

PRD GIFT Winner AEJMC 2019
**Mining the Gap: Research to Guide CSR
Communications Strategy**

Janis Teruggi Page, University of Illinois at Chicago

Editorial Record: Submitted to AEJMC-PRD GIFT Competition by Feb. 22, 2019. A blind copy was peer reviewed by the PRD Teaching Committee, led by Chair Brigitta Brunner, and selected as a Top GIFT. First published online on August 17, 2019.

Rationale

CSR communications have become an increasing responsibility for PR practitioners, as corporations have now recognized CSR as essential to their operations and their reputations. This lesson is designed to prepare students for this growing, essential practice in corporate public relations through analyzing industry research to find gaps between the “good works” companies perform and their “good works” reputation among the general population—gaps that can be filled through the use of strategic communication. According to the Reputation Institute:

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a highly important driver of reputation. Although companies are increasingly becoming more sustainable, the public often does not know or recognize a company’s CSR commitment. Consequently, a company’s actual and perceived CSR is frequently misaligned. Aligning CSR minimizes reputational risks and can improve reputation significantly. (Verheij, 2017, p. 1)

Student Learning Goals

By engaging in this assignment, students will understand that a strategic CSR program is only as strong as a company’s ability to

communicate its strengths, values, and impacts to a wide array of internal and external stakeholders. They will diagnose the need for a CSR communication strategy by evaluating gaps between performance and reputation. They will also gain insight on excellence in CSR communication by evaluating communication tactics of high-performing companies with high-perceived reputations. Guided by this research process, they will recommend a strategic communication plan to support CSR engagement to close the reputation gap between public reception and reality.

Connection to Public Relations Theory

This lesson connects to relationship management theory. An organization's survival depends on mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its publics. According to Ledingham (2003), "Successful organization-public relationships develop around common interests and shared solutions to common problems" (p. 188). Among the relational factors is trust that the organization lives its values. Consumers consider CSR efforts when judging the reputation of a company, and CSR is a key public relations tool for communicating norms and gaining legitimacy (Aksak, Ferguson, & Duman, 2016). CSR engagement, when done correctly, is tied to the purpose and values of the corporation and should be communicated accordingly. Recognizing and addressing a misalignment of actual and perceived CSR is one means for corporations to build a sustained and authentic relationship with its publics.

Evidence of Learning Outcomes

This lesson has been successfully taught multiple times in an online graduate program using data from two respected industry sources: an annual ranking of U.S. corporations' CSR activity conducted by Corporate Responsibility magazine (CR Magazine, 2019) and an annual ranking of U.S. corporations' CSR reputation conducted by the Reputation Institute (2019). Positive achievement of outcomes has been measured by

students' engagement with industry data that reveals a company's "gap"—and students' subsequent written justifications for selecting a company in need of a CSR communications plan. Student analysis also has determined the company's strongest CSR programs most worthy of better messaging. Finally, student communications plans are influenced by the strategy and tactics of companies ranking high in both performance and reputation, as well as by best practices in CSR communication.

References

- CR Magazine*. (2019). 100 best corporate citizens. Retrieved from https://www.3blassociation.com/files/yMblCg/100BestCorporateCitizens_2019.pdf
- Ledingham, J. A. (2003). Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 15(2), 181-198. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1502_4
- Aksak, E. O., Ferguson, M. A., & Duman, S. A. (2016). Corporate social responsibility and CSR fit as predictors of corporate reputation: A global perspective. *Public Relations Review*, 42(1), 79-81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.11.004>
- Reputation Institute. (2019). 2019 US RepTrak 100. Retrieved from <https://www.reputationinstitute.com/research/2019-us-reptrak>
- Verheij, D. (2017). Closing the gap between actual and perceived corporate social responsibility. The Reputation Institute. Retrieved from <https://lmscontent.embanet.com/GWGSPM/PSPR6207/CLOSING%20THE%20GAP%20BETWEEN%20ACTUAL%20AND%20PERCEIVED%20CORPORATE%20SOCIAL%20RESPONSIBILITY.pdf>

Appendix A Assignment

Mining the Gap: Research to Guide CSR Communications Strategy

This lesson is designed to prepare you for a growing, essential practice in public relations: managing communication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement. You will analyze industry research to find reality/perception gaps: Companies that are performing excellent CSR but are lacking the reputation they deserve. Through industry data, you will identify one company with a reality/perception gap and recommend how its reputation can be enhanced with a strategic communication plan.

Reality

Corporate Responsibility magazine annually recognizes companies that are good corporate citizens, excelling through their performance in multiple dimensions. Its 100 Best Corporate Citizens 2019 ranking is derived from the Russell 1000 stock market index, which measures the largest U.S.-based companies. It uses a database that tracks publicly available data in seven categories: environmental, climate change, human rights, employee relations, corporate governance, philanthropy, and financials. Beyond an overall company ranking, these categories are also ranked within each company.

Perception

The Reputation Institute annually recognizes companies perceived by the public as good corporate citizens due to their reputation. Its 2019 ranking, US RepTrak 100, presents results from a survey based on more than 167,000 ratings from the general public of 390 eligible companies (the largest U.S.-based survey in this area). The survey quantifies the public's perception of citizenship (supports good causes, positive societal influence, environmentally responsible), governance

(open and transparent, behaves ethically, fair in the way it does business), and workplace (fair employee rewards, employee well-being, equal opportunities), as well as leadership, products/services, innovation, and performance.

Examples of the Gap

In Corporate Reputation magazine’s 100 Best Corporate Citizens 2019 ranking, companies that ranked relatively high in actual CSR engagement were ranked in the Reputation Institute’s 2019 US RepTrak 100 as relatively low (or not at all) in CSR perception. Here are just a few examples:

Company	100 Best Corporate Citizen Ranking “CSR Engagement”	US RepTrak 100 ranking “CSR Perception”
General Mills	#3	#29
Campbell Soup	#4	#26
HP	#5	#57
Microsoft	#6	#31

Instructions

Part 1:

1. Based on these two reports, explore and choose a company ranked high as a good corporate citizen but ranked low in reputation.
2. Justify your choice. What is the disparity between good citizenship and reputation?
3. In the 100 Best Corporate Citizens report, explore the detailed summary showing which type of CSR engagement ranks highest for that company.
4. On the company’s corporate website, find the CSR initiatives in the high-ranking category you identified in step 3. Choose one initiative for which you will recommend a communication plan. Provide a URL.
5. Explain your choice – why did you choose this initiative to help

improve the company's overall CSR perception and reputation?

6. To help inform your recommendations, identify companies ranking high in both performance and reputation, and then explore their CSR communication strategies.

7. Other considerations for your communications plan:

- a. Beware empty boasting and greenwashing; focus on authenticity
- b. Be transparent; simple, direct communication is more authentic
- c. Know the audiences and the likely impact on each
- d. Create an ongoing dialogue
- e. Collaborate with friends and foes
- f. Partner with an NGO for credibility
- g. Focus on employee engagement and enhancing morale, image and loyalty
- h. Be consistently credible

Part 2:

Based on completion of Part One, prepare a CSR communications plan that you will recommend to the company. Follow the steps in the “Key Elements of a Strategic Communications Plan” template provided below. For this deliverable, you will play the role of a consultant assigned to analyze the CSR initiative and make recommendations in a presentation to the chief executives of the company.

Deliver your plan (as if you were presenting and speaking to the executives) in a professional PowerPoint presentation with recorded voice narration. For guidance, search online for Microsoft's instructions, “Record a slide show with narration and slide timings.” Your PPT should have no more than 12 slides and be approximately 5-7 minutes in length. Regarding slide appearance, use type no smaller than 30 points and incorporate good slide design: visually pleasing, clean, and concise (don't put all your speaking points onto the slides).

Submit your plan as a voice-narrated PPT or export it to a video

file (with the PPT opened, select File/Export/Create Video). If exported to a video, you may submit the video or upload it to a YouTube account and simply provide the URL.¹

You will be assessed based on the quality and depth of your analysis and recommendations as well as the overall quality of the presentation itself.

Key Elements of a Strategic Communication Plan

1. Executive Summary	Overview of the entire plan.
2. Situation Analysis	Succinct breakdown of the issue addressed by the plan (high performance, low reputation, need for CSR communications).
3. Target Audiences	Concerned stakeholders addressed by the communications.
4. Goal	Overarching end purpose of your plan.
5. Objectives	Building blocks to meet your goal: informational, attitudinal, behavioral.
6. Strategy	Plan of action designed to achieve objectives.
7. Tactics	Steps to be taken to achieve objectives.
8. Theme and Key Message(s)	Theme: Broad statement of the vision guiding all communication. Message(s): Concise and value based.
[Budget and Timeline are optional]	
9. Evaluation	Methods to measure how effectively tactics met objectives.
10. References	The last slide in your presentation must display all of your sources.

¹*Teaching note:* This assignment was developed for an online class. As an alternative to a voice-narrated PPT, the plan can be presented in a classroom setting to fellow students acting as board members, providing follow-up questions for discussion. Also, as an alternative to a PPT, the assignment's end deliverable could be a detailed memo to the CEO.