



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



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 19 February 2016

### Keywords:

Corporate social responsibility  
Public relations  
Professionalism  
Spain  
Dialogue  
Communication

## 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 IBEX35<sup>®</sup>. The research included semi-structured interviews and interpretative analysis of official documents and reports. Our findings suggest that despite normative claims from CSR departments that downplay the importance of public relations in the design and implementation of CSR programmes, the empirical evidence suggests otherwise. In this context, our findings show important operational deficiencies and accountability deficits precisely because of the lack of public relations input in the design and implementation of these programmes.

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## 1. Introduction

There has been some debate in relation as to who should manage and implement Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes (L'Etang, Lugo-Ocando, Ahmed, 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, Tywoniak, Hatcher, 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 (Bebbington, Larrinaga, & Moneva, 2008, p. 337) 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 disseminate final outcomes and achievements of their CSR-related programmes.

This last happens despite the fact that an important body of research indicates that the origins, theories, processes, and primary responsibilities between public relations and CSR are similar (Clark, 2000; L'Etang et al., 2011; Sriramesh, Ng, Ting, & Wanyin, 2007). 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 liter-

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ature. 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 public, 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 IBEX35<sup>®</sup> quoted in the Madrid stock market (known as BME). The research included 28 semi-structured interviews with managers responsible of CSR in these organisations and interpretative analysis of 33 official documents and reports.

The overall research indicates that despite normative claims from CSR departments that downplay public relations' relative importance and potential contributions, there are nevertheless important gaps in terms of objectives, achievements and performance precisely because of the lack of engagement with public relations. To be sure, the empirical evidence shows important operational deficiencies and accountability deficits due to the absence of professional communication know-how 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: 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 (Grunig & Hunt, 2003; Harlow, 1976; Seitel, 2002) and therefore, a necessary element for the proper development of CSR. Hence, one can expect public relations to be part of the design criteria of CSR policy (Oliveira & Nader, 2006, p. 104) as the 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 & Moreno (2007), Signitzer & Prexl (2008), Kim and Reber (2008), Castillo-Esparcia (2009), Míguez (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) who have highlighted the importance of public relations for CSR. 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.

In fact, 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 (2003, p. 106) pointed out, accountability to the public is a capital premise of public relations, while others such as Daugherty (2011, pp. 390–92) have underlined that public relations is the practice of social responsibility.

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 (2007, p. 85) have highlighted, 'the communication function is at the heart of CSR and corporate citizenship'. 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 should be and the reality on the ground. Recent studies in Spain, for example, highlight that public relations practitioners are largely excluded from the CSR management areas. This research indicates that only 11% of the professionals working in CSR in that country have a 'communications' background (Argandoña, Fontrodona, Ramón, & García, 2008, p. 3). Other research in the field have shown that the great majority of those in charge of CSR in Spanish companies have degrees in business, followed by those who studied environmental science or related fields (DIRSE, 2014, p.13), while people with degrees in communication are all but invisible in this area. In light of this, the aim of the authors of this article is to explain the absence of public relations in CSR programmes, while examining the implications of this situation in the boarder context of professional practice of public relations within the modern organisation.

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