

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) services: What are public relations agencies selling?

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Abstract

Different discourse communities have associated corporate social responsibility (CSR) with different meanings. Because of the lack of a universal definition, organizations could attach different labels to the concept to their own advantage. Public relations agencies are one type of consultancies which has packaged CSR as a service for which they offer advice for planning and implementation. Based on an analysis of the web sites of 22 public relations agencies in the United States, this study found that these agencies presented to be offering a variety of services for different purposes, some of which are related to their expertise in communication and some of which are not. They highlighted their expertise, experience and innovative approaches in their services but failed to fully make use of their specialty in public relations to assist their clients in making CSR-related decisions. Thus, based on the findings, this study has suggested several areas to which public relations agencies could be hired to best contribute to their corporate clients' CSR strategies, including understanding publics, segmenting publics and relationship building. By hiring agencies to help with CSR strategy formulation, corporations could benefit from a more effective allocation of resources to achieve desired outcomes.

Key Words: corporate social responsibility, CSR services, public relations agency

Introduction

Without a universal definition, the definition of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is subject to subjective presentation and interpretation. On the one hand, for the benefits of the corporations for whom they work, professional communication practitioners could associate it with different labels; as long as it falls within the boundaries of prevailing business and social norms, the definition will be deemed acceptable (Windell, 2007). On the other hand, corporations are criticized for not walking the talk as a result of which CSR is interpreted to be more about promotion rather than actions (Christensen, 2007). The criticism about the inconsistency between words and actions is especially prevalent when a corporation is in crisis. During the BP oil spill in the Gulf in 2010, BP's CSR campaign Beyond Petroleum was criticized for promoting the cult of corporate responsibility as if it were a socially deviant belief which was adhered to but failed to align corporate interests with social interests (Freeland, 2010). A corporation's own definition of its CSR practices would drive how it plans and implements its CSR efforts. But in light of this, how could the consultancies which sell CSR as one of their professional services assist them? To explore further, this study investigates how public relations agencies have promoted CSR as one of the services that they offer and analyzes the extent to which the services that they offer could contribute to the organizational effectiveness of their clients.

Problems in the concept of CSR

The concept of CSR has an underlying assumption that corporations have an indispensable responsibility to society. While the word corporate within CSR is clear, how a corporation goes about investing its limited resources into the different social groups within society and the extent to which the responsibility is carried out as a self-imposed compulsory responsibility points to the need of exploring how professional services offered

by external consultancies could contribute to a corporation's overall CSR strategies, i.e. how to prioritize resources to contribute to the desired outcomes of both the corporation as the giver and society as the recipient. Even though corporations have the freedom to attach meanings, and thus to determine actions, for CSR, they still have to operate within prevailing business and social norms and to consider their own interests at the same time. Thus, being strategic is about being selective in their CSR efforts to prioritize resources for the optimal CSR outcomes.

CSR does not have a definition which different discourse communities have agreed upon, but there are typologies to break down CSR into a hierarchy of pillars. In 1970, Friedman adopted a shareholder perspective to claim that the social responsibility of a business is to increase its profits (Friedman, 1970). This perspective prioritized business survival at the very top of the hierarchy of responsibilities. Carroll's (1979) pyramid also prioritized a corporation's economic responsibilities, i.e. the obligation to sell products and services at a profit, as the most important responsibility, followed by its legal responsibilities, i.e. complying with its legal obligations of abiding by the laws. The third prioritized responsibility is ethical responsibilities, defined as the ethical norms that society imposes on corporations, followed by discretionary responsibilities, defined as other responsibilities which are not required by laws or norms. Carroll's (1979) pyramid suggests that if a corporation cannot meet its economic responsibilities, it will not be able to meet other responsibilities. If a corporation cannot meet its economic and legal responsibilities, then ethical and discretionary responsibilities cannot be met either. Corporations are expected to respond to the interests of multiple stakeholder groups (Carroll, 1999). Yet, constrained by limited resources, corporations should develop their own definitions of CSR based on which they prioritize some responsibilities out of all social responsibilities.

What is expected of corporations is

emphasized in CSR; it is society which determines whether a corporation could be considered a corporate citizen to be given a license to operate (Maignan & Ferrell, 2001). Moreover, CSR has to be practiced within the confines of existing social norms. Hence, the social environment could be a major factor shaping and changing those norms. A country's political system, economic system and culture could make an impact on whether and how corporations meet their responsibilities and how these responsibilities would be perceived (Ang & Leong, 2000; Pan & Xu, 2009; Studer, Tsang, Welford, & Hill, 2008). In China, due to the lack of law enforcements, corporations are less likely to fulfill their legal responsibilities (Ang & Leong, 2000). Marten and Moon (2008) examined how and why CSR differs and changes in different countries and suggested that whether CSR is motivated by expectations from stakeholders or societal consensus and legitimate expectations could cause differences in how CSR is carried out and communicated. The rapidly changing social and business conditions could contribute to equally rapidly changing expectations in different circumstances, causing the criticism of an inconsistency between words and actions. The BP oil spill, as the largest oil spill in human history, has led to debates on CSR (Freeland, 2010).

Because of the importance of the social aspects of CSR, i.e. what is expected of corporations and how their actions are subsequently interpreted, in addition to Carroll's (1979) pyramid, there are other conceptualizations on how CSR activities are conceptualized. Dahlsrud (2008) proposed five dimensions of CSR activities. First, the economic dimension refers to the financial aspect of CSR for the operations of a business, similar to the economic responsibility in Carroll's pyramid. Second, the social dimension refers to the relationship which is established between businesses and society through CSR. Third, the environmental dimension is characterized by activities carried out for the natural environment. Forth, the stakeholder dimension is defined by the interactions corporations have with different stakeholder groups. Lastly, the voluntariness dimension refers to business actions which are not required by laws. The overlap between Carroll's pyramid and Dahlsrud's empirical findings portrays similarities between what is conceptualized and what is implemented – what is believed and prioritized determines what is implemented and how it is subsequently interpreted. In 2011, the European Commission has defined CSR as “the responsibility of enterprises of their impacts on society,” meaning that corporations must integrate these dimensions of responsibilities into their core business operations (“Corporate social responsibility,” 2011, para. 3).

Because society is the prioritized public to which corporations fulfill their responsibilities, corporations ought to consider the extent to which their understanding aligns with society's understanding. In a focus group study, individuals were asked to describe a socially responsible company (O'Connor, Shumate & Meister, 2008). Several valuable findings were made. First, participants identified profit making as the primary motive for engaging in CSR. However, CSR was not equivalent to profit making. Thus, the economic responsibility highlighted in Carroll's (1979) and Dahlsrud's (2008) conceptualizations would be ruled out as a CSR activity in these participants' perspectives. Second, corporations are socially responsible if they make responsible business decisions and are engaged in issues which affect the lives of other people. Third, philanthropic activities are not considered to be a CSR activity, which raises the question of whether philanthropic activities should be included in the category of discretionary responsibility in Carroll's pyramid and the voluntariness dimension in Dahlsrud's conceptu-

alizations. Lastly, participants believed that CSR should be a long-term strategy integrated into a corporation's core business practices.

If there is a misalignment between corporations' and the public's understanding of CSR, a discrepancy could be caused between what is implemented and what is interpreted. In this respect, Azer (2001) found that corporations preferred to invest in philanthropic activities because they are more manageable and are more likely to receive news coverage. Moreover, when business executives were asked to provide definitions for CSR, they failed to elaborate their perceptions in detail. Amidst the skepticisms of corporations' inherent nature of being profit-driven (e.g. McMillan, 2007; Waddock, 2007) and the impossible capability of meeting the needs of different stakeholder groups (e.g. Whelan, 2007), business executives' failure to explain CSR could lead to a misallocation of resources, causing a mismatch between investments and desired outcomes. In such situations, the goals of both the corporations and the public cannot be met. Therefore, the question remains: how should CSR be strategized to meet the goals of both the corporations and the public?

Public relations and CSR

The question of how it should be strategized requires a further investigation into the purposes for which CSR is conducted which will shed light on how professional services could be hired to do the how – the rationale behind why a corporation should be engaged in CSR and what it should do. To persuade a corporation into investing in CSR, the corporation needs to first know why. In Sweden, managers reported to have been involved in CSR for the purposes of increasing media coverage and gaining legitimacy by responding to social pressure from various stakeholder groups (Arvidsson, 2010). CSR was a necessary and a proactive approach to prevent legitimacy issues from arising. By responding to social demands, pressure from the groups could also be alleviated. In Lebanon and Syria, corporations considered CSR to be a strategic activity to promote financial objectives rather than an ethical initiative to bring corporations and society together (Dima, 2008). This indicated that these corporations perceived CSR to be beneficial for their self-interests.

An underlying problem with the major discrepancy between what is expected and what is implemented is that corporations and the public have different priorities in their perceptions of CSR. Yet, it is unrealistic and ineffective to advocate for corporations to be completely altruistic in giving up all their interests to accommodate the interests of the public. Therefore, professional practitioners could utilize their expertise to help corporations strategize CSR by aligning their interests with those of their publics. In connection with this, Podnar (2008) found that the public tended to be skeptical about the intentions behind which CSR is carried out. As a result, Benn, Todd and Pendleton (2010) suggested that public relations professionals be engaged in CSR to balance the interests between organizations and their stakeholders. When corporations and their publics both have access to the co-production of meanings in the CSR discourse (e.g. Morsing & Schultz, 2006), public relations services could be deemed helpful to complement CSR (e.g. Clark, 2000; Dhanesh, 2012; L'Etang, 1994).

When public relations is combined with CSR, CSR could be perceived as an act of hypocrisy as a result of the exploitative relationship created between corporations and the beneficiaries of their CSR activities (L'Etang, 1994). Such a perception is

often caused by the use of public relations solely for the purpose of positive publicity. For example, during BP's oil spill incident, Ogilvy, the agency for which BP hired for its Beyond Petroleum campaign, was criticized for presenting BP as leading the green revolution when BP is only concerned about making profits (Freeland, 2010). Benn, Todd and Pendleton (2010) also discussed how business leaders often see public relations as a source of positive publicity, and thus, are not taking advantage of the expertise of public relations professionals in the strategic planning of CSR. Similarly, in Vietnam, public relations only serves the function of content creation (Bilowol & Doan, 2015). In India, public relations did not play a leading role in CSR; its function was limited to media relations (Dhanesh, 2012). Thus, the complementary relationship between public relations and CSR was limited to the technical function of communication that public relations provided for CSR (Clark, 2000; L'Etang, 1994).

Whereas public relations' role in CSR is perceived to be limited to the technical aspect of communication, public relations could, in fact, better contribute to CSR as a strategic management function. In a public vote conducted by the Public Relations Society of America, public relations is defined as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." ("What is public relations?," 2011/2012, para. 4) According to Kim, Ni, and Sha (2008), corporations are constrained by limited resources, so public relations plays an integral role in segmenting publics to ensure that resources are effectively allocated to build relationships with prioritized publics. On the other hand, Ihlen (2008) argues that corporations should be engaged in an ongoing dialogue with society at large to keep abreast of changing social values, norms and expectations. Corporations prefer to adopt the stakeholder theory for CSR communication merely because stakeholder groups are easier to manage than the general public. Kim, Kim and Tam (2015), however, suggested the utility of publics segmentation in CSR, arguing that if immediate publics are not first attended to, corporations will not be perceived as being socially responsible. Likewise, Tam (2015) found that CSR-related news is the most likely to be picked up by the media if the news is about corporations' core business operations and products and services, which are the most relevant to corporations' most immediate publics.

One of the areas in which public relations and CSR are discussed concurrently is stakeholder engagement with multiple actors in society. Burchell and Cook (2006) defines CSR as corporations' engagement in a dialogue with multiple actors in the social environment. In the process, social actors gain access to influence the dialogue. Both corporations and their publics are involved in the co-production of meanings (Morsing & Schutlz, 2006). Stakeholder engagement is the process of bridging perceptions (e.g. Miles, Munilla, & Darroch, 2006) and is helpful for building mutual understanding and developing trusting relationships (e.g. Heath, 2010; Hutchins, Walck, Sterk, & Campbell, 2007; McComas, 2003). Corporations should be socially responsible by sharing power with their stakeholder groups (Black & Hartel, 2003). Although different stakeholder groups could have conflicting interests, stakeholder engagement should be conducted not for the purpose of seeking consent, but addressing public concerns (Cooperrider & Fry, 2010).

Involving other stakeholder groups in the dialogue is of crucial importance for a corporation's CSR efforts; without listening to publics, the social aspect of the responsibility is lost. In Grunig and Hunt's (1984) concept of two-way symmetrical communication, it is suggested that public relations serves a

boundary-spanning role in understanding publics through environmental scanning and relationship building in order to help corporations make better decisions to minimize the impact of their operations on their publics. This is similar to Branco and Rodrigues' (2007) argument that corporations should be obligated to first examine the harm they do on stakeholder groups. This is also supported by Kim, Kim and Tam's (2015) empirical research on how philanthropic donations made to social groups could not prevent a company which exposed employees to unsafe practices in the workplace from being criticized for being socially irresponsible. Over the years, public relations is perceived to have contributed to CSR reporting for gaining legitimacy and reproducing corporate power (e.g. De Bakker, Ohlsson, Den Hond, Tengblad, & Turcotte, 2007; van Dijk, 2008; Williams, 2008). But its role as a strategic management function has been overlooked.

There are different approaches using which public relations can be practiced to contribute to an organization's CSR efforts. Benn, Todd and Pendleton (2010) called for most positive engagement by public relations in the strategic planning and implementation of CSR. Corporations ought to play a broader societal view by using CSR as a tool to balance their interests with those of publics. To achieve this, they should utilize public relations to play a proactive rather than a reactive role in advancing both their own goals and their publics'. This relates to public relations' purpose of contributing to organizational effectiveness, which ultimately refers to achieving goals which are shared by both the corporations themselves and their publics (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Porter and Kramer (2006) also advocate the improvement of social and environmental consequences of corporate activities by adopting an approach to integrate social considerations into core business operations; such an approach would help organizations build a corporate social agenda by prioritizing certain social issues. This is also similar to the publics' segmentation advocated in public relations, seeking to achieve social and economic benefits by mitigating the harm of corporate activities and working on social problems in which these corporations have expertise.

In addition to the planning of CSR activities through publics' segmentation, public relations is also responsible for carrying out CSR efforts and communicating about them. Kallio (2006) pointed out that when communicating about CSR, certain things are excluded for the same reason other things are included. For example, in the discourse of CSR, the taboos of amoral business, continual business growth and politics are completely left out. Greenwood (2007) also pointed out another problem with CSR; it is generally assumed that stakeholder engagement is always good, but it should be acknowledged that more stakeholder engagement does not necessarily make things better or lead to corporations' responding to publics' interests. Engaging with employees does not necessarily result in positive changes. Hence, public relations advocates understanding and thereby, incorporating publics' concerns into the decision-making processes of corporations. It is necessary to ensure that the outcome of stakeholder engagement is to make better business decisions rather than to engage for the sake of engaging.

Because the intentions for which corporations are engaged in CSR are crucial for why corporations are engaged in CSR (e.g. Arvidsson, 2010; Dima, 2008) and how publics respond to CSR (e.g. O'Connor, Shumate & Meister, 2008), public relations agencies would need to justify why their potential business clients should be engaged in CSR. Maignan and Ralston (2002) categorized corporations' motivations for engaging in CSR into three types of principles. First, the value-driven

principle refers to motivations caused by core corporate values. Second, the performance-driven principle is defined as motivations for the improvement of financial performance and competitiveness. Third, the stakeholder-driven principle refers to motivation to respond to the scrutiny of stakeholder groups. In other words, public relations agencies would promote their CSR services based on the advantages of CSR efforts outlined in these three principles.

After justifying the purpose for which corporations should be engaged in CSR, public relations agencies need to highlight why their agencies should be selected or the extent to which their expertise could contribute to a corporation's overall CSR efforts. Morsing and Shultz (2006) developed a model of communication strategies consisting of three types of strategies. First, the stakeholder information strategy refers to one-way communication efforts which informs stakeholders about favorable CSR actions. Second, the stakeholder response strategy refers to two-way asymmetrical communication efforts which aims at demonstrating how stakeholder concerns are addressed. Third, the stakeholder engagement strategy refers to the two-way symmetrical communication strategy which aims at maintaining an ongoing proactive dialogue with stakeholders and involving them in the CSR messages. Therefore, the expertise that they offer as communication experts should fall under one of these three categories.

Windell (2007) discussed the commercialization of CSR and found that consultants used different labels for CSR in different contexts. They were found to have used CSR as a rhetorical device for sales and had a difficult time elaborating the concept. To look into the extent to which public relations agencies label CSR, package the labels and mobilize them, the following research questions are proposed for this study:

RQ1) How do public relations agencies, as professional communication practitioners offering services to corporate clients, present the purposes for which corporations should be engaged in CSR?

RQ2) What types of specialized services, in terms of communication strategies, are offered to corporate clients?

RQ3) How do the public relations agencies differentiate themselves from one another?

Methodology

To answer the research questions on how public relations agencies present their CSR services to their corporate clients, this study uses the O'Dwyer PR Firms Database (2010) to identify the top fifty public relations agencies in the United States. Based on the list, their dedicated pages on CSR services were retrieved in 2011. The agencies were ranked based on their self-reported net income, the number of employees, the taxes and the wages paid. After the search, 22 agencies were identified to have a dedicated page. The information presented on the pages were used as data for analysis.

The text on the web sites of the agencies was used as the data for this study. Windell (2007) discussed how professional communicators mobilized the labels that they created for CSR using interviews as a method. Pedersen (2009), on the other hand, used inductive open coding and deductive targeted coding in his analysis on modeling CSR. Likewise, Maignan and Ralston (2002) used content analysis to categorize CSR-related information presented on corporate web sites into CSR principles (e.g. value-driven, stakeholder-driven and performance driven), processes (e.g. philanthropic programs, sponsorships, volunteerism, codes of ethics, quality programs, health and safety

programs and the management of environmental impacts) and stakeholders (e.g. the community, customers and shareholders). Similarly, Nielsen and Thomsen (2007) build an analysis model consisting of stakeholders, perspectives comprising people, planet and profit, CSR ambition levels and the contexts in which the corporations operate. For the purpose of this study, analysis was made based on the existing frameworks identified in the literature review (e.g. Maignan & Ralston, 2002; Morsing & Schultze, 2006). The categories of principles driving corporations' engagement in CSR are adopted from Maignan and Ralston's (2002) study to address RQ1 and the categories of the types of communication strategies are adopted from Morsing and Schultze's (2006) study to address RQ2. Educated guesses were made about how the text would be interpreted (McKee, 2003). In particular, the text was analyzed to see whether they fit into the categories and how the categories were presented on the agencies' web sites. Moreover, the analysis could identify additional categories which have not yet been identified or re-define some of the existing categories which have been identified in the analysis of corporate web sites.

Findings

Out of the top fifty public relations agencies, 22 of them have a dedicated page on CSR, even though they are not necessarily named CSR. Out of the top ten, eight of them have a dedicated page on CSR services. Table 1 shows the agencies included and the names of their dedicated pages on CSR services.

Rank	Agency	Names of Dedicated Pages
Rank #1	Edelman, New York	CSR, Citizenship and Sustainability
Rank #2	APCO Worldwide, Wash, D.C.	CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY--CR3G SM
Rank #3	Waggener Edstrom, Bellevue, WA	Social Innovation
Rank #4	Ruder Finn, New York	Corporate Social Responsibility
Rank #5	Text 100 Global PR, San Francisco	Corporate Social Responsibility
Rank #7	MWW Group, 'East Rutherford, NJ	Sustainability
Rank #8	Qorvis Communications, DC	Marketing Communications
Rank #10	Schwartz Comms., Waltham, MA	Cleantech and Green Public Relations
Rank #11	Regan Comms. Group, Boston	Green and Technology
Rank #14	Coyne PR, Parsippany, NJ	CSR/Sustainability
Rank #16	Allison & Partners, San Francisco	Social Impact
Rank #19	Zeno Group, New York	Corporate and Public Affairs
Rank #22	Peppercom, New York	GreenPepper (communication practice)
Rank #23	Capstrat, Raleigh	Blog posts: Corporate Social Responsibility
Rank #24	5W Public Relations, New York	Blog posts: Corporate Social Responsibility
Rank #28	Widmeyer Communications, 'Wash., DC	Blog posts: Corporate Social Responsibility
Rank #29	CJP, New York	Environmental and Climate Change
Rank #32	Kaplow, New York	CSR and Cause Marketing
Rank #34	Levick Strategic Comms., Wash., DC	Blog posts: Corporate Social Responsibility
Rank #35	Sparkpr, San Francisco	Greentech
Rank #45	Airfoil PR, Southfield, MI	Cleantech Public Relations
Rank #50	Beckerman, Hackensack, NJ	Cleantech

Table 1. Agencies included in the study and names of their dedicated pages

Motivation	Definition	Examples
Performance-driven principle	CSR is an economic mission that serves as an instrument for improving financial performance and competitiveness (Maignan & Ralston, 2002). Corporations could suffer from value destruction if they are not involved (Arvidsson, 2010).	Emphasizing improvements in performance, such as ensuring business continuity, increasing employee morale, securing market expansion, earning a license to grow and gaining an asset that pays dividends.
Stakeholder-driven principle	CSR serves to respond to the scrutiny from different stakeholder groups (Maignan & Ralston, 2002). Because corporate wrongdoings are largely reported in the media, management feels pressured to be socially responsible (Arvidsson, 2010). CSR is conducted to gain legitimacy through operating within the norms and expectations of society. Corporations should adopt a proactive approach to CSR to prevent legitimacy issues from arising, such as engaging in voluntary disclosure.	Emphasizing stakeholders' expectations of CSR efforts. For example, Edelman made references to its GoodPurpose study that 86% of the citizens worldwide emphasize the importance of businesses' awareness of social interests. Capstrat suggested that employees would prefer to work for socially responsible companies.
Communication-driven principle	CSR is conducted to portray that corporations can walk the talk. It is a communication-focused approach to avoid the criticism of conducting CSR for propaganda purposes. For example, philanthropic donations should not be considered a window-dressing activity. Good guys should not be portrayed as bad guys because of their engagement in CSR.	Emphasizing being able to communicate CSR as being genuine. For example, Text 100 differentiated between "help" and "hype" and the blog posts by 5W Public Relations, Widmeyer and Levick promoted a communication approach to CSR to avoid being criticized for window-dressing.

Table 2 Definitions and examples of motivating factors

CSR communication strategies (Morsing & Schultz, 2006)	Examples from agencies' web sites
The stakeholder information strategy: one-way communication aiming at informing stakeholders about favorable CSR actions	- Correcting misconceptions - Running employee voluntary programs to complement community investment
The stakeholder response strategy: two-way asymmetrical communication aiming at demonstrating how stakeholder concerns are being addressed	- Releasing reports to explain goodwill in CSR - Engaging with the public to get them speak for the corporations
The stakeholder involvement strategy: two-way symmetrical communication aiming at maintaining an ongoing proactive dialogue with stakeholders and involve them in the CSR messages	- Establishing public-private taskforce to solve problems - Working with NGOs to identify their needs

Table 3 Agencies' presentation of communication strategies as professional services

To answer RQ1 about the purposes for which corporations should be engaged in CSR practices, Maignan and Ralston's (2002) categorization of principles was used to analyze what public relations agencies presented to be the factors motivating their corporate clients to invest resources into CSR. While the value-driven principle focuses on reflecting core corporate values, it was absent in the agencies' presentation as a motivating factor. But the performance-driven principle and stakeholder-driven principle were found. An additional principle was identified in this study: a communication-driven principle which emphasized getting the corporation's story out to correct misconceptions. Table 2 shows the definitions of the principles and examples of how they are presented.

The table 2 answers RQ1 by indicating that public relations agencies believe that their potential clients should be engaged in CSR because CSR improves business performance in a variety of aspects, meets the expectations of their stakeholders and prevents their clients from being misunderstood (if they hire their services). The new principle identified, i.e. the communication-driven approach, highlights the public relations agencies' perception of how their expertise could contribute to their clients' CSR efforts and how they think their clients believe they could contribute.

Furthermore, RQ2 looks at the extent to which public relations agencies offer their professional services to assist their corporate clients in their CSR efforts. Table 3 provides definitions of the communication strategies outlined in Morsing and Schultz's (2006) analysis and some examples which fall under the categories presented in Table 3.

Specifically, in addition to the above communication strategies, the agencies have highlighted their roles in several aspects. First, the agencies have highlighted their expertise in CSR management. They emphasized the problem of carrying out CSR activities which are not in line with a corporation's core values, which could be resolved by the agencies' involvement in CSR management. Edelman provides services such as writing an audit report to illustrate a corporation's positions on its issues, goals and strategies for the purpose of branding. Schwartz Comms, Sparkpr, Airfoil PR and Beckerman mentioned their offering their expert advice on how to conduct clean energy. Moreover, some agencies also mentioned the programs and campaigns which would help corporations with their media relations efforts. Thus, public relations agencies did not limit their services to communicating CSR, but expanded their expertise to providing other services related to CSR.

Second, stakeholder relations were highlighted as a service. Edelman discussed the importance of conducting stakeholder relations by prioritizing certain stakeholder groups, building partnerships with the government and NGOs, working with activists to correct their misconceptions and publishing reports to disclose such CSR practices. Amongst all the stakeholder groups mentioned by the agencies, the government, NGOs and employees were the most frequently mentioned. The government was described to be a source of funding, especially for green programs. NGOs were not only potential recipients of donations, but could also speak on behalf of a company's goodwill for its causes. Employees were described to be contributing to a company's community investment through voluntary pro-

grams.

Third, environment issues management was offered as a service, such as the launch of environmental technology, products and services, for the purpose of connecting a corporation's green practices with its corporate brand. They also assist clients in the launch of green products and services so that the CSR practices could be integrated into their core business operations. By doing so, corporations could be depicted as prioritizing the importance of CSR in every part of their operations.

Lastly, the agencies have emphasized creating social impact as part of their services. For example, such terms as social innovation and social impact, were used to describe society at large as the general audience of a corporation's CSR efforts. The agencies have not mentioned running community programs themselves, but have mentioned NGOs as the potential partners or community programs. To harness their expertise in communication, they also discussed their expertise in communicating with society at large, including using multiple media platforms to get their messages across through media campaigns, media events and online media.

Other than the health and safety programs, quality programs, employee issues and legal compliance mentioned in Maignan and Ralston's (2002) and Pedersen's (2009) studies, the agencies have presented themselves to be offering a variety of services. To answer RQ3, the agencies also sought to differentiate themselves from one another in terms of their expertise, experience and innovation. Edelman cited its expertise in branding and management. Waggener Edstrom made references to the UN Global Initiative to emphasize its expertise in the subject. Other agencies have also mentioned their media contacts and familiarity with technology. In terms of experiences, Edelman made references to the campaigns it had carried out with reputable clients. APCO and Text100 mentioned what they had done without disclosing the names of their clients. MWW Group mentioned working with the leaders of the United Nations and the United States government in advancing the world's sustainability measures. Those which specialized in green communication had also mentioned the names of the energy giants and media publications with whom they had worked. In terms of innovation, the agencies advocated an innovative approach to implementing CSR through the use of new media platforms.

All in all, the agencies have presented a purpose-driven approach to CSR which would benefit their potential corporate clients. An asymmetrical approach is emphasized through which the goals of their clients are prioritized. Even though Edelman discussed the importance of addressing stakeholder concerns for communication to be practiced for the mutual benefits of corporations and stakeholders, they had only given examples of how to persuade rather than to engage. Similarly, other agencies had spoken of engagement or relations, but had presented their activities as serving the corporate interest of persuading rather than the societal interest of being understood.

All in all, the way the agencies presented their CSR services on the web sites indicated several assumptions. First, they assume that their corporate clients would be interested in hiring their services to prevent criticisms and strengthen reputations. Second, their clients would require management advice in terms of how to go about carrying stakeholder relations, environmental management and product and service promotion. Third, the agencies' expertise, experiences and innovative approaches to CSR would be desired. Forth, their clients would desire to be engaged in asymmetrical communication to present their interests to the public rather than to understand the public. The agencies have extended their services from communication ser-

vices in CSR to the management of CSR.

Discussion: Public relations as a strategic management function for CSR

According to Windell (2007), consultants in Sweden had attached CSR with different labels so as to make the concept better to their potential corporate clients. Using these labels, they distinguished themselves from one another and claimed to be offering unique services which could benefit their clients' business. The diversity of labels was helpful in enabling different consultants mobilize the labels as a rhetorical strategy. Yet, it also caused confusion as to what it is and how it should be carried out. As a result, CSR becomes more like an ideal than a practical reality. Corporations could suffer from the lack of credibility. Windell (2007) also found that corporations placed a low priority for hiring professional consultants for CSR services. But consultancies were driven to offer CSR services because of increasing market demand. As a result, they entered the market by commercializing the concept and finding a niche within CSR to which they could offer unique services. When commercializing their services, they make normative claims about how CSR contributes to profitability. But in reality, their goal was not to improve profitability, but corporate behavior. Organizations should foster a culture of integrity within itself by aligning their economic goals with their ethical and environmental goals (e.g. Paine, 1994; Verhezen, 2008).

This study found that public relations agencies have presented to their potential clients the advantages of engaging in CSR; in addition to what had been identified in previous research, they also highlighted the importance of preventing genuine CSR efforts from being seen as hype. As specialists in professional communication, they presented examples of the use of communication strategies through which such misperceptions will be minimized and corporate goodwill will be maximized. In spite of this, the relationship building aspect of public relations for the purpose of CSR was not emphasized. As a result, although CSR management was offered as a service, it focused on the environment or other unique technical areas, such as clean technology, rather than the areas in which public relations' expertise in relationship building or strategic communication could be useful. Public relations agencies could contribute to changing organizational practices by making CSR practices more proactive than reactive, enhancing their clients' credibility. In the current study, in terms of relationship building, which involves understanding publics and incorporating their concerns into the decision-making processes of corporations so as to minimize their harm on publics, only partnerships with NGOs or other organizations are mentioned. Thus, there is a need to reconsider how public relations agencies could contribute to corporate clients' CSR strategies.

Older literature has emphasized the technical role of content creation by public relations for CSR (e.g. L'Etang, 1994), but more recent literature has also found that the strategic management function of public relations has been underused (e.g. Dhaneš, 2012). When Grunig (2003) was developing his situational theory of publics, he conceptualized public relations with the assumption that communication is not just about changing attitudes and behaviors, but how individuals cope with life situations. In other words, public relations should not be considered as a function to disseminate CSR-related information with the goal of changing publics, but a bridging function of relationship building to understand their life situations. Through relationships, corporations can better understand their publics and

can make better corporate decisions to minimize the impact of their corporate activities on them (e.g. the behavioral, strategic management paradigm of public relations, Kim, Bach, & Clelland, 2007). Therefore, public relations agencies should also be offering relationship building as a unique service for CSR.

Expertise #1: Understanding publics and publics segmentation in CSR Corporations are constrained by limited resources. Investing in CSR could cost corporations an additional amount of money which may or may not result in the desired outcomes that public relations agencies claim to be able to achieve. When offering advice to their clients about CSR, public relations agencies should seek to achieve one goal: effectiveness in CSR. Achieving effectiveness in CSR means meeting CSR goals which are shared by both its corporate clients and their most immediate publics. If these goals are met, then the CSR activities are considered effective in contributing to overall organizational effectiveness.

Because the goals must be shared by both corporations and their publics, public relations agencies could offer their unique service of being an expert in proactively understanding publics and conducting publics segmentation for their corporate clients. Within an organization, public relations plays a unique role as a boundary spanner (e.g. Springston & Leichty, 1994), i.e. they understand the environment in which their corporate clients operate through environmental scanning and transmit information between their clients and their publics. Hence, their expertise and experience in understanding the environment should be emphasized. Boundary spanning activities could include but are not limited to traditional media monitoring, social media monitoring and scenario planning. As proponents of the innovative approaches to CSR, public relations agencies should understand both the environment in which their clients operate and the environment in which meanings of CSR are discussed and negotiated, so as to better advance their clients' CSR practices.

After understanding the environment, public relations agencies should help their clients formulate CSR strategies through publics segmentation. In this respect, the situational theory of publics is helpful in assisting corporations in identifying the most immediate publics who should be prioritized in their CSR strategies (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Furthermore, the situational theory of problem solving could help corporations predict the communicative behaviors of these immediate publics (Kim & Grunig, 2011). The two situational theories used problem recognition, constraint recognition and involvement recognition to predict the extent to which an active public would arise to be engaged in communicative behaviors against corporate behaviors. Kim, Kim and Tam (2015) suggested that the approach of corporate public responsibility be adopted through the use of the situational theories to ensure that corporations first fulfill their responsibilities to their most immediate publics (e.g. employees and customers) before attending to their responsibilities to society at large. Therefore, public relations agencies should first identify the extent to which their clients' corporate activities are affecting their publics after which these publics should be prioritized. If an electricity provider plans to build a wind farm in a specific area, the residents in that area should be prioritized for relationship building to ensure that the CSR goals of both parties are met. In addition, to build a corporate social agenda (e.g. Porter & Kramer, 2006), public relations agencies should also be familiar with the overall CSR environment enough to advise their clients on the social issues to which they could contribute with their industry expertise. Success-

ful public relations is data-driven; based on data, predictions could be made about what strategies would achieve the desired outcomes. Agencies like Edelman have their own subsidiaries in research and analytics. Therefore, public relations agencies, as experts in understanding and researching the environment, should help their clients collect data from the environment to better advise their clients on their CSR strategies.

Expertise #2: Co-orienting between corporations and publics on CSR Building on top of understanding publics and providing the strategic management of CSR through publics segmentation, public relations agencies should also emphasize their expertise in relationship building by co-orienting between corporations and their publics on CSR. Public relations agencies have highlighted the differences between help and hype which has been the cause of the criticism about the inconsistency between words and actions. Corporations and their publics require agencies' help in co-orientation because they have different expectations. Corporations are expected to serve the interests of multiple publics which should be prioritized based on their situational characteristics. At the same time, publics are affected by corporate decisions and behaviors; when they are affected, their problem recognition increases and they might seek to resolve the problems through communicative actions.

Public relations agencies should offer advice in relationship building in their CSR services. After understanding publics and segmenting them, corporations should engage in a long-term relationship with them. More importantly, it is of crucial importance that the success of the relationships is not measured by the extent to which their publics have changed their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, but the extent to which corporations are able to make better decisions which minimize the negative impact of their decisions on their publics. Susskind and Field (1996) proposed the mutual gains approach. If the government is to remove trees from a neighborhood for the construction of a factory, the local residents of the area could be the best source of advice as to where the trees could be relocated. If an agency advises corporations to invest in employees' voluntary programs as part of their CSR efforts, it should first conduct consultation with employees to find out how corporations can best invest in the efforts with the support of the employees. Such consultation could take place in the form of surveys, focus groups, or employees' forums. The relationship building approach should prevent help from being interpreted as hype by drawing corporations closer to their strategic publics in CSR through the prioritization of publics and resources. It is through relationships that public relations agencies could collect data from the relevant publics to help their corporate clients formulate the most effective CSR strategies which will meet goals shared by both their corporate clients and their publics.

Conclusion

For corporations, engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) means having to make an investment of resources; hiring public relations agencies for their CSR services could require even more resources. Yet, as the word responsibility in CSR implies, it is required, but how to go about doing it depends on how it is defined and strategized. Corporations ought to be strategic in their CSR efforts so as to ensure that resources are effectively allocated to the CSR activities which could maximize the possibility of achieving the desired outcome, i.e. achieving CSR goals which are shared by both the corporations and their publics. As consultancies specializing in communication which

offer services in CSR, this study found that public relations agencies have particularly highlighted how they could help to respond to the criticism about the inconsistency between walk and talk. They presented to be offering a variety of services with their expertise, experience and innovative approaches in the areas, some of which are not specifically related to communication, but CSR management which could result in positive public-

ity for corporations. Based on the findings, this study suggests that public relations agencies harness their expertise in publics segmentation and relationship building to help their corporate clients optimize the use of resources to understand publics, segment them and incorporate their interests into the CSR-related decisions of their clients.

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