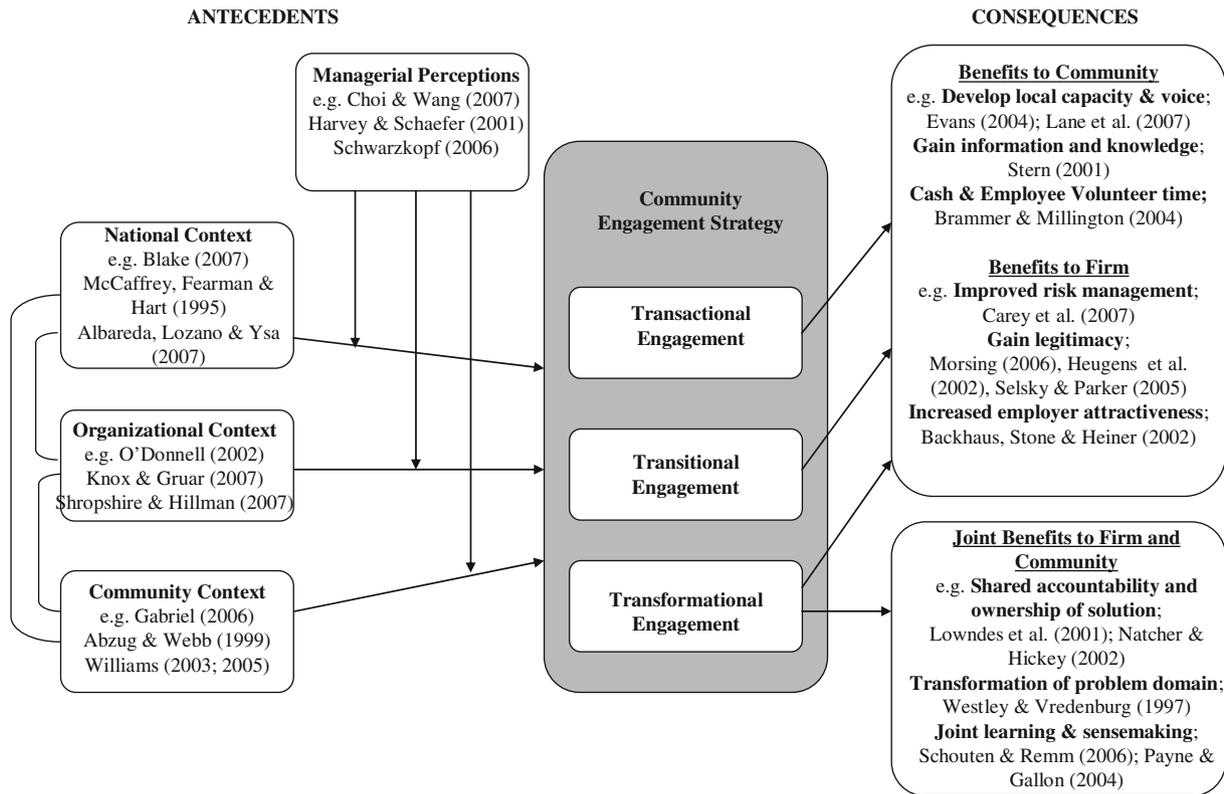


Figure 3. The antecedents and consequences of community engagement strategies.

perceptions on community engagement. While this is not often made explicit in the literature, we argue that managerial perceptions form an important filter through which signals from the broader context are received. For example, Fiol and O'Connor (2002) argues for the importance of understanding the filters of 'hot' emotional and 'cold' cognitive managerial interpretations in processes of community engagement. Managerial intuition (Harvey and Schaefer, 2001) and values (Choi and Wang, 2007; Voss et al., 2000) can make some managers connect emotionally with engagement. Managerial cognition reflecting experience, aspirations and risk perception can also impact engagement behaviours (Lowndes et al., 2001; Schwarzkopf, 2006; Shropshire and Hillman, 2007). The extent to which managerial perceptions moderate the other antecedents of community engagement depends on the extent to which managers have discretion to act on corporate social strategy (Bowen, 2007; Buchholtz et al., 1999).

### *The outcomes of community engagement strategy*

Our coding suggested three main categories of consequences of community engagement: benefits accruing primarily to the community, benefits accruing to the firm and benefits shared jointly by both the firm and community. Our analysis suggests that transactional and transitional approaches to community engagement lead only to separate benefits to each side of the transaction. Transformational approaches, however, can lead to shared or conjoint benefits.

The primary intended benefit to community of engagement strategy is substantive social improvement. The nature of this improvement varied widely according to the substantive focus of the knowledge sources, including provision of housing (Kolleeny, 2006), improved public health (Ray and Hatcher, 2000), ecosystem management (Muhweezi et al., 2007) or emergency relief (Fernando, 2007). Specific

transactional forms of engagement can lead to communities gaining information and knowledge through training (Stern, 2001), professional or technical upgrading (Jones, 2001) or developing local capacity (Evans, 2004). However, not all consequences for the community are necessarily positive, as it can be difficult to ensure that transactional benefits are sustainable (Jones, 2001), and there is a danger of developing dependency on the firm for resources (L'Etang, 1995).

The primary benefit to the firm of community engagement is the development and enhancement of societal legitimacy (Heugens et al., 2002; Morsing, 2006; Wei-Skillern, 2004). Engagement allows firms to demonstrate social responsibility (Wood, 2002), and awareness of community impacts and issues (Myers, 2007). Several authors argue that increased legitimacy can lead to improved credibility and trust with stakeholders (Choi and Wang, 2007), and ultimately to enhanced employer attractiveness (Backhaus et al., 2002). In addition to legitimacy-based benefits, firms might gain competitiveness benefits, such as improved risk management (Carey et al., 2007), more effective promotion of their services to the community (Atakan and Eker, 2007; Buys and Bursnall, 2007; Manson, 2007) or innovation (Lowndes et al., 2001).

More proactive forms of engagement might yield learning benefits to firms through a more reflective practice of corporate citizenship (Payne and Gallon, 2004), and the institutionalization of social concerns in the firm (Bindu and Salk, 2006; Epstein and Roy, 2001; Litz, 1996). The very act of gathering data and reporting on the engagement so as to learn from it improves employee awareness of community and social issues (Wei-Skillern, 2004).

A consistent feature in the knowledge on transformational engagement is the possibility of not only symmetrical, independent benefits to firms and communities from engagement as described above, but also of conjoined benefits accruing to both parties. Both firms and communities benefit from the richer community-business exchanges developed through a transformational approach (Balmer et al., 2007; Fernando, 2007; Fukukawa et al., 2007; Okubo and Weidman, 2000; Payne and Gallon, 2004). Similarly, transformational approaches can lead to mutual understanding and agreement about firms' responsibilities

in addressing social problems (Alberic and Van Lie-rop, 2006; Unerman and Bennett, 2004), and even to the transformation of the problem domain itself (Westley and Vredenburg, 1997).

The most powerful outcomes from a transformational engagement process may be a shared ownership of the problem and a shared vision of solutions (Lowndes et al., 2001; Morrison-Saunders, 2007). If communities are sufficiently involved in the goal-setting and measurement processes, shared accountability for the engagement process may also be achieved (Barnett, 2002; Natcher and Hickey, 2002; Rasche and Esser, 2006).

## Discussion and implications

Our systematic review overcomes three problems with our current knowledge on community engagement strategy: we spanned disciplinary boundaries; focused on community engagement actions and included all engagement strategies. First, by spanning disciplinary boundaries we have shown that while the 'continuum of community engagement' is robust across disciplinary boundaries, the definition of 'community' (whether individual citizen-based or a community group) varies systematically across disciplines. A major research opportunity in this domain is for strategy researchers to move beyond a group-based to an individual citizen-based notion of community. We found a notable distinction between studies that focused on strategies to engage individual citizens and those that addressed groups of citizens organized to represent a community's shared interests (Crane et al., 2004). We find that the former conceptualization is more prevalent in the public policy literature, while the latter is more popular in the strategy literature. While firms may receive strategic benefits from engaging with specific groups or community leaders (Rondinelli and London, 2003), a group-based approach runs the risk of excluding community members who may later have a strategic impact on the firm (Hall and Vredenburg, 2005). Our more comprehensive review reveals the potential for strategy researchers to learn from the extensive public policy literature on participatory citizen engagement.

Second, focusing on community engagement actions has helped us unpack symbolic and substantive community engagement strategy (Bowen and Dillabough, 2009; Googins and Rochlin, 2000). A specific problem in this literature is on distinguishing between transitional and transformational engagement strategies. These are both often labelled as ‘collaboration’ or ‘partnership’, but there are substantive differences in the processes employed, and in the nature of benefits expected from, the two strategies. This is a particularly important challenge given the tendency for firms to try to package transitional engagement strategies as truly transformational. Our analysis provides some diagnostic tools for differentiating between these strategies: the number of viable partners and nature of trust is different. Only transformational engagement can give rise to joint benefits both to firms and communities rather than merely symmetrical ones. We would encourage others to build on this distinction between symbolic and substantive strategies. This will require researchers to get beneath the surface of community partnerships to identify the extent to which authentic learning, leadership and empowerment have occurred (Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Payne and Gallon, 2004).

Third, including all engagement strategies serves as a reminder of the variety of firm tactics in managing the interface with communities. We highlighted the striking similarity in across a wide variety of corporate behaviours and disciplinary perspectives in the ‘continuum of community engagement’. Of interest here are the strategies that do not appear in the mainstream continuum. The continuum in Figure 2 is framed in terms of positive community engagement. However, we found several studies that examined more negative forms of engagement such as retaliation (Collins, 1989), neglect (Kolk and Pinkse, 2006), monitoring (Altria Inc., 2004) or buffering (Hooghiemstra, 2000). Given well-publicized episodes of negative interactions with communities in practice, it is surprising that there is so little research on these negative engagements.

#### *When and how community engagement strategy provides benefits*

An ideal-type explanatory knowledge synthesis would have been able to identify the precise causal

mechanisms leading from specific antecedents and strategies to the likelihood of achieving particular benefits (Rousseau et al., 2008). Unfortunately, as mentioned above our current knowledge on community engagement strategy is not sufficiently developed, systematic or sophisticated to achieve these precise linkages. Our answer to when and how community engagement strategy provides net benefits remains rather general. A central paradox of this literature is that while there is a very large number of suggestions as to what organizations should do, there is very little empirical evidence of what works and when. However, there are a few key lessons for our understanding of successful community engagement strategy to be drawn from our knowledge synthesis.

First, the payoffs from engagement, particularly of the transactional and transitional types, are largely in the form of enhanced firm legitimacy. As Mattingly’s (2004) empirical analysis shows, community engagement has little direct, short-term effect on financial performance, but has a positive effect on social performance. Second, value is more likely to be created through engagement which is relational rather than transactional since purely transactional interactions can be duplicated and thus offer little potential for gaining competitive advantage (Hillman and Keim, 2001). A corollary of this is that firms that breed trust-based co-operative ties with communities may gain a competitive advantage over those that do not (Choi and Wang, 2007; Heugens et al., 2002). Third, firms that desire the outcomes of shared ownership to problems and solutions, shared accountability and richer relationships must follow a transformational approach to engagement. These outcomes are unlikely to be achieved through transactional or symbolic approaches. Finally, successful community engagement strategy involves fit between the engagement context and process in order to achieve the best outcomes for both the firm and the community.

#### *Implications for future research*

The primary implication of our systematic review of the knowledge on community engagement is a call to arms for academic researchers to be far more specific in their treatment of this broad issue. It is difficult to draw conclusions on successful community

engagement strategy from a knowledge base that includes divergent definitions of community (whether individual or group-based), and a wide range of engagement strategies (ranging from transactional to transformational approaches). While we were able to discern groups of antecedents (institutional, organizational, community and managerial contexts) and consequences (for the firm, for the community, for both) of community engagement, the precise causal mechanisms linking contexts to engagement processes to success is still unclear.

Our review implies several further extensions to academic research. First, we should renew efforts to measure the costs and benefits of community engagement strategies. Most of the studies that have attempted this so far have studied transactional engagement in large-scale surveys. However, it is important for us to know whether and how the other forms of engagement yield net benefits. We would encourage rigorous case-based studies getting beneath the symbolic surface of engagement activities to evaluate the costs and benefits to these approaches.

Second, the dominant perspective in our review was on firms' responsibilities to society. There has been very little discussion of communities' responsibilities to firms and to other stakeholders (cf. Goodstein and Wicks, 2007). This is an area ripe for future study, especially given the current government rhetoric in countries such as the UK and Australia on the potential of community empowerment. While communities may gain new rights through these public policy changes, they will also incur expanded responsibilities.

Third, our analysis suggests that the primary benefit to firms from engaging with community is in terms of indirect enhanced legitimacy and reputation management rather than direct competitiveness benefits. One implication of this is that there may not be an obvious short-term, net financial benefit to the firm from an engagement process. Transitional and transformational engagement may in practice cost money which is not easily recouped in the form of competitive advantage. Further research is required on whether community engagement is merely a costly threshold capability required for legitimate entry into communities, or whether firms can gain competitive advantage from these activities.

Fourth, future research should address more critically the recent emergence of online engage-

ment strategies such as corporate websites, blogs and twitter. Some firms are replacing portions of their traditional marketing budgets with these activities that are intended to build relationships with actual and potential consumers. These modes of engagement would have been included in our systematic review: our definition of 'community' would have included online communities as groups of people drawn together online by shared identity or interaction. However, there is currently relatively little empirical evidence on the effectiveness and appropriateness of online interaction, especially when the interaction is intended to lead to social benefit. These online forms of engagement are often positioned as allowing a transitional approach based on on-demand interaction, two-way communication and relationship building. In practice, however, it is not clear how interactive these intended transitional engagement strategies are, and to what extent they address the social wellbeing of communities. Further research is required on whether the transitional potential of online community engagement is being realised, or whether blogs and twitter feeds are just contemporary channels for enhancing traditional methods of transactional engagement.

#### *Implications for practitioners*

The evidence we collated suggests that corporate engagement stances vary from 'giving back', through 'building bridges', to 'changing society'. We labelled these three main approaches to community engagement: transactional, transitional and transformational. We find that the most studied form of engagement is transactional, followed by transitional and then transformational engagement. Despite the potential for learning and community empowerment inherent in the most involved forms of engagement, most of the sources address one-way communication and limited two-way dialogue and consultation.

We suspect that transformational engagement strategies are very rare in practice, and rightly so. Transformational engagement strategies are both intensive and sensitive. Common pitfalls include attempting to cultivate too many transformational partnerships (which could lead to overload in the community engagement team), or talking a 'changing society' talk while only pushing out

one-way corporate communications (which might lead to justifiable community frustration).

Much of the rhetoric surrounding ‘collaboration’ and ‘partnership’ with community is enacted with more of a transitional nature. Crucially, this is not necessarily a strategic problem if it is done transparently. Epcor’s Community Advisory Task Groups, for example, have been sufficiently successful for the Alberta provincial government to select the Genesee power plant as a highly subsidised test facility for CCS technology confident in the knowledge that the project will likely pass the public acceptability test. The necessary public trust has so far been carefully cultivated through a transitional engagement strategy. A key lesson here is on transparency about the objectives and extent of engagement. While managers are often encouraged to strive to ‘change society’ through transformational engagement, our review shows that ‘giving back’ through providing information, donating dollars, time or employee skills can be a successful strategy to gain and maintain firm legitimacy.

## Conclusion

Understanding a firm’s interface with the community has become a familiar strategic concern for both firms and non-profit organizations. Our review of over 200 sources has shown that it is also an increasingly studied phenomenon across the strategy, human resources, public policy and community development literatures. The commonalities across these disciplines, both in terms of the strategies identified across the community engagement continuum and the antecedents and consequences of engagement, suggest that it is time for more systematic and rigorous empirical study of engagement, particularly the more proactive forms. The differences suggest future research avenues, especially the potential for strategy scholars to go beyond studying dyadic interactions with specific community groups to considering the strategic potential of individual citizen engagement in social strategies.

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