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PR AND CSR: A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

The literature pays special attention to the interaction between public relations (PR) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Masuku & Moyo, 2013; Goi & Yong, 2009; Ilieș, 2012), as strategic approach that will serve both the interests of the company and their audiences, by building good collaboration and mutual respect. Public relations can act in the public interest to answer the public's expectations and to support companies to be more attentive to social problems (Petrovici, 2015b, p. 77). In turn, the corporate social responsibility is perceived as part of the portfolio of public relations, a technique that establishes efficient relationships with different groups (Theaker, 2008, p.182). The paper reviews the recent definition of public relations and corporate social responsibility and also examines the relationship between the two concepts. Our study will focus on the following research questions: (1) PR can be a mechanism to enable the realization of social goals ? (2) What is CSR ? As methodology, we opted for the questionnaire-based inquiry to a sample of 80 persons, students at Communication and Public Relations to identify the perceptions of a representative segment of public regarding the relationship between public relations and corporate social responsibility. In our opinion, the partnership between PR and CSR can be a reference point for the companies to improve corporate image and reputation and to cultivate collaborative relationships with different categories of audiences, stakeholders, customers, shareholders, donors or sponsors.

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Keywords: PR, CSR, strategic partnership, companies, categories of audiences.



1. Introduction

Literature is especially interested in the interaction between public relations (PR) interaction and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Masuku & Moyo, 2013; Goi & Yong; 2009 Ilieş, 2012), as a joint action which creates benefits both at the company level and at the level of different categories of audiences with which they interact.

Traditionally, public relations represent “the distinctive management function helping to establish and maintain mutual communication limits, mutual acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its audience; they involve issues management, helping managers to inform public opinion and to respond to its requests; they define and emphasize the obligations of the managers to serve the public interest; they serve as a warning system that helps managers to anticipate environmental trends; they use, as their main tools, research and communication based on ethical principles” (Rex Harlow, in Grunig & Hunt 1984, p.7). The modern vision proposed by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA, 2011/2012) emphasizes that “public relations represent a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its audiences”. This definition describes public relations as a communication process that is strategic by nature and builds mutually beneficial relationships (Petrovici, 2016, p.19). The term “process” is preferred to that of “management function”, which suggests the one-way communication from the top down. The term “relations” defines the role of public relations as a connection between an organization and its audiences. The term “audiences” is preferred to the term “stakeholders”, because it refers to the public nature of public relations, while “stakeholders” connotes the publicly traded company (<http://www.prsa.org>).

The European Commission (2001) defines CSR as “a concept by means of which a company voluntarily integrates the concerns about the social and environmental issues in the business operations and in their interaction with our partners we are interested in”. A similar vision describes corporate social responsibility in relation to the five dimensions related to this concept: the environmental dimension refers to how companies integrate in their activity the concerns about the environmental protection; the social dimension deals with the relationship between the business environment and society; the economic dimension examines this concept in terms of profit, but also the responsibility towards the shareholders; the stakeholder dimension describes the categories of stakeholders and how the company interacts with them; the voluntariness dimension monitors the volunteering activities performed within a company for the welfare of the society (Dahlsrud 2006, pp.1-13). This definition provides a comprehensive view of corporate social responsibility which brings into attention both the internal dimension, the relationship with different categories of stakeholders and how the organization interacts with them and the external dimension of the relationship between the organization and society, environment and community in which it operates. Personally, corporate social responsibility designates a set of practices that result in building mutually beneficial relationships between a company and categories of stakeholders by integrating into the business practices the economic, social, environmental dimension (Petrovici, 2015b, p. 17).

According to the activity performed, public relations and social responsibility can respond to the various challenges with which an organization is faced, as well to the expectations of the public or the community in which they operate. Researchers in the field consider that public relations involve a dual

responsibility: “a responsibility to the public to help achieve corporate responsibility, namely to harmonize behaviors and image of organizations we serve, with the public interest and a responsibility to the organization, to help managing fairly the values within the social system to which they belong” (in Miculescu 2006, p. 114).

2. Problem Statement

Edward Bernays (in Stone, 2005, pp.31-35) believes that “public relations are the practice of social responsibility”. Public relations are socially assigned with a function that must be exercised professionally to cope with the various requests to be answered (Petrovici, 2016, p.61). In turn, corporate social responsibility is seen as part of the portfolio of public relations, a technique that generates effective relationships with different groups (Theaker, 2008, p.182).

Based on these considerations, the paper performs a large-scale literature review and use the concept of public relations and corporate social responsibility to outline the partnership between PR and CSR, as strategic approach that will serve both the interests of the company and their audiences, by building good collaboration and mutual respect. In our opinion, the partnership between PR and CSR can be a reference point for the companies to improve corporate image and reputation and to cultivate collaborative relationships with different categories of audiences, stakeholders, customers, shareholders, donors or sponsors.

3. Research Questions

The paper reviews the recent definition of public relations and corporate social responsibility and also examines the relationship between the two concepts, the extent to which public relations can be a mechanism for achieving social objectives. Our study will focus on the following research questions:

RQ1: PR can be a mechanism to enable the realization of social goals?

RQ2: What is CSR?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is two-fold: to analyze the concept of public relations and corporate social responsibility, in order to seize their defining dimensions and applicative nature, and to evaluate the degree of efficiency and applicability of public relations and corporate social responsibility, their interactive dimension. The case study aims to identify how the public perceives the public relations and social responsibility, the connection between the two concepts, impact and consequences on the image of the company. For this, we have applied a research on a representative segment of audience who responded to our request.

5. Research Methods

As research method, we opted for the questionnaire-based survey which we applied during March – April 2016, on a sample of 80 people, students at Communication and Public Relations. The reason for

which we applied this questionnaire was not to perform a rigorous sociological analysis with valid statistical results (Petrovici, 2013), but rather to identify the strategic role of partnership between public relations and corporate social responsibility, respectively the “thought particularities” (Petrovici & Dobrescu, 2013) existing at the public level.

6. Findings

The answers gathered highlight firstly that public relations and social responsibilities are concepts known to the public who believes that they must become landmarks on the agenda of an organization. Most of the interviewees (75%) believe that public relations help to build a climate of sympathy between an organization and its audiences, to shape the corporate image and identity (25%). PR’s role is to foster collaboration between organizations and audiences (35%), to improve its image (25%), to enhance the reputation and image in the public space (22.5%), to meet public expectations and to be more responsive to its requests (17.5%). The manner in which the public relations are practiced becomes emblematic for the organization because it has an impact on the audiences they interact with.

When asked what corporate social responsibility was, the responses were absolutely provocative. According to the respondents, social responsibility is a common practice that aims to raise awareness of social causes (32.5%), and a PR strategy has positive effects both on the organization and on the community within which it operates (30%). For others, social responsibility is another way to promote the organization, which is misunderstood (22.5%), being just a fashion, without any strategic connection to the organization (15%). Assuming the social responsibility, the organization has the opportunity to make known the activities they carry out for the benefit of social causes, to fulfill the obligations they have towards the community and the society. Actually, recent research has shown that the wide public form their opinion about an organization not only based on the quality of its products and services, but also according to the extent social responsibility is manifested (Kotler, 2010, p.170).

An interesting view is the one referring to the way in which the public perceives the relationship between public relations and social responsibility. The answers to this question show that opinions are divided: for 52.5% of the respondents, the public relations activity is closely related to social responsibility, 32.5% consider that the public relations activity has nothing to do with corporate social responsibility while 15% do not know / do not answer this question. Arguments advocating for the connection between public relations and social responsibility aimed at the practical usefulness of the two types of activities, given the benefits they generate both within the organization and on the social environment in which they operate (68.75%). For others, CSR actions are visible especially in crisis situations when the public impact is negative (31.25%), unlike in other countries where CSR actions are designed to support groups or communities with social needs.

Most respondents (52.5%) believe that corporate social responsibility could be a public relations tool, given the benefit of the image which this kind of activity receives. Moreover, studies show that “the simultaneous use of the CSR and the PR activities is seen as an exercise which can bring positive results both at the management level and on the general image of the company” (Ilieș, 2012, p 238 An). In the vision formulated, the two activities complement each other, “as working tools of the same whole” (Ilieș, 2012, p.239). The distribution of the answers by gender indicates a percentage of 90% for the female

segment, respectively 10% for the male section. In terms of age categories, 95% of the respondents fall into the category of 18-25/26-35, and 5% into the category of above 35.

7. Conclusion

The specialists in the field believe that public relations practiced effectively can save the organization money by reducing costs due to litigation, legislation, boycotts or pressure campaigns; reduce the damages caused by a bad relationship with the audiences; support the organization to gather the necessary funds by cultivating collaborative relationships with stakeholders, customers, shareholders, donors or sponsors (Grunig, in Wilcox et al., 2009, p. 100). In turn, social responsibility becomes a reference point for those companies which are able to make known the activities they carry out for the benefit of social causes, to fulfill the obligations they have towards the community and society.

Although public relations and social responsibility are concepts commonly referred to in the companies' policy, their interactive dimension is not sufficiently exploited. Public relations play an important role in the activity of corporate social responsibility by having the capacity and competence to know how to communicate a CSR campaign, how to create added value and how to manage the whole process of social responsibility of a company (Petrovici, 2016, p.63). Public relations can help to successfully achieve the social objectives through the transfer of image they realize. The collaboration relationship between the two types of activities can lead to benefits both for the organization and for the community in which they operate. This partnership between public relations and social responsibility can be a reference point for companies to improve their image and reputation, but also to develop effective relationships with different types of audiences, stakeholders, customers, shareholders, donors or sponsors.

The arguments advocating for the connection between public relations and corporate social responsibility are: rational (PR and CSR build bridges and foster best practices); pragmatic (PR and CSR generates benefits both for the company and across the different categories of audiences), strategic (PR and CSR enhance corporate image and reputation). This strategic partnership can bring a whole new perspective on the potential which public relations and social responsibility develop as team effort to improve the relations between the organization and the different categories of audiences, strengthening corporate image and reputation (Petrovich, 2016, p.62).

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