

# Corporate citizenship and public relations: The importance and interactivity of social responsibility issues on corporate websites

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Received 24 March 2006; received in revised form 5 September 2006; accepted 20 November 2006

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## Abstract

Recently, corporate responsibility has become a prominent issue internationally. It has also become a research priority in public relations, having been considered one of the key aspects of that field for decades. Several studies have shown the importance of the Internet and of corporate websites as public relations tools and the growing relevance of corporate websites for communicating approaches to corporate responsibility. This paper discusses the importance of corporate responsibility information on those websites, and their levels of interactivity. The authors have designed a specific tool to analyse these aspects of corporate websites.

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*Keywords:* Public relations; Corporate responsibility; Dialogic communication; Internet; Interactivity

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## 1. Introduction

From a company perspective, corporate responsibility has acquired growing importance, as it is considered a legitimating activity for the organisation in the eyes of society (Deegan, 2002, p. 292; Holmström, 2003; Hooghiemstra, 2000, p. 56; Neu, Warsame, & Pedwell, 1998; Wartick & Cochran, 1985, p. 759). Moreover, several studies (IPSOS, 2004; MORI, 2004; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2005) show that it is also an activity more and more valued and demanded by different publics (consumers, investors, employees, communities, journalists, etc.), which observe the civic behaviour of companies in this area and evaluate them accordingly.

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the level of importance that companies place on the information about corporate responsibility that they put on their corporate websites, and the level of interactivity of that information. The authors have designed a specific tool for the identification of corporate responsibility issues and for an analysis of the degree of interactivity of such information on corporate websites. The methodology and the results obtained will be useful for other researchers, and, on an international level, will facilitate a comparison of organisations regarding the issue of corporate responsibility and of the degree of interactivity in the relationship between organisations and their publics on this matter.

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## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. *Public relations and corporate citizenship*

Corporate responsibility is one of the most prominent themes in the field of public relations. A narrow relationship between the practice of public relations and corporate responsibility can be observed (Clark, 2000; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Public relations itself can be considered a legitimating practice for organisations in the eyes of society from both functionalist (Holmström, 2003) and poststructuralist (Moreno, 2004) perspectives.

Companies have progressively assumed responsibilities beyond their own economic activities within the social sphere (Capriotti, 1999; Carroll, 1999; Waddock, 2004). The conception of what corporate responsibility is and of what responsibilities companies have has evolved during the past 50 years. In addition to the appearance of different concepts, authors such as Wartick and Cochran (1985), Wood (1991), Carroll (1999), and Waddock (2004) suggest the existence of a gradual evolution in the conception of company responsibilities.

In his fundamental article about the development of theories on company responsibilities, Carroll (1979, p. 500) differentiated between economic–legal responsibilities and ethical–philanthropic responsibilities. This view of corporate responsibility took on a larger scope in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Waddock (2004, p. 10), the concept of corporate citizenship has acquired relevance in the past decade to incorporate a global focus and the concrete approach of the stakeholder theory into corporate social responsibility (CSR). As Waddock (2004, p. 9) explains, corporate citizenship involves “the strategies and operating practices a company develops in operationalising its relationships with and impacts on stakeholders and the natural environment.” In the past few years, the conception of corporate responsibility has also come closer to the broader concept of sustainable development (Herrmann, 2004; Molleda & Moreno, 2004). It is for these reasons that we use the notions of corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship, and sustainable development (CSR/CC/SD) jointly.

Thus, the present conception of CSR/CC/SD is based on the stated commitments of an organisation and its relationship with its different kinds of publics in the fulfilment of its economic, social, and environmental duties; in the fulfilment of its commitments to information transparency and ethical behaviour; in the management of the company; in the development of its products, services, and business; and in the evaluation and control of the fulfilment of these commitments. In this way, the communication function is at the heart of CSR/CC/SD management.

### 2.2. *Public relations and corporate websites*

In a short time, the Internet has become an essential tool for organisational communication (Stuart & Jones, 2004; Sullivan, 1999). Previous works have shown the importance of the Internet and of corporate websites as tools for public relations (Hill & White, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; White & Raman, 1999), and also the growing importance of corporate websites for communicating organisational responsibilities (Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 2000).

In research on public relations and the Internet, the possibility of interactivity between the public and the organisation is an issue of high relevance. Interactivity is one of the main characteristics of the Internet, and has been the subject of a considerable number of studies in the field of communications (Downes & McMillan, 2000; Ha & James, 1998; Rafaeli, 1988; Schultz, 2000). With regard to the degree of interactivity that organisational websites have, several authors in public relations have identified two basic approaches: the dissemination of information and the generation of relationships between the different publics and the organisation (Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Ryan, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; White & Raman, 1999). In the first approach, the level of interactivity is low, and the use of the Internet is unidirectional, with the essential objective of diffusing information and trying to influence the image of the company that the various publics have. In the second approach, the degree of interactivity is high, and the Internet is used to make bidirectional communication easier and to establish and build relationships by allowing dialogue and interaction between the organisation and its different kinds of publics.

This paper analyses the importance given by companies to issues concerning CSR/CC/SD on their corporate websites and the degree of interactivity of the information on such matters. These objectives are operationalised in the following research questions (RQs).

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