

การสังเคราะห์งานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพด้านกลยุทธ์การสื่อสารเรื่องความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคมขององค์กรธุรกิจในประเทศไทย¹

A Synthesis of Qualitative Research on Thai Corporations' Corporate Social Responsibility Communication Strategies

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บทคัดย่อ

การสังเคราะห์งานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพที่นำเสนอการใช้กลยุทธ์การแสดงความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคม ในช่วงปี 2551-2557 ของบริษัทในประเทศไทย 17 แห่ง การสังเคราะห์ทั้ง 6 ขั้นตอน สรุปได้ว่า บริษัทต่าง ๆ ใช้กลยุทธ์ 7 กลยุทธ์หลัก ได้แก่ การรณรงค์การสื่อสารภายในองค์กร การสร้างเครือข่าย การประชาสัมพันธ์ด้านการมีจริยธรรมเชิงธุรกิจ การเป็นผู้นำด้านการอนุรักษ์สิ่งแวดล้อม การมีบทบาทเป็นผู้ให้ การริเริ่มความโครงการความร่วมมือกับชุมชนโดยให้ชุมชนเป็นศูนย์กลาง และการจัดกิจกรรมสานสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้ประกอบการกับลูกค้า โดยกลยุทธ์ดังกล่าวสอดคล้องกับทฤษฎีด้านการสื่อสารเพื่อแสดงความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคม

Abstract

This qualitative synthesis study presents seventeen Thai companies' corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies used from 2008 to 2014. Through six stages of the synthesis, the findings show seven major strategies including promoting intra-communication, network formation, publicizing corporations' ethical business operations, being a leader of environmental conservation agency, labeling themselves as providers, initiating community-centered mutual projects, and bridging the firms and customers through goodwill and supportive activities. The discussion that follows the findings briefly relates all of the strategies to theories in CSR communication.

คำสำคัญ: กลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร ความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคม การสังเคราะห์งานวิจัย

Keyword: Communication strategies, Corporate social responsibility, Research synthesis

Background

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) began to receive public attention in the 1950s (Bowen, 1953, cited in Carroll, 1999: 269). Since then, large entrepreneurs have been urged to become more aware of environmental and social conservation in addition to sole policies to earn unlimited profit. Also, in the World Economic Forum 2002 (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2013: Online), elevating the necessity of taking care of the environment was a highlighted discussion topic. The discussion led to requiring entrepreneurs to launch policies directly involving social responsibility practices. As a result, business sectors started to broaden communication to include strategies related to corporate social responsibility. Corporate images also reflect how well each business sector contributes to both local and global surroundings.

In Thailand, in 2006, CSR became an important focus of attention (Thaipat Institute, 2015: Online). At the beginning, a sudden trend in sharing social responsibility was in the form of the concept of 'green' through any campaign highlighting environmental friendliness. Later, the 'green' trend became an action or a mission instead of an option in business.

In order to be regarded as environmentally-friendly businesses, large companies in Thailand have agreed to exercise corporate social responsibility through a variety of strategies (Thaipat Institute. 2015: Online). In addition, in compliance with the trends, these companies have agreed to submit CSR reports. Report submission also serves as a communication channel to connect with customers. In doing this, the companies employ strategies believed to be effective in attracting the general public. Though communication strategies tend to be widely used, each company has created innovative ways of communication. Part of the strategies have been studied and presented in research in the past decade. However, the studies aimed to explore an individual company's CSR strategies. As the roles of CSR are increasing in Thai businesses, this qualitative synthesis has been conducted to bring together Thai companies' corporate social responsibility strategies that have been used so far. Hence, the objectives of this study included (1) to identify strategies used for CSR communication and (2) to synthesize the characteristics and activities of each strategy used by corporations situated in Thailand.

Literature Review

The movement of CSR from the 1930s to this decade has taken place in the forms of obligation to which various organizations have abided. The movement also involved definitions and scopes. Upon the beginning, CSR policies were guided by ethical obligation with an aim to convince firms to realize their impacts on the lives of people and any other component of a society. (Moura-Leite; & Padgett. 2011: 529–530). Later, CSR became more vivid when corporations were urged to consider true responsibilities to society. In the meantime, new forms of practices involving social responsibilities began to play an important role in businesses by the end of the 1960s. Such practices are embedded with, for example, philanthropy, customer relations, and stakeholder relations. In 1970, the Committee for Economic Development introduced a “three concentric circles” approach to operating CSR (Carroll. 2008: 91). While the inner circle depicts basic economic functions, the intermediate circle prioritizes an awareness of social values. The outer circle broadens responsibilities to include social environment improvement.

Currently, most CSR practices that emphasize the interrelationship between the organization and community can be viewed as innovation (Porter; & Kramer. 2011: 4). Despite differences in practice, innovative ways to serve the CSR concept are still mainly relevant to responsive CSR, strategic CSR, or creative CSR (Thaipat Institute. 2015: Online). According to Porter and Kramer (2011), Ravisnit (2006), and Roonkasem (2008), responsive CSR is concerned with proactive practices related to social issues to prevent negative impacts due to the lack of social awareness. However, the issues do not seem to relate to the corporate business structure. In contrast, strategic CSR is explicitly integrated to the firm's policies. The proactive implementation of the policies along with the business operation can be seen through contributions to society. That

is, companies encompass actions that could be believed to benefit the community.

In Thailand, the Thai CSR Network (Thaipat Institute. 2015: Online) has introduced creative CSR that is beyond both responsive and strategic CSR. For creative CSR, collaborations between the firm and the community become the mainstream social activities. In doing this, cohesiveness substitutes competition.

With a focus on performing social responsibilities, corporations have employed practices that can be viewed as one of four categories: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities (Carroll. 2008: 26–29). Firstly, it is generally understood that goals of business are to create profits to ensure the existence and consistently profitable status of corporations. In doing this, firms need to both create policies and implement practices to earn profits as viewed as economic responsibilities. Secondly, firms are required to operate business tasks under laws as widely known as legal responsibilities. Thirdly, doing business needs to comply with ethical norms that could go beyond legal requirements. That is to say, performing ethical responsibilities is another practice for responsible business. Lastly, philanthropic responsibilities involve performing good corporate citizens' activities. This type of responsibility includes, for instance, financial, charity, and social assistance to communities and the public. One notable understanding is that the contributions are on a voluntary basis to improve social conditions. Carroll (2008: 92) calls all the four types of social responsibilities 'the pyramid of corporate social responsibilities'.

Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research synthesis methods. According to Weed (2005: Online), meta-interpretation approaches to synthesizing qualitative research involve a number of methods. However, in this study, the meta-interpretation was shaped by systematic reviews. Relevant studies were filtered and chosen. In doing this, six stages of meta-interpretation were employed (Weeds. 2005: Online).

First, the researchers identified key features of targeted qualitative and mixed-method research studies including CRS, strategies, policies, and companies located in Thailand. Second, all studies published during 2008 – 2014 were electronically retrieved. During this stage, the research assistants collected around 26 studies. Third, screening the methodology and findings of the 26 studies based on the research questions in this study took place to confirm the inclusion criteria. Fourth, all selected studies were then reviewed again to exclude irrelevant entries and those with the objectives that were not directly related to the research questions in this study. At the completion of this stage, 17 studies were selected for the following steps. Fifth, the synthesis started through extracting the findings of all selected studies into the findings extraction form. Sixth, the last synthesis stage, comparing and contrasting the research findings

and discussions were carried out and yielded categories or themes from the answers to the questions in this study.

Findings

Seventeen studies used as data in this research synthesis have revealed condensed findings concerning the approaches of communicating CSR from 19 corporations in Thailand. The studied companies consist of energy industry, telecommunication companies, an optical company, beverage companies, a water resources company, a bank, alcohol industry, and large distributors. Major approaches are as follows.

The first communication strategy involves intra-communication as well as forming sub-networks inside organizations. In doing this, executives initiated fundamental policies and acted as role models for performing responsibilities to communities and employees. Principal strategies could be arranged into convincing employees to have an awareness of various social responsibilities. This created an organizational culture and enacting CSR policies through forming CSR teams to implement the policies proactively. In the meantime, executives seriously adopted ethical management systems with emphases on fairness and justice. These systems have been directly implemented and integrated in a means of communication with employees about the overall concept of a wide range of responsibilities and collaborations to serve society. That is to say, employees would be encouraged to realize that the firm cared for all stakeholders and the community.

The second strategy is in the form of network formation. With networking, the studied corporations collaborated with media companies and any other firm to strengthen CSR projects. This type of networking also served as an ally of corporations sharing common contributions to the society. Free media was also a targeted member of a network to broadcast or publicize outstanding public relations and campaigns that could attract the public. Such activities aimed at adding the values of each CSR project. More importantly sharing responsibility in producing an outstanding activity could enable the public to realize the significance of each big project rather than a number of small projects.

The third strategy is concerned with using all channels to publicize corporations' ethical business operations. Most firms were found to emphasize the necessity of doing the right thing. More importantly, good practices need to be disclosed. That is, the public would be expected to be informed that the corporation sees the values of ethics within organizations, toward customers, competitors, and the environment. In doing this, firms continuously employed a variety of channels to let the public know that they, for example, received an award of good business practice. Even 'thank you' messages or events for expressing appreciation held by government units to a particular firm was also used as a means to disclose outstanding practices.

Newspapers and television news programs tended to be the media for passing news to customers.

The fourth strategy directly involves being a leader of environmental conservation agency. With an aim to be perceived as a leader in being friendly to the environment, each firm launched campaigns urging the public to be aware of, for example, deforestation, reduced natural areas, water pollution, and water consumption. The campaigns were mainly promoted via charities, social events, and any other means of communication to announce being 'green' and 'caring' business sectors. Innovative slogans and trademarks were also used to convey the meaning of non-profit activities devoted to the betterment of the environment. Instead of focusing on some particular groups of potential customers, a number of firms, trying to be viewed as pioneers, declared their devotion to saving natural resources.

The fifth strategy can be viewed as being a provider. Charitable activities including giving away, for example, financial support and any resources that communities needed were the main methods of this strategy. In doing this, big companies donated money through scholarships to students and communities. In addition, the free distribution was based on the needs of each targeted community. For instance, a big company donated blankets to people living in remote areas, and even computers to schools in rural areas. Others built school buildings and other community centers that local people could utilize. One company built waste water treatment tanks to promote water conservation and the treatment system.

The sixth strategy used by a number of the studied companies adopted community-centered mutual projects. Instead of giving away supplies, the firms got communities involved through appointing each community a coordinator. Once the connection was settled and local residents seemed to understand the purposes of the policies, a number of collaborative activities were launched. These included community improvement projects, community volunteers, seminars on living condition development, and any other activity related to self-reliance workshops. In doing this, companies tried to convince local residents to perceive that they were empowered and their cooperation was recognized. With both the empowerment and involvement, local residents would be provided with information how the projects truly benefited the community. Along with the information, their involvement was acknowledged throughout the process.

The last strategy is bridging the firms and customers through goodwill and supportive activities. Due to the focus on promoting trust and loyalty, each firm employed various methods to enable customers to realize shared profits between businesses and customers. In terms of social networking, Facebook and SMS were mainly used to update news and information. Urgent information about agricultural and social problems was also communicated. Another similar method involved integrating current trends such as the value and benefit of The Sufficiency Economy campaign. Also, innovative marketing conveying how seriously business

sectors recognized customers was carried out to enable customers to realize that businesses would always be available to serve them.

Discussion

This study has synthesized and portrayed the CSR strategies and activities used by Thai corporations as presented in 17 studies during the past seven years. All seven strategies indicate that corporations were well equipped with alternative methods of CSR communication. Nonetheless, two important themes emerged from the synthesized findings.

First, in terms of compliance with CSR communication theory and the firms' actual strategies, Thai companies tended to employ all four groups of CSR theories (Garriga & Melé, 2004: 52–53). That is, parts of methods such as network formation aimed at gaining increased financial profits. Garriga and Melé (2004: 52) classify this kind of activities as instrumental theories that emphasize 'wealth creation'. Other activities that share similar goals include labeling themselves as leaders in serving the society could be influenced by the principles of 'social investments in a competitive context' (ibid: 54). The firms that employed these principles expected to achieve social objectives that, in the meantime, create advantages in competitive contexts, and profits respectively. Other methods seem to be relevant to 'political theories' (ibid: 52). As the findings revealed, an activity through working hand in hand with the community shares an aim of performing social duties as well as exercising social power. Among the rest of the strategies, serving local residents based on their needs seems to relate to 'integrative theories' (ibid: 57). Providing support that the community lacked was a way corporations took public responsibility into account. Through integrative theories, it seems that social development and business growth continued together. Other activities reflected the adoption of 'ethical theories' (ibid: 53). This means some activities signify that corporations are devoted to helping society as responsible citizens. That is, ethical values were embedded in business policies and operations.

In addition, it can be argued that the methods that the studied companies used to communicate CSR above lean toward altruistic and reciprocal strategies (Galbreath, 2006: 177–178). In terms of the altruistic strategy, some of them were in the form of promoting the 'interwoven relationship' between the firm and the community through 'an act of goodwill' especially any contributions (ibid: 177). In terms of the reciprocal strategy, the firm focused on explicitly building partnerships to improve society, expecting beneficial returns to both the firm and the society.

The other theme of discussion involves the empowerment of CSR in businesses. Note that strategies presented in this synthesis study confirm the increased roles of CSR in business. In addition to financial profits, a number of activities have been continuously implemented to contribute to social and environmental conditions. Interestingly, through CSR strategies, the inter-

relationship between business sectors and society could become stronger through, for example, shared values. Due to the prominent roles in business in Thailand, the seven strategies presented in the findings section signify the integration of CSR communication into business operations. Such strategies, in the meantime, confirm that the CSR concept has been a crucial mechanism to run business. In short, CSR communication strategies maintain the role as a norm in the business world, especially for communicating with the public how each company treated and cared for the surroundings.

Conclusion

This study has been conducted to synthesize CSR strategies for communication of enterprises in Thailand as presented in research during 2008–2014. Seventeen studies were selected and filtered by the criteria and stages based on the systematic reviews of meta-interpretations. Seven strategies have been found to be employed as methods of CSR communication. Each strategy conveyed both what and how the studied firms manipulate approaches to CSR missions while operating businesses. Regardless of any particular strategies, CSR practices identified in the studies seemed to contribute to environmental and social development. Hence, it can be concluded that CSR strategies remain an essential part of business in Thailand.

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