The value of sharing data to build trust

A case study in the agriculture sector

This case study is part of a project exploring the value of sharing data in the private sector. When sharing data, businesses face a range of challenges. A significant barrier is a lack of evidence showing how increasing access to data can create business value, for example, by enabling new business models, increasing efficiency or reducing costs.

To help address this, we have been documenting real-world examples of how the private sector is creating value from increasing access to data.

In this case study we look at how the global agriculture business Syngenta publishes open data to help evidence its commitment to being a more trustworthy organisation in the agriculture sector.

Key findings

1. Businesses are increasingly sharing data as a means of demonstrating that they are operating in a trustworthy way.

2. Although data sharing with regulators and the government is commonplace for businesses in regulated industries, making data available openly to potential consumers and partners is helping organisations build trust across the wider ecosystem.

3. Publishing open data on sustainability commitments is a key aspect of Syngenta's open approach to business. Syngenta publishes a range of datasets on its progress towards sustainability goals and also shares wider research data to promote transparency and trustworthiness.

4. Promoting an open and transparent approach has provided reputational benefits and a competitive advantage for Syngenta. It has helped Syngenta's employees better understand the company's data; helped Syngenta build connections in adjacent sectors; and aided better engagement with supply-chain partners.

5. Syngenta promoting an open and trustworthy brand is helping others in the sector to share data, providing a virtuous cycle of increased understanding of biochemical research, and improved economic and environmental outcomes.

Sharing data to build trust

Becoming a recognised, trusted brand is a large part of every retail sales strategy. Businesses aim to accomplish this in a variety of ways.

Labelling and certifying products with trustmarks to indicate that they are locally or ethically sourced is one method of showing consumers how the organisation is sourcing its products. Corporate social responsibility programmes, transparency initiatives, and principled approaches to sales, marketing and partnerships are also part of a range of approaches that businesses are using to build their brand and increase the trust of consumers.

However, businesses are increasingly sharing data as a means of demonstrating that they are acting in a trustworthy way.[1] This includes sharing data about any or all of the following:

- **Team diversity, pay scales and hiring practices**, to evidence how an organisation is recruiting and rewarding it staff,
- **Charitable giving**, to evidence how the business is providing value back to its community, consumers or worthy causes,
- **Product information**, to describe the ingredients, provenance and safety of products that will help consumers and partners make more informed decisions about the companies' products,
- **Data sharing agreements**, to provide evidence of how the organisation is delivering on commitments to protect privacy and use data in ethical ways, and
- **Social, economic and environmental impacts** of its activities, to allow others to hold the business to account.

Organisations are increasingly collecting data not just about their direct business activities, but also their workforce, customers and environment. Reducing unnecessary data collection, and ensuring that data is used and shared in ethical ways, is already fundamental to building a trusted business. Sharing data in ways that protect privacy and deliver value back to consumers, citizens and society is also becoming increasingly important.

In the following case study we explore how Syngenta has been publishing open data to provide evidence of its progress towards building a more sustainable agricultural sector.

How Syngenta is sharing data to build trust

In 2013, Syngenta adopted the Good Growth Plan, a list of six commitments to improve global agricultural sustainability by 2020.[2] The plan shapes company activities by committing them to "working with growers, governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and others to make a difference".[3]

To increase transparency around the GPP commitments, Syngenta committed to publishing openly licensed datasets to describe progress against each of the commitments: crop efficiency, soil fertility, enhanced biodiversity, smallholder empowerment, farmer safety, and fair

[1] OpenDataSoft (2019), 'How Organizations Capitalize on Data Sharing to Further CSR Goals' https://www.opendatasoft.com/blog/how-organizations-capitalize-on-data-sharing-to-further-csr-goals

[2] Syngenta (2019). 'The Good Growth Plan', https://www.syngenta.com/what-we-do/the-good-growth-plan

[3] ibid

labour conditions. Over the last six years, Syngenta has published annual updates for each of these datasets.

To provide additional external assurance, Syngenta asked professional services firm PwC to review the process of data collection and analysis. It also asked the Open Data Institute (ODI) to independently verify and review its approach to publishing data. Publishing open data, with independent verification of the quality of data and publication, demonstrates a commitment to transparency.

Beyond the Good Growth Plan, Syngenta has also explored publishing other openly licensed datasets. In 2016, it began openly publishing RNA-based biocontrols data, the first agrochemical company to do so.[4]

What are the benefits of sharing data openly for Syngenta

Syngenta has reported that publishing open data alongside the Good Growth Plan annual report has generated a great deal of additional interest in the data. While its intention was to build trust in the programme, there has been growing interest in using the data in other ways, for example to explore benchmarking efficiency across farms and regions.[5]

Taking an open approach has positioned Syngenta as pioneers within the often-closed agrochemical sector, meaning it has been well received by the wider community that often want greater access to agrochemical data.

The experience of publishing open data as part of the Good Growth Plan, as well as participating in the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN) network has provided the organisation with greater insight into the process of publishing and opening data.[6] This is a valuable benefit for an organisation working in an increasingly data-enabled sector.

External stakeholders are more willing to discuss open data, based on the Syngenta model, and it has become easier for Syngenta to approach other organisations working in the agriculture and nutrition sector to discuss more open sharing of data. For instance, Syngenta is partnering with The Kellogg Company to help create transparency of sustainable outcomes in the food supply chain.[7]

This openness has also been a positive force in building connections into adjacent sectors, helping Syngenta to achieve the challenges set out in the Good Growth Plan. As Syngenta's Open Publishing Lead, Graham Mullier, stated: "The rate of data generation is increasing. The granularity is getting finer and finer all the time. All of that gives us loads more data to work with and the chances of any one organisation being able to generate the data, host the data, analyse the data and come up with brilliant answers all on their own seems vanishingly small. We have to find ways of collaborating."[8]

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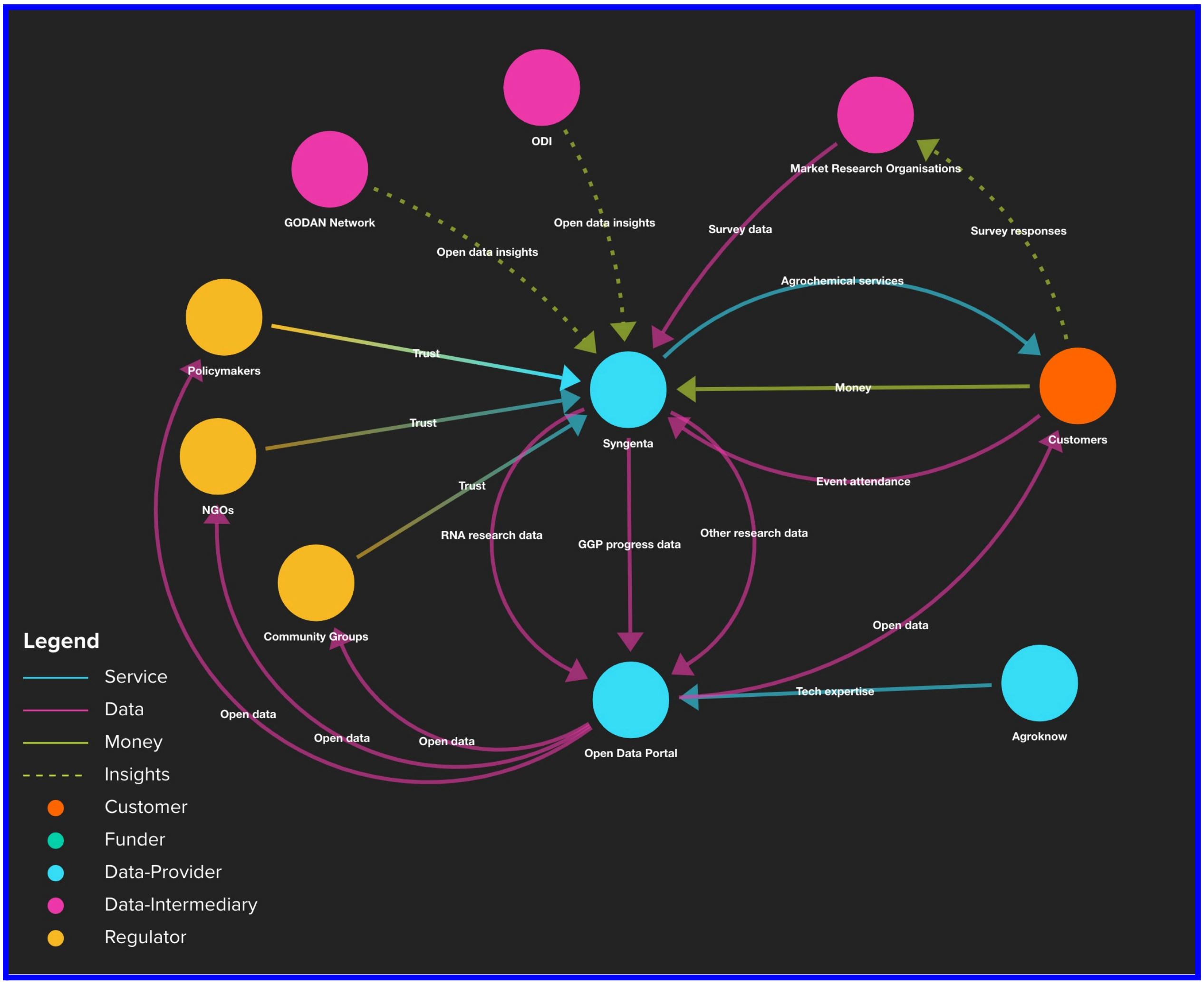
[4] Syngenta, "RNA Open Data", http://opendata.syngenta.agroknow.com/rna
[5] ODI, "Syngenta supports sustainability with open data" (2018), https://theodi.org/project/syngenta-supports-sustainability-with-open-data/
[6] https://www.godan.info/
[7] Kellogg Company, Supporting Farmers Critical to Addressing Hunger, Population Growth, http://crreport.kelloggcompany.com/WorkingWithFarmers
[8] ODI, "Syngenta supports sustainability with open data" (2018), https://theodi.org/project/syngenta-supports-sustainability-with-open-data/

In addition, publishing data in accordance with best practice has allowed Syngenta's employees across the world to have an increased understanding of the company's data. This has not only instilled a deeper appreciation for the work the company does within the organisation, but anecdotally it has also been a selling feature for acquiring talent. Syngenta's Chief Sustainability Officer, Dr Alexandra Brand, noted that at the time she was being headhunted for the role, her research into the company's open sharing of data under the Good Growth Plan demonstrated to her the seriousness of Syngenta's commitment.

The Syngenta data ecosystem



The Good Growth Plan ecosystem fosters trust towards Syngenta from farmers, other customers and the wider community of stakeholders.

Syngenta gathers data from farmers and other customers via financial transactions, as well as other activities such as delivering training to farmers on new technology and processes. In addition, it contracts external market-research organisations to carry out farm surveys in various countries. Syngenta is therefore able to collate data on its activities and customers in multiple ways.

Syngenta then publishes the Good Growth Plan datasets alongside other data on its open data portal. Agroknow, a technology provider in the agriculture and food sectors, provided the technical support to launch the portal. The ODI and GODAN provided data expertise and a global network respectively to support Syngenta's open approach.

Key stakeholders in Syngenta's ecosystem such as farmers, NGOs, policymakers and various community groups are able to openly access data on the Good Growth Plan and other data from Syngenta. This builds trust in the organisation which helps maintain relationships to continue to provide agricultural services to farmers.

How is data being published at Syngenta?

Syngenta publishes its annual releases of its Good Growth Plan datasets under a Creative Commons Attribution-Sharealike licence, allowing the data to be accessed, used and shared by anyone for any purpose so long as they also share any improvements to the data.

The datasets draw on Syngenta's operational sales data, metrics from its delivery of training and engagement programmes, and externally commissioned small-holder farm surveys across various countries where Syngenta operates.

Prior to each annual release, Syngenta reviews the data, and Syngenta asks the ODI and its auditors (PwC) to carry out an independent review of the results publication.

The release of data is intended primarily to build trust with Syngenta's farming partners, NGOs, researchers, community groups and policymakers, as well as building collaboration with other sectoral partners.

While the data was originally published to the main business website, Syngenta has now launched an open data portal to simplify the process of updating and releasing new data. The portal provides additional data visualisations to help a wider range of people to engage with the figures.

Further reading

This case study is part of a broader set of case studies looking at the value of sharing data in the private sector. Our research has identified a variety of ways in which sharing data can directly create business benefits for individual organisations as well as their network of partners, suppliers and customers.

We are developing tools to help private sector companies share data to unlock innovation and create value for their businesses. You can access these online, to help you plan and deliver your data strategy by filling out a form here.

The ODI also provides training, consultancy, and thought leadership to companies seeking to benefit from increasing access to data. If your organisation is looking to launch a data-sharing initiative or realise the value of data it holds through an open approach, contact us today to discuss how we can help.