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Reluctant to talk, reluctant to listen: Public relations professionals and their involvement in CSR programmes in Spain

Abstract: This article examines the type of contributions that public relations professionals make towards corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, while discussing the issues and obstacles they face to enter into that professional area. To do so, the authors have looked at the top publicly owned companies in Spain, which are part of the so-called Ixex 35. The research included semi-structured interviews with key players (28 interviews) and interpretative analysis of official documents and reports (33 documents). The overall research suggests that despite normative claims from CSR departments that downplay public relations contributions towards the implementation of CSR programmes, the empirical evidence suggests otherwise. This evidence shows important operational deficiencies and accountability deficits precisely because of the lack of public relations input in their design and implementation.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Public Relations, Professionalism, Spain, Communication

Highlights:

- Public relations professionals in Spain are rarely included in the conceptualisation, design and implementation of CSR programmes.
- The lack of considerations regarding professional communication in relation to CSR programmes create important gaps and shortcomings.
- Without spaces for dialogue, CSR programmes are just temporary palliatives.

1. Introduction

There has been some debate in relation as to who should manage and implement Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes (L'Etang, J.; Lugo-Ocando, J; Ahmed, Z, 2011, p. 170). In some cases these debates have centred in the incorporation and use of public relations professionals within the remit of CSR activities (Bartlett, J.; Tywoniak, S; Hatcher, C, 2007, p. 281). This because, communication is a key component of these programmes both in terms of using them to strengthen the reputation of the companies as well as the need to engage stakeholders and the general public in order to achieve its wider objectives. However, one of the most common experiences –at least in Spain– is that these same organisations have been reluctant to incorporate public relations professionals in the core design and implementation of their CSR programmes and only use tangentially their own public relations departments in order to promote disseminate final outcomes and achievements of CSR-related programmes.

This last happens despite the fact that important research indicate that origins, theories, processes, and primary responsibilities between public relations and CSR are similar (Clark, 2000). These scholarly comparisons have also highlighted a key difference whereby effective communication methods and professional communication approaches are largely absent from the social responsibility practice and literature. These same scholars have indicated the need to include such techniques in order to enhance the development and overall impact of managing corporate–stakeholder relationships (Clark, 2000, p. 363). This clearly suggests that a more active involvement of public relations in the realm of CSR could greatly benefit both areas not only by making more dynamic the overall public engagement of CSR with its audiences, stakeholders and general publics, but also by allowing public relations to link more actively with one of the key areas of the modern organisation.

This article examines the type of contributions that public relations professionals make towards CSR programmes, while discussing the issues and obstacles they face to enter into that professional area. To do so, the authors have looked at the top 35 publically owned companies in Spain, which are part of the so-called Ibex 35 quoted in the Madrid stock market (known as BME). The research included semi-structured interviews with key players (28 interviews) and interpretative analysis of official documents and reports (33 documents). The overall research indicates that despite normative claims from CSR departments that downplay public relations contributions towards the implementation of CSR programmes, there are nevertheless important gaps in terms of objective achievements and performance precisely because of the lack of engagement with public relations. Indeed, the empirical evidence shows important operational deficiencies and accountability deficits precisely because of the absence of public relations input in the design and implementation of CSR programmes.

Overall, we argue that social responsibility in business should be a real means for reaching the coveted and desired dialogue with the public. In so doing, we suggest that public relations can make an important contribution with regards to this aim by promoting dialogue and understanding with stakeholders, involving them in the design, formulation and implementation of CSR policy. The research was possible thanks to a grant from the Junta de Andalucía awarded through their Department of Science, Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Spain.

2. Literature Review

Research regarding public relations practitioners' contribution to CSR has identified broadly five roles for public relations in CSR: management, philanthropic, value-driven, communication, and no role at all. In these same studies, public relations professionals have expressed important limitations to their ability to contribute to CSR programs (Kim & Reber, 2008, p. 337), while highlighting the absence of public relations and communication in general from CSR policies and programmes (Clark, 2000, p. 364). Overall, managing relations with the public is postulated as the quintessential role of public relations (Harlow, 1976); (Seitel, 2002); (Grunig & Hunt, 2003) and therefore a necessary element for the proper development of CSR, allowing the organisation to relate to its stakeholders. Hence, one can expect public relations to be part of the criteria design of CSR policy (Oliveira & Nader, 2006, p. 104) as relationship management with stakeholders is at the heart of CSR as functions of public relations (Wang & Chaudhri, 2009, p. 247).

In this context, the relationship between corporate social responsibility and public relations has been defined by the work of authors such as L'Etang (2006) (2009), González (2006), Capriotti and Moreno (2007), Signitzer and Prexl (2008), Kim and Reber (2008), Castillo-Esparcia (2009), Miguez (2011), Raupp (2011) and Ruiz-Mora (2012), among others. Other authors who have explored the importance of public relations in relation to CSR include Black (2011), Cutlip, Center and Broom (2001) and Seitel (2002). There is a broad consensus among these authors that there is an important link between CSR and public relations and that within this link there is the need for public relations to inform part of the work of CSR as its outcomes concern both the general public and stakeholders.

Indeed, most definitions of CSR refer to the relationship with the public. These definitions understand it as 'the voluntary integration by companies of social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders' (European Commission, 2001, p. 7). As Grunig and Hunt pointed out, accountability to the public is a capital premise of public relations (2003, p. 106). Others such as Daugherty have

underlined that public relations is the practice of social responsibility (2011, pp. 390-392). Moreover, CSR theories tend to focus their attention on the stakeholders while alluding to the need to manage public relations within organisations. To be sure, as Capriotti and Moreno have highlighted, ‘the communication function is at the heart of CSR and corporate citizenship’ (2007, p. 85). Indeed, theories of CSR generally require the integration of the management of relationships with stakeholders; these theories include the Theory of Stakeholders (Freeman, 1984), the Theory of the Pyramid of CSR (Carroll, 1991), the Theory of Legitimization (Lindblom, 1994) and the ethical approach and its relation to CSR (Cortina, 1994). These theories point out at a Weberian type that ideally should define the incorporation of public relations in the remit of CSR design, formulation, implementation and evaluation.

There is, nevertheless, an important gap between what these ideal types represent and the practice in general. Recent studies in Spain indicate, for example, that public relations practitioners are largely absent from the CSR area. They indicate that only 11% of the professionals working in CSR in that country have a ‘communications’ background (Argandoña, A., Fontrodona, J., Ramón, J. & García, P., 2008, p. 3), while other research in the field have shown that that the great majority of those in charge of CSR in Spanish companies have degree in business followed by those who studied environmental science or related fields (DIRSE, 2014, p. 13). Therefore, the key question is how to explain the absence of public relations in CSR in the case of Spanish companies and examine the implications it has in the boarder context of professional practice.

3. Material and methods

Our research included research strategies such as questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were anonymised in order to protect the identity of the subjects and allowed them a greater degree of freedom to respond. These results were triangulated with data drawn from interpretative analysis of reports of companies under study. The research focused on Spanish companies listed in the Spanish stock market index IBEX 35® in 2012, this because these are the largest Spanish companies in that country, presumably leading CSR programmes in terms of allocation of resources. The questionnaire was distributed among the professionals responsible for defining the CSR policies of the companies in our study. The survey was grouped into three sections; general data, team and CSR department. This was done in order to understand how departments or areas responsible for CSR are structured.

Interpretative analysis was applied to social responsibility reports of the companies listed on the IBEX35®. We analysed the 2010 CSR reports, which were the ones available at the time of our research. To carry out this analysis, we designed a data collection tool ad hoc that facilitated the collection of data, its systematisation and subsequent comparative analysis. We designed an instrument that allowed us to perform an interpretative and contextualise analysis of each CSR annual report. The categorisation of the data analysis was as follows: General information (basic information, CSR, important issues); Stakeholders (dialogue, categorization, CSR policies); Social Responsibility (corporate governance and other information about CSR); Transparency; Regulatory support (CSR); and, Public Relations (PR issues identified).

4. Results and findings

100% of the people in charge of CSR in these companies had a university degree, 38% of which had a Masters and 6% had or were undertaking a PhD. Most of their backgrounds were

mainly in economics and finance, environmental science and management. Indeed, one of the key findings of our fieldwork is the fact that while an important part of the activities of CSR managers is closely related to public relations, they largely lack professional training in any area related to professional communications. From 28 companies, only one department had a person with a communications background in charge of CSR. But even in this case, the background was not in public relations but rather in journalism.

Despite the fact that the link between CSR departments and communications departments is strategic in terms of the relations with stakeholders and the public, most of the interviewees considered public relations 'irrelevant' to CSR programmes, although they did acknowledge the use of the communication departments when they had to disseminate aspects of the CSR programme among the media outlets and the public in general. In fact, 64% of the people in charge of CSR programmes do not consider necessary the incorporation of public relations professionals. The broad consensus among CSR departments is that the participation of public relations professionals is not only redundant, as these companies already have communication departments, but also is not pertinent as CSR require specialised technical knowledge that goes above and beyond 'what public relations professionals can offer'. One of the interviewees went to say that he 'would hire any professional except a public relations professional'. Only 36% think that they should be included in particular programmes but circumscribed to specific tasks related to communications and dissemination of information among stakeholders.

Another important finding from the questionnaire and interviews is the fact that CSR departments do perform a great deal of activities and tasks often associated with public relations. For example, 21% of those in charge of CSR programmes have as their main responsibility the communication with stakeholders, followed by 18% whose main task is to deal with the company's reputation, both of them activities closely related to public relations. More striking, perhaps, is the fact that 64% of those surveyed consider that communication is a crucial part of CSR while 46% see their relation with communication departments as 'strategic'.

However, most of the CSR managers do not recognise that these tasks require professional communication and see themselves as capable of carrying them out despite lacking specialisation in this area. In other words, CSR departments do recognise the need of professional communication but not as an intrinsic part of their own departments or activities. Indeed, the overall study also revealed what skills are mostly valued for those aspiring to become a CSR managers. While a public relations profile is not the most desirable, neither can we say that there is one per se. Indeed, the wide consensus among CSR departments is that its manager must have a heterogeneous view with a 'humanist vision' of the organisation. The manager must be already in a senior management position and be able to understand the company and its strategy.

4.1. What the reports say

Analysing discursively CSR reports from the companies studied here, we can suggest that they also recognise the importance of communication, while highlighting the different strategies that are undertaken by the company to both disseminate what is happening in relation to CSR and strengthen the reputation of the company. This, nevertheless, contrasts abysmally with what in fact happens in practice in terms of the incorporation of professional communication in those departments. Indeed, most CSR reports are directed primarily to specific shareholders as the main recipients. In this context, most the documents analysed in this study tend to identify their employees and everything

that has to do with them as a primary target of their actions, while environment, education and training are the second areas of focus in this listing.

It is also important to highlight the areas that are covered in these reports as priority subjects both in terms of internal publics as external ones. For example, 91% of the reports refer to health and safety, 88% research and development, 88% to political equality, 88% to work-family balance and 82% to integration and diversity. All of these areas with a clear need of professional communication intervention to address internal publics. Meanwhile and in relation to external publics, 76% of the reports highlight solidarity and cooperation with NGOs projects with other countries, 67% underlined actions related to poverty and social exclusion, 61% referred to corporate volunteering, 58% underlined culture, arts and sports and 38% included references to actions towards disaster relief.

More important is that these same reports made direct reference to specific activities associated with public relations. Indeed, 85% of them provided information about the tools of dialogue and participation that are used in the organisation. Moreover, 85% of these reports refer to risk management as one of their areas of competence, 76% refer to relationships with stakeholders, 61% to corporate image and reputation, 61% to internal communication management, 61% to communication channels and 52% to external communication management. CSR reports also claim as areas of competence 'responsible' marketing and advertising (33%).

From this data it is clear that there is an important gap between what the CSR reports say about their competences in terms of professional communication and what actually these departments incorporate as part of their organisational structures. While they normatively claim and recognise the importance of professional communication, this seems not to resonate in their daily practices. As corollary to this paradox between what is said and what is actually done is worth mentioning that 82% of companies submit their CSR reports outside the organisation. Despite this and the fact that the reports are such an important communication tool, the majority of them are elaborated by the CSR departments with little or no input from communication experts.

5. What is lost?

The next question to ask then is to what degree does this paradox matter in terms of delivering the desired outcomes and hindering the possible achievement of the organisation's goals. In other words, to what extent does the lack of professional communication affects the performance of CSR departments or limits their potential performance. Indeed, one of the greatest deficiencies that our studies shows among CSR departments in Spain is the fact that despite strategic considerations regarding the importance of opening dialogic spaces with their stakeholders these dialogues merely exists in practice. Indeed, only one of the people surveyed in CSR departments said that they had effectively consulted their internal publics while none of the 28 interviewees did so with the external ones. This says a great deal about how unidirectional CSR programmes are and how little involvement there is from the stakeholders they aim at reaching.

Indeed, when we talk about public relations it is important to understand that we are referring to dialogue and dialogic communication that builds relationships that serve both organisational and public interests (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 21). This implies that publics cannot be considered a subsidiary element of the relationship. Instead, they need to be acknowledged as a core element in achieving a real communication between organisation and its publics, where both parts have the same status. In this sense, Kent & Taylor listed the

principles of dialogue in public relations as mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment (2002, pp. 25-29). These are principles of any relationship between human beings and therefore should be core to any organisation attempt to establish a relationship with its stakeholders. This in spite of the fact that the concept of dialogue can be controversial and sometimes unclear (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012, p. 5) as not always organisations and publics are in the same level in the playfield (Pieczka, 2011, p. 117).

6. Conclusions

The overall findings suggest that public relations professionals are not considered to be 'fit for purpose' by those managing CSR programmes in the biggest companies in Spain. Neither do these managers see public relations as an essential part of their own activities, despite overwhelming evidence and numerous theoretical approaches that indicate the contrary. We believe that these views are in part the result of a complex set of circumstances which require further research.

To start with, and based in some of the subsequent conversations with CSR managers, there seems to be both a widespread unawareness regarding the professional status of modern public relations practice as well as a generalised perception of it as a 'mischievous' area that has a problematic reputation even within the organisation. Indeed, in follow-up conversations with CSR managers the consensus was that public relations practitioners had a very limited scope of competence and could deliver very little towards achieving CSR general goals.

This corresponds to other studies which seems also to indicate that the image of public relations professionals is under continual questioning and in some countries such as Mexico, is seen as a profession that is not taken 'too seriously' (Islas, 2005, p. 42). In response to this, Pieczka states that 'the constitution of public relations professional jurisdiction needs to be broad and extensive in terms of communication theories, applications, and practices in order to sustain the profession in times of change' (2011, p. 120).

The other cause for the dismissal of public relations is far more structural and is related to how CSR is conceptualised and viewed by those managing these programmes. This can be subdivided in two specific arguments, although closely intertwined. One that sees CSR as a social extension of the organisations' commitment towards the wider society and the other that conceives CSR as a highly technically and specialised sets of tasks, despite the recognition of the need for a 'humanistic' worldview from those managing these programmes.

Indeed, because CSR is seen by many of these managers as a 'social extension' of the companies' activities rather than embraced as a process of internal and external accountability towards its stakeholders and the public, the overall understanding is that is an activity in which communication is secondary to the core of the tasks, despite normative claims of the contrary. In this particular aspect, CSR can learn a great deal from other areas of professional communication such as science communication which after many years of struggle have finally managed to convince a great part of the scientific community to engage communication as a core element of research and innovation.

Indeed, just as it happened with science communication in its time (Bauer, M. W. and Bucchi, M. , 2007) (Dean, 2009) (Nisbet, 2009) CSR is seen by many of the organisations studied here as an activity that delivers 'technical' goods and which therefore needs to be designed by specialised professionals who have 'technical' skills and abilities, public relations practitioners not being one of them. It is precisely the second part of the argument that results the most challenging. To us, as researchers, the most problematic aspect of our

findings was the absence of consultation with both the public and, particularly worrying, the stakeholders.

It is in relation to this pivotal gap in which professional communication in general and public relations in particular can make the most important contribution of all. That is to open spaces of true dialogue that can inform the organisation's management in the process of formulation, design, implementation and evaluation of CSR programmes as to make them achieve their true goal. That is to become an instrument that enhances the companies transparency towards the world outside and makes it fit to face the old and new ethical challenges posed to them by a changing society.

Indeed, it is not the 'good deeds' that an organisation does –as seems to be the way in which CSR is understood by many of the organisations studied here- but its ability to ensure ethical and moral acceptance of its core operations by the wider publics, that will define at the end the success and failure of these programmes. This was certainly the lesson learnt by Nestlé in its dealings with Greenpeace over claims that it is continuing to source palm oil from Sinar Mas, the Indonesian company accused of illegal deforestation. It was a lesson that Nestlé had to learn the hard way (Khor, 2011) (Pye, 2009).

To avoid such tough experiences, as our findings indicate, CSR managers will need to learn to listen and consult public relations practitioners, despite all their reservations. More important, CSR managers will need to put their ear on the ground in a more humble manner and treat the general public and their own stakeholders as 'equals' in the articulation, design, implementation and evaluation of their own policies and programmes. Otherwise, CSR will be in danger of becoming another cosmetic palliative that will fade away as many other managerial fashions of the past.

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