

# The (in) communicability of corporate social responsibility – a Portuguese insight

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**Abstract:** From the perspective of a group of public relations consultants and communication directors operating in Portugal, this chapter discusses the complexity inherent to CSR communication. Some of the key questions to be addressed include: are so-called sustainable and socially responsible business strategies, in fact, indicators of genuine corporate change? Or is CSR *per se* insincere and should CSR communication be considered as a mere invention of PR? CSR will be equated, first, from the analysis of the dialectic relationship between activist movements, government regulation and business discourse and action. Then, some core principles for communicating CSR are highlighted, as well as the dangers and dilemmas in communicating CSR policies from a PR theoretical framework.

**Keywords:** CSR, CSR communication, Portugal, PR practitioners.

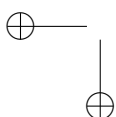
## Introduction

**I**N the Green Book of the European Commission, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is defined as “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interactions with stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (European Commission, 2001).<sup>1</sup> However, it is difficult to find a consensual definition for CSR in specialized literature, as it is an “essentially contest concept” (Okoye, 2009, p. 624). Over time, various terms have arisen as synonyms or related words for CSR. “Corporate citizenship” (Waddock, 2004) “corporate responsibility” (Hillenbrand & Money, 2007) and “sustainable business” (Zorn & Collins, 2007) are perhaps the most prominent examples.

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<sup>1</sup>Available from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>. Accessed May 2, 2013.

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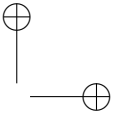
There is no intent here to address some of the conceptual delimitations of which many authors have already focused on (see for example, Elkington, 1998; May, Cheney, Roper, 2007; Ihlen, Bartlett, May, 2011). For the purposes of this article it suffices to know that the concepts revolving around the notion of CSR place greater emphasis on the domain of Business Ethics. More specifically, CSR points to a business stance in the definition of the relationship between company and society that contrasts the traditional neoliberal vision (well exemplified by Milton Freedman) where the sole responsibility of businesses is to make a profit and be in accordance with the law.

The presupposition behind this text is that CSR focuses on the way companies deal with economic, social and/or environmental questions in relation to their stakeholders and the general public. It is also worth mentioning that the fundamental tenet of this vision resides in communication which is an essential component of the process that shapes the company/society relationship.

As L'Etang (1994, p. 113) states, CSR "is often managed by PR practitioners for public relations ends and therefore corporate social responsibility is seen as part of the public relations portfolio". From company websites to annual sustainable reports or from different events to information media, the messages and means used to impact the public on the theme of CSR is quite varied. Through sponsorships or patronage of the arts and sports, to the implementation of volunteer programs, which for the most part engage NGOs, we can see some common examples of CSR programs that can be found all over the world.

But CSR and communication is a sensitive and complex topic. There are many who are wary of the explosion of rhetoric and images on environmental, social and economic sustainability. For many pressure groups, such as activists, journalists and opinion makers, as well as for the common citizen, the prevailing question is: are the strategies for the so-called socially responsible and sustainable projects real indicators of genuine business policies? Or is CSR insincere per se or simply "markethique", that is, a marketing stratagem as accused by Lipovetski (1994, p. 246)? Isn't CSR a mere "PR invention", as Frankental argues (2001)?

Therefore, the overall purpose of this chapter is to examine the links between communicating CSR and public relations both from a theoretical and practical perspective in order to foster the debate over current issues and assumptions on this topic. The inherent complexity of CSR communication will



be discussed in three phases. First, emphasis will be placed on the evolution of CSR by focusing on the dialectic relationship which has always been present among activist movements, government regulation and business discourse and action. This will require a particular focus on Sharon Beder's (1996, 2001, 2002) critical vision on the genesis of the environmental question. Then, a bibliographic review about PR in CSR will be provided with the intent of highlighting communication dangers and dilemmas in CSR policies. Finally, particular attention will be paid to an empirical study developed in Portugal on the perception of PR practitioners in relation to their role in organizations and society. This is also where the previously raised questions on PR and CSR communication will be discussed.

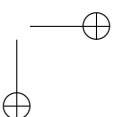
“Communicating and informing more is crucial for the Portuguese society to have greater awareness on the theme of Social Responsibility”. This was the main conclusion of the study carried out in 2004 by Sair da Casca, the first Portuguese consulting company specializing in sustainable development and social responsibility.<sup>2</sup> In addition to emphasizing on CSR communication, the present chapter mainly aims to analyze the contribution of PR to the decision making process in relation to what, how and when to communicate CSR policies, thus offering elements for a better understanding of this important professional field in the process of the relations organizations have with society.

## 1. CSR, activism and public opinion – a dialectic relation

According to the most well-known manuals on public relations (e.g., Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1986; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Lesley, 1991), up until the 1950s the action of corporate public relations was centered on the dissemination of information, and on unidirectional communication models, without any consideration for the feedback from the public or audiences. After the 1950s, due in part to the appearance of television – a mass media able to strongly influence audiences, as set by the early mass media effects theories – the communication models promoted by public relations start to be bidirec-

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<sup>2</sup>Available from [www.sairdacasca.com](http://www.sairdacasca.com). Accessed May 2, 2013.



tional. Edward L. Bernays is representative of this evolution by focusing his attention on and researching the public. He also got feedback from audiences and evaluated the attitudes of the masses. The concept “engineering of consent”, title given to one of his essays (Bernays, 1955), at the time served as a synonym for the power of PR advice: “one who would prescribe for a client the most effective ways to navigate an increasingly complicated, often hostile, social environment” (Ewen, 1996, p. 163).

It is precisely at the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the anti-business sentiment gains momentum in the United States followed by Europe a bit later on. Nuclear power, the abuse of civil rights, the women’s rights movement and consumer rights movement are some of the examples that contribute to the tension between businesses and society. Due to public activism and skepticism, the consensus in public opinion was at risk and companies needed new management and communication skills.

In this context, it is natural that the concept of CSR evolve exponentially. In accordance with the synthesis developed by Carrol (1999, p. 270) in the 1950s, the concept of CSR enters the modern age with the publication of *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*, by Howard Bowen (1953). As the title indicates, the author questions the obligations of business leaders in the sense of pursuing “policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society (Bowen, 1953, p. 6). According to Cochran (2007), it is in the 1960s and 1970s that the concept suffers one of its most interesting evolutions which is visible in William Frederick’s (1978) frequently quoted text: *From CSR1 to CSR2: The Maturing of Business-and-Society Thought*. This is when companies stop being involved only in the academic debate about ethics at the different levels of CSR and start responding, quite pragmatically, to various social pressures. This means that as activist groups improved their highly mediatized pressure measures, companies also reacted with new management and production policies.

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the level of company response to activist pressure has grown dramatically with the environmental movement being a paradigmatic example. Environmental questions, as a widespread concern, appeared after World War II with the movements for disarmament and against nuclear experiments and their respective public demonstrations. Later on, for example, there was the foundation of Greenpeace in 1971-72



(Schmidt, 1999) which were against the French nuclear experiments in the Mururoa atoll and the American experiments on the island of Amchitka in Alaska.<sup>3</sup>

For Sharon Beder (1996), the environmental movement also results from the proliferation of interest groups that challenged corporate power and demanded greater government control over businesses. The protests focused on the social and environmental impact of business activities and environmental degradation was attributed to unbridled industrial growth.

During this period, many governments responded with new environmental legislation in order to limit the sources of pollution (Beder, 1996, p. xii). Consequently, throughout the 1970s, many companies became extremely active politically, working towards the promotion of an anti-regulation agenda and financing public relations and advertising programs with the aim of restoring the public's faith in a company that would be free from governmental regulation. In accordance with Beder (2002, p. 21), large North-American companies developed a real "new corporate activism" that was visible in the creation of public affairs departments and in the application of billions of dollars for the advertising and sponsorship of one sole objective: to improve the company's image and reputation.

The efficacy of the pressure from corporate and social activism on governmental regulation would be challenged with greater force in the late 1980s. With the Bhopal, Chernobyl and Exxon Valdez disasters, environmental movements gained strength. Simultaneously, the public's concern with the environment is also strengthened by scientific discoveries related to the ozone phenomenon and global warming. The theme of sustainable development enters the global agenda in an inevitable way. "Our common Future – the Brundtland Report" from the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), is pointed out in the literature as the text that gave the most impetus to the sustainability movement. In it you may find the most consensual definition of sustainable development as progress that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 43).

As environmental concerns grow so does the distrust in relation to com-

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<sup>3</sup>For more information on the foundation of Greenpeace see: [www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org). Accessed June 20, 2012.





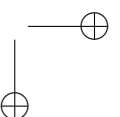
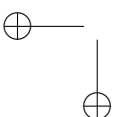
panies – they are seen as the biggest polluters of water, air, forests, soil, etc. Perhaps as a response, green communication increases and becomes more sophisticated. The peak of this advertising trend is in 1990 with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day – “one-fourth of all household products that came on the market . . . advertised themselves as ‘recyclable’, ‘biodegradable’, ‘ozone friendly’, or ‘compostable’” (Thien, 1993, p. 18).

During the 1990s, there was an explosion of the application of public relations techniques that involved environmental concerns. At the service of large companies, lobbyists, think tanks, and specialists in environmental public relations made efforts to influence the increasingly tighter regulations on the company’s responsibilities towards the environment and pollution indexes (for example, the *Clean Air Act* in the USA and certain legislation in the European Parliament). According to Beder, “Environmentalism was labeled ‘the life and death PR battle of the 1990s’ and ‘the issue of the decade’ by public relations personnel” (2001, p. 9).

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the accusations of greenwash – understood as a pseudo-action of CSR that allows organizations to create an image of respect for the environment – becomes recurring in the literature on this subject (see Athanasiou, 1996; Greer & Bruno, 1996; Beder, 1996, 2002; Lubbers, 2002):

The key to *greenwashing* is manufactured optimism, which comes in many forms – as images, articles and books, technologies, and even institutions. Anything will do, as long as it can be made to carry the message that, though the world may seem to be going to hell, everything is in good hands (Athanasiou, 1996: 3).

Evidently, it is the big multinational companies such as Shell or BP that are first put in check. This is due, in particular, to their involvement in complex public affairs and PR strategies aimed at contradicting the growing environmental regulation and public interest in this matter. These strategies are always evident when there is a significant difference in an organization’s rhetoric. In other words, when that which is communicated and the actual behavior is different (see, e.g., Sagar & Singla, 2004). Framed by skepticism about business ethics, there are many who mistrust a business discourse centered on respect for the environment or public interest. Bakan (2004) looks at the CSR





narrative discourse as being insincere per se (Bakan, 2004) and others see it as a mere invention of public relations at the service of business interests, many of which are not very ethical (Frankental, 2001). Journalistic discourse itself follows this tendency. Despite being open to positive news coverage, media reports on CSR issues are largely negative in tone and the tension inherent to “Corporate Social Irresponsibility” tend to stand out (Tench et al. 2007).

Gilles Lipovetski’s essay clearly illustrates that critical tone against CSR which provokes skepticism on the communication of that issue, as is discussed in point three of this chapter:

It is not ethics that governs a company’s communication; it is communication that imposes and administers it internally and externally. Ethics functions first of all as a lifting and a company’s offensive-defensive line: ethics, of an imperative category, converts itself into a strategic vector of business communication coerced by public relations, the business instrument of the brand (1994, p. 261). [my translation]

## 2. Communication and CSR – a dangerous liaison?

In recent decades, the corporate world has become public enemy number one due to financial scandals, environmental disasters and human rights violations. Inevitably, the public’s trust with regard to decisions made by companies decreased and corporate activities are increasingly scrutinized by activist groups and NGOs and magnified by real-time news coverage in online media.

Stakeholder demands have led organizations to communicate their social viewpoint in a more strategic manner in order to gain and maintain legitimacy. Organizational legitimacy can be understood as the congruence between public expectations and organizational actions and values (Suchman, 1995). Legitimation is therefore an essential process for all organizations, even to such a degree that it forms the core of all strategic communication practice (Metzler, 2001). However, the role communication plays in the management of organizational legitimacy is not consensual. Corporate communication is viewed with suspicion, that is, as a strategic approach to instrumentally manipulate and deploy evocative symbols in order to garner social support (Suchmann, 1995, p. 572).



It has been argued that the management of CSR shares similarities with public relations once both developed from public information to reputation and issues management during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and both seek to enhance relationships with key stakeholder groups in order to respond to society's demands (Clark, 2000). By analyzing trends and patterns in public relations literature about CSR (between 1998 and 2007), Goodwin and Bartlett (2008) concluded that the current status of the literature suggests that public relations scholars have broadened their approach to CSR from one of solely comprehending communication management, as proposed by Clark (2000), to one that incorporates the management function and relationship management components of contemporary public relations thought.

CSR and public relations as a management function predominates in research dedicated to the planning process. As Goodwin and Bartlett (2008, p. 11) stressed, "research on CSR shows that public relations professionals are often responsible for CSR activities, demonstrating a direct correlation to their involvement in other themes such as ethics, CSR reporting and organization reputation". The management function was one of the roles for public relations in CSR identified by Kim and Reber (2008) as the "significant management role". The "significant management role" implies that the PR practitioner's responsibility is to strongly advise clients or advocate management on behalf of CSR issues. To educate clients about CSR, in other words. Nevertheless, in their empirical study, the authors also find out that, in some cases, the PR practitioner may have no role in CSR.<sup>4</sup>

In regard to public relations as a communication management approach to CSR, the literature centers its attention on the strategic understanding of the flow of information. According to Goodwin and Bartlett (2008, pp. 12-13), CSR reporting is the most popular theme in public relations literature, presented usually in three key ways: (1) as information dissemination (Golob &

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<sup>4</sup>Along with the "significant management role", Kim and Reber (2008) identified the philanthropic, the value-driven and the communication role in PR practice. The "philanthropic role" means that public relations is important to promote human welfare such as, making decisions about charitable giving, encouraging and facilitating volunteering, promoting community relations and health and safety issues. In some cases, working as pro-bono, for instance, for NGOs. The "value-driven" role implies that public relations is based on ethical standards, the mission or values of the organization and serves as a corporate role model. The "communication role" for CSR is mainly linked to the practice of publicity.



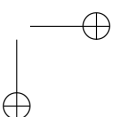


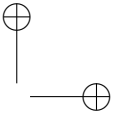
Bartlett, 2007; Esrock & Leichty, 1998), which suggests that CSR is essentially a communication technique; (2) as a two-way communication mechanism (O'Connor, 2001; Capriotti & Moreno, 2006). This approach discusses the role of the internet in CSR and public relations, in particular, with the advantage that the new and social media improve the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders, through transparency and accountability.<sup>5</sup> And (3) the interactive approach to CSR that highlights how organizations must nowadays engage in dialogue to meet stakeholders' concerns (Bartlett, Tywoniak & Hatcher, 2007; Tench, Bowd & Jones, 2007).

Concerning CSR and PR as a relationship approach, the nature of the relationship itself is analyzed in the literature. Sagar and Singla (2004), for instance, discussed the importance of organization-public relationship dimensions using a number of cases studies (Enron, Arthur Anderson, Xerox, etc.) to demonstrate how negative developments have led to the erosion of trust in businesses globally. They stress that the role of public relations is to generate trust through CSR, which means to utilize it as the social face that leads stakeholder relationships. Moreover, these authors declare the importance of public relations consultants to be serious about relationship management and hence bridge the gap between trust and CSR initiatives. Jones and Bartlett (2009) also state that the value of public relations is in its ability to aid relationship management. This should be considered in terms of corporate strategy as opposed to a communications-output perspective which is quite common in public relations practice. Thus, the authors understand CSR as a facilitator of relationship management, which is capable of building support networks for the organization, as opposed to viewing CSR as a set of activities that act as vehicles for building organizational legitimacy through the management of perceptions.

Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that a communication management approach, that is, a communicative-output perspective to a public relations role in CSR leads to a "CSR promotional communication dilemma" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 110): stakeholders want CSR information, however, corporate messaging may generate repercussions when stakeholders see it as an excessively self-promotional strategy. In other words, although corpora-

<sup>5</sup>For an analysis of CSR reporting in Portugal from a theoretical framework of organizational communication see, e.g., Freitas & Lobão, 2011.





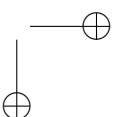
tions want stakeholders to see them as socially responsible, they are reticent about communicating their actions, fearing criticism and wary of creating expectations (Schlegelmilch & Pollack, 2005).

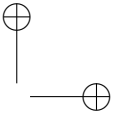
Therefore, despite the importance of communicating CSR policies, it can be stressed that there are in fact specific challenges which includes skepticism towards company messages and potentially hostile reactions from the media, activists and in more general terms, from public opinion (see, e.g., Dawkins, 2004; Schlegelmilch & Pollack, 2005; Ihlen, Bartelett & May, 2011; Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Within this scenario several authors have tried to prescribe a solution to this communicative dilemma. Schlegelmilch and Pollack (2005: 278-280), for example, list three factors that can lead to success in CSR communication, namely, (1) the source credibility of the communicator, (2) honesty of the statements and (3) involvement of the audience with the topics that are being communicated. Ethics awards, reports from independent ethics audits, evidence of contributing to NGOs, and news coverage of the company's ethical affairs can also be used as evidence to enhance source credibility (Pollack, 2003).

Companies must also be aware that they are perceived as hypocritical and dishonest when they spend more on advertising the action than on the CSR action itself. The "marketing of good corporate conduct", as stated by Stoll (2002: 123), implies a very special case of publicity that needs to be carried out in an especially responsible fashion. Goodman (1998) also argued that whilst CSR communication is often channeled through corporate advertising, web sites and CSR reports, external media coverage has greater credibility among consumers and the general public than communication from the corporations themselves.

Inspired by Grunig and Hunt's 4 models of public relations and following a sense making approach, Morsing and Schultz (2006) presented three CSR communication strategies which companies should be able to employ in a combined way: "the stakeholder information strategy, the stakeholder response strategy and the stakeholder involvement strategy". The "stakeholder information strategy" is based on one-way communication, indicating that organizations are concerned with "talking" and not "listening" to stakeholders. This means that the purpose is to inform stakeholders of their good intentions and actions in relation to their CSR efforts without any use of third party en-





dorsement. In this manner, the company has full control of the communicative effort.

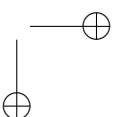
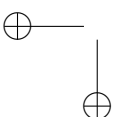
On the other hand, the “stakeholder response strategy” is a two-way asymmetric communication strategy since it gives stakeholders the opportunity to respond to CSR communication. The overall aim in engaging in dialogue with stakeholders is to determine if the company’s CSR actions are accepted. The feedback is then used to plan a better way to create a positive image which satisfies the demands of stakeholders. This kind of dialogue is therefore merely instrumental – companies “listen” in order to be able to “talk” better.

According to Morsing and Schultz (2006) only the 3<sup>rd</sup> strategy offers an opportunity for dialogue, participation and involvement. The “stakeholder involvement strategy” is based on a symmetric, two-way communication model that allows for the stakeholders and the company to influence each other through dialogue. As a result, the stakeholders are not just the receivers in the communication process but become proactively involved in it, which enables corporations to continuously understand and live up to the stakeholders’ changing expectations. The 3<sup>rd</sup> party endorsement, that is, the use of the opinions of external stakeholders, is a common way to involve stakeholders.

Overall and after a review of key literature in the field we might conclude that whether we look to public relations as a management function, a communication management function or a relationship management role, the transversal question seems to be whether to communicate or not CSR activities. This will be debated in the last part of this chapter by using the Portuguese case as a starting point. For this debate we adopt, as Ihlen et al. (2011, pp. 10-11), a social constructivism epistemological view (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Since our knowledge of the world is socially built through communication, we believe that it is through the analysis of CSR communication that we may be able to understand how the meaning of CSR is implemented in organizations and how its meaning is socially constructed.

### 3. CSR and public relations – the Portuguese case

Portugal centered its attention on CSR a bit later than the majority of industrialized countries. However, since the turn of the millennium there are numerous manifestations that the theme is present in the media, academic debates and



company practice. Studies at a national level have pointed to the following trends: more and more organizations have profiled codes of ethics/conduct; the support of social causes and volunteering has risen; the publication of sustainability reports (especially from companies in the stock market) has skyrocketed; several companies integrate today international CSR networks and adhere to international principals of conduct (e.g., BCSD Portugal, linked to the World Business Council for Sustainability; or RSE Portugal, a partner of CSR Europe); an increasing number of companies, even if modest, obtain environmental and/or social responsibility certifications<sup>6</sup>; there are more prizes and awards in the social and ethics areas; and some companies, even if a scarce number, integrate sustainability indexes (Rego et al., 2006, p. 295; Rego et al., 2003: chap. 5). Another indicator of the increased popularity of CSR in Portugal may be understood with the introduction, even if hardly representative, of post-graduate courses dedicated to this subject.

On the other hand, as Rego (2006) stresses, it is also true that many of the Portuguese companies' activities are occasional as CSR is often confused with "simple" acts of philanthropy and "many actions and events are fundamentally acts of public relations – that are not well permeated in the companies' 'way of being' and whose positive effects tend to evaporate over time" (Rego et al., 2006, p. 297) [my translation].

The state of development in Portugal regarding CSR can also be associated to the fact that society itself and Portuguese consumers are not sufficiently aware. According to the study "A percepção da RSE em Portugal" [CSR Perception in Portugal] (Sair da Casca, 2004), Portuguese citizens are still unfamiliar with the concept and consumers do not assume the "activist" mentality that exists in other countries. This is something that may change given the attention that the media give to reporting news pieces on social irresponsibility, thus creating even more debate on this theme.

In the last few years much attention has been given to CSR mainly from a

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<sup>6</sup>The certification of companies arrived in Portugal at the beginning of the 1990s, and initially only involved Quality Control. Environmental certification (ISO 14001) and social certification (Social Accountability – SA 8000) arrived in the country in the late 90s. Novadelta was the first Portuguese company to be certified in social responsibility – SA 8000, in December 2002. It is internationally known for its work in implementing sustainability practices in East Timor and is an international case study, not only in the coffee sector, but also in CSR communication (see for example, Gonçalves, 2004).



management perspective, both in the business and academic fields (Rego et al, 2006). Nevertheless there are few studies on CSR from a PR perspective focusing specifically on the Portuguese realm (Vau, 2005; Gonçalves, 2009). The practical aim of this chapter is therefore to investigate public relations consultants and directors' perceptions in regards to CSR communication policy. In the light of this overall aim, a small-scale empirical research was carried out in Portugal to review the existing practice and PR practitioners' self-awareness of their professional role in organizations and in communicating CSR. The sample consisted of 29 interviewees made up of 13 in-house communication directors in private companies, 7 from public companies and 9 from public relations agencies).

All interviews were conducted and recorded in the participants' workplaces and lasted around 50 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and the data was analyzed qualitatively in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the key role of communication professionals in organizations?

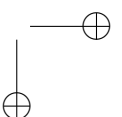
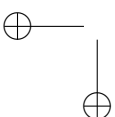
RQ2. What are the underlying goals of CSR communication?

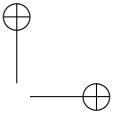
RQ3. How to communicate CSR?

### 3.1 The strategic role of a PR professional

Public relations activity has gained credibility and prestige in Portugal by being presented as an activity that aids the administration of organizations. Not only has the position of communication managers gained hierarchical importance but external consulting services in communication are also increasingly valued (APECOM/OJE, 2009). The communication department should be directed or "reported to the president or director of the organization" (E17) and the external consultants should have a "direct connection to CEOs or the companies' executive committees" (E28).<sup>7</sup> The importance of this presupposition is expressed in the possibility of a PR practitioner to develop or not that

<sup>7</sup>All of the expressions or concepts in quotation marks mean that they are an "*in vivo code*" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 65), that is, that they are expressions taken *ipsis verbis* from the interviewees' speech. Whenever relevant, the quoted excerpts from the interviewees are presented here numerically (E1, E2, E3... E29).



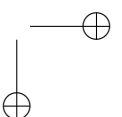


which is considered to be his/her fundamental mission in accordance with the interviewees – “strategic advice”:

I think that for the communication area to be successful, it depends 90% of the times on the relationship of trust that is established between the decider and the technical support that exists in that area (be it in the office or through an advisor). It is based on this relationship of proximity and trust, which is vital, that one can participate more or less in strategic management ( E23).

The practice of this “strategic advice” is defined according to the following characteristics:

- “*Know how to listen*” (E4.) The capacity to “hear the signs of society” (through studies or informal observation) and “interpret and inject those signs” (E4) into the organization, thus contributing to either its reaction or adaptation to what their stakeholders expect of it.
- *A panoptic and global vision.* Public relations occupies a “transversal function” (E27) in the organization thanks to the access to the high quantity of information and a wide range of knowledge on the different sectors of the organization and its inter-connections. Since all sectors need communication, it is up to the communicator “to find the synergies that should work at a strategic level” (E17).
- *More and better information.* A company’s growing openness to society is shown through the increase of information made available on the economic and social pillars of the organization: “Communication has to be something that corresponds to a reality. If we don’t know our reality, we simply create noise” (E24). This openness translates into communicational pro-activity.
- *A builder of relationships.* Any communication strategy should start from a “stakeholder mapping” (E17) with the goal of establishing long-lasting relationships of trust. Those relationships are at the basis of all strategies and are put to the test, especially when facing crisis situations.





- *The voice of conscience.* A PR professional is concerned with “propagating values” and “assuming causes” (E2) contributing for companies to affirm themselves for what they do “be it for their social responsibility, their ethics, or their compliance with regulation” (E11).

### 3.2 Real objectives, effective strategies

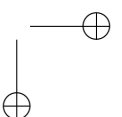
When asked about the main objective underlying CSR communication, the agents immediately highlighted the contribution towards the company’s image and reputation. This is an objective that may be understood as either negative or positive. On the one hand, many of the interviewees showed that they were conscious of the fact that much of the communication in CSR is still only “cosmetics, being good” (E5), or “giving to charity” (E17), which leads to an exaggeration in the communications. In other words, the company is “faking that it is doing it; says that it is doing it and then nothing changes” (E3).

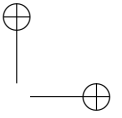
On the other hand, all of the interviewees stressed the fact that CSR communication is a positive contribution to an organization’s image and reputation not only for “humanizing the company” (E25), but mainly for legitimizing the organization’s action in society vis-à-vis its entire public. In this sense, the majority of respondents highlighted the importance of CSR communication in being strong and clearly linked to the organization’s own mission and identity:

It has to be an attitude that comes from deep within because if it is not real, if it is not part of the DNA, then it won’t propagate. When it is something that is made without criteria and that is not assumed by the company then it doesn’t make sense. It is only a publicity scheme. (E2)

All of the interviewees defend the importance of communicating policies of corporate responsibility. The main reasons given are as follows:

- *Company positioning.* CSR communication allows the company to position itself in the current competitive market and accompany international trends in terms of social and environmental intervention and economic sustainability.





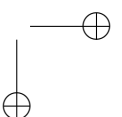
- *The public has a right to information.* CSR communication is closer to information than advertising: “We have the duty to make society aware of what we do, just as society has the duty of denouncing our misdeeds” (E14).
- *Be an example.* Through communication an organization shows its competition and other companies that it’s possible to successfully apply CSR policies. It is important to draw attention to good CSR practices.
- *“Communicating is always an act of corporate responsibility”* (E24). Communication transforms companies in that it demands a foundation on what is real. For example, if one intends to elaborate a sustainability report, it is necessary to do some previous work on the organization concerning those matters.

### 3.3 Well-balanced communication

“To do something well and not say it is dumb. . . it’s a lost opportunity. But of course, without exaggerating so that it doesn’t become ridiculous” (E19). The affirmation from the agent interviewed clearly points to the main problem of CSR communication: what, when and how much should be communicated. In other words, knowing to which extent communicating about a company’s action is acceptable without the message generating suspicion in the receptors and consequently becoming counterproductive for the company’s own image and reputation.

Through an analysis of the data gathered from the interviews, we identified some of the principles or rules for communication that were determined in this topic. This is in harmony with the authors discussed in point 3 of this article and is listed below:

- First do it, and only then communicate it;
- Don’t spend more in communicating than in doing, that is, develop a discrete communication and not a “*comercialona*” (hugely commercialized) one (E1);
- Practice a “well-balanced communication” (E14), that is, don’t always talk about the theme of corporate responsibility. Do it only when there







are reasons to be proud of something (for ex., you are in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index ranking, or obtain a social responsibility or environmental certification such as Norm SA8000 and the Eco-label);

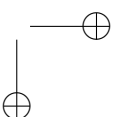
- Don't exaggerate with advertising, but rather resort to media relations;
- Develop many interpersonal communication plans and events (for example, meetings, conferences, award ceremonies);
- Don't communicate everything that is done in corporate responsibility, only what is of interest for the general public;
- Let others talk about what the company does (partners, such as NGOs or the media itself).

### Concluding remarks

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) seems to have found a “new mantra” in the business world (Munschi & Kurian, 2005, p. 414). However, there are many that only see a mere propagandistic technique in this corporate policy. In fact, often times, CSR communication has no foundation since the only objective lies in improving a company's image and reputation.

The development of this communicational choice on behalf of a large variety of organizations was mainly influenced by pressure from civic movements, for example, ecologists, that alerted public opinion towards contradictions from many multinational companies – between saying and doing. Without a doubt, the development of activist movements generated clear changes in the way companies interacted with society and, consequently, in the way they communicated with society. Nowadays, marketing objectives are certainly one of the main explanations for the explosion of green communication. Therefore, the question that prevails is of an ethical nature. In other words, to which extent has CSR communication developed in a transparent and responsible way, or the contrary, has it been merely instrumental with the overestimated communication of a green image, for example, for corporate success?

In the opinions of the communication and public relations professionals who were interviewed and work in the Portuguese market, the strategic role that communication occupies in companies does not seem to leave any doubts





– it is important to communicate about the responsible positioning of organizations, but in a well-balanced manner. For CSR communication not to become a “*communication externe en boomerang*” (Libaert, 2010, p. 93), meaning, a perverse communication that turns against its own messenger, certain basic principles should be taken into consideration. First of all, take the decision to communicate only when the subject of CSR is at the heart of the organization’s mission; Secondly, communication should be developed humbly and moderately, especially without resorting to gigantic advertising investments; and finally, try to find the messages about the organization’s action that could be endorsed by opinion leaders or NGOs. As a whole, the adoption of these basic principles will help affirm not only a level of responsibility that underlies CSR communication, but also the fundamental role of the communication professional in the strategic management of communication in organizations and in the construction of long-lasting relationships with different publics.

Despite the immanent limitations in this exploratory study, we hope that the data here discussed may serve as a starting point for further and more comprehensive research on the limits and peculiarities of CSR communication in the perspective of public relations and therefore contribute to a strategic communication that is designed to be effective but also public and socially responsible.

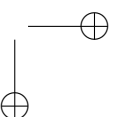
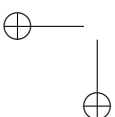
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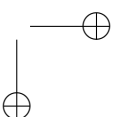
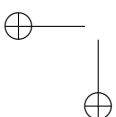
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