

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

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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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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).

RQ1: Which CSR/CC/SD issues are present on corporate websites?

RQ2: Which resources are used to present the information on CSR/CC/SD?

RQ3: Which resources are available to facilitate feedback on CSR/CC/SD issues?

3. Research methodology

A content analysis methodology (Krippendorff, 1990) was used and applied to the corporate websites of the 35 companies studied. Two categories were established: content categories and presentation of information categories.

The content category served to identify the issues included in CSR/CC/SD. The starting points were the *Global Reporting Initiative (2002)* and the *Corporate Citizenship Communication Index*, the latter being a method developed by *Ingenhoff (2004)* that is also based on the most important evaluation criteria and the most relevant international bibliography of the subject. Other reports and documents were used complementarily. These include the *UN Global Compact (2000)*, the *European Commission Green Paper (2001)*, the *ECC Kothes Klewes Report (2003)* and the *Business Impact Review Group Report (2003)* on the international scope, and the *Ley 26/2003 (2003) (Act 26/2003)* and the *Orden Eco/3722/2003 (2004) (Eco Order 3722/2003)* on the national. Ten values corresponding to issues related to CSR/CC/SD (Table 1) were identified.

With regard to the presentation of the information, the categories are based on the bibliographic references mentioned in the theoretical framework, and the research was complemented with consultations with experts on website design. Five categories were established: amount of information, information hierarchy, information location, information resources, and feedback resources.

The amount of information category allows identification of whether the different issues are present on the corporate websites and of how much information there is on the different issues. A large part of the information on CSR/CC/SD is linked to the annexed documents. These documents were identified and catalogued, but their content was not analysed. This is because the aim was to identify the information, its level of presence and the relevance given to each issue on the webpages. The hierarchy of information category permits the establishment of the hierarchical level, that is, where the majority of the information on CSR/CC/SD is located within different sections of the website. The location of information category facilitates the localisation of the information on CSR/CC/SD within the homepage sections.

The information resources category allows the identification of the different resources used to present the information on CSR/CC/SD. Two types of resources were recognised. (1) Expositive resources are those that allow the dissemination of information, with the visitor eminently passive and receptive. These types of resources are differentiated as graphic (written text and fixed images, photos, and graphics) or audiovisual (audio and video). (2) Interactive resources are those that permit information to be obtained through active interaction, with a mainly active and participative visitor. These include hypertexts, interactive graphics, charts, and similar resources.

The feedback resources category facilitates the identification of the systems available on corporate websites for visitors to ask questions, give opinions, or assess the CSR/CC/SD issues. Three types of possible forms of feedback were laid out: (1) general email to the company; (2) specific email linked to CSR/CC/SD issues; (3) other forms of feedback (questionnaires, chats, forums, blogs, etc.) that allow an assessment of or opinions on any of the issues on CSR/CC/SD. The latter type implies an active incentive resource to generate opinions and assessments from visitors.

The study sample included the corporate websites of all of the enterprises quoted in the first half of 2005 in the selective index of the Spanish Stock Exchange, the IBEX-35. This index is the basic reference for the Spanish Stock Exchange nationally and internationally, as the companies listed are the most significant enterprises and represent more than 95% of the total capitalisation of the Spanish Stock Exchange. The companies studied included Telefónica, Telefónica Móviles, TPI, Metrovacesa, BSCH, BBVA, Endesa, Iberdrola, Repsol YPF, Gas Natural, ACS, Acciona, Inditex, Corporación Mapfre, ENAGAS, Banesto, Sogecable, Altadis, Telecinco, Banco Popular, Arcelor, Indra, Abertis, FCC, Ferrovial, Iberia, Amadeus, Sacyr, Bankinter, Prisa, Unión Fenosa, Gamesa, Banco Sabadell, Acerinox and NH Hoteles.

Once the codification form was created, an initial analysis of five corporate websites, those of Telefónica, BBVA, Inditex, Metrovacesa, and Acerinox, was made. These are enterprises of different sizes and sectors. To test and adapt the codification form, a parallel analysis with two codifiers was applied. This first approach allowed us to judge the suitability of the categories to the subject of study and to the RQs. Afterwards, we proceeded to the application of the content analysis of our defined sample. The information has been codified in Excel codification forms. In this paper, only the categories related to the objectives and the RQs are isolated and analysed.

Table 1
Issues of CSR/CC/SD

Issue	Definition	References
Corporate profile	Explanation of the enterprise's views, values, and corporate strategy. Presentation of the company's property, structure, and legal form; divisions, subsidiaries and countries with which the enterprise operates. Explanation of results	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004)
Products and services	Explanation of the enterprise's products, services, and brands from a corporate perspective and not from a commercial one (type of products, raw materials, manufacture systems, etc.)	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004)
Employment and human resources	Declarations and explanations of its systems of contract, promotion, evaluation, and dismissal. Declarations and explanations about human rights in the enterprise (children labour, discrimination . . .)	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004); UN Global Compact (2000); Business Impact Review Group (2003); European Commission Green Paper (2001); Capron and Gray (2000); Maignan and Ralston (2002)
Economic action	Declarations and actions related to the economic impact of the enterprise in its local, regional, national, and supranational environment	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004); Business Impact Review Group (2003); Capron and Gray (2000); Maignan and Ralston (2002)
Social action	Declarations and actions related to the enterprise's involvement in social issues	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004); European Commission Green Paper (2001); Business Impact Review Group (2003); Capron and Gray (2000); Maignan and Ralston (2002)
Environmental action	Declarations and actions related to the enterprise's involvement in environmental issues	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004); European Commission Green Paper (2001); UN Global Compact (2000); Business Impact Review Group (2003); Capron and Gray (2000)
Corporate governance	Declarations and explanations of the enterprise's transparency, compromises in the governance of the company. Explanation of the structure of power, remunerations, responsibilities, government departments, etc.	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004); Ley 26/2003 (2003); Orden Eco/3722/2003 (2004)
Corporate ethics	Declarations and explanations about the enterprise's ethical compromises in relation with the business and its groups of public	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004); Capron and Gray (2000)
Relationship with publics	Declarations and explanations about the interests, importance, and linking of the groups of public with the enterprise	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004)
External criteria	Declarations, explanations, and linking with the national and international criteria on aspects of CSR/CC/SD	Global Reporting Initiative (2002); Ingenhoff (2004); ECC Kothes Klewes (2003)

4. Findings

4.1. Presence of CSR/CC/SD issues on corporate websites

The Internet has become an essential space through which to diffuse information about corporate responsibility. All of the enterprises in the IBEX-35 present information about CSR/CC/SD on their webpages.

Specific CSR/CC/SD sections also have an important presence on the corporate Web pages of the IBEX-35 enterprises. Of these, 68.6% have a specific section, and 31.4% do not. Of the enterprises with a specific section, the majority call it "Corporate Social Responsibility" (29.2%), followed by "Corporate Responsibility" (25%), and "Social Responsibility" (16.7%). Only one enterprise calls this section "Sustainable Development" (4.2%), and none call it "Corporate Citizenship."

Table 2
Presence of RSC/CC/DS issues on corporate websites

Issues	Presence (in %)
Corporate profile	100
Corporate governance	97.1
Products and services	91.4
Employment and human resources	77.1
Social action	74.3
Environmental action	68.6
External criteria	59
Relationship with publics	50
Economic action	37.1
Corporate ethics	22.9

The 10 CSR/CC/SD issues presented on the corporate websites of the enterprises in the IBEX-35 are not homogeneous (Table 2).

The most present and relevant issues are those linked to the presentation of the general characteristics of the company (corporate profile) and of its products and services. This reinforces the idea of the self-presentation function of corporate websites. These issues have an eminently descriptive and informative approach and are more commercial in perspective, rather than allowing an ethical valuation or an appraisal of the company's compromises in its production and marketing activities. Another issue with a high presence is corporate governance, but in this case the relevance is established mainly in connection with the legislation making it compulsory for enterprises to present such information on their websites (Ley 26/2003 [Act 26/2003] and the Orden Eco 3722/2003 [Eco Order 3722/2003]).

It must also be remarked that the issue of economic action turns out to be the least known and explained aspect of the "triple bottom line" of CSR/CC/SD for the companies in the IBEX-35 (it is found in only 37% of the webpages). Thus, the "triple bottom line" becomes the "double bottom line," as economic action does not have the prominence given to corporate profile and products and services. However, about 70% of the websites reserve a space for the issues of social action, environmental action, and employment and human resources.

Finally, a remarkable fact is that the issue of corporate ethics does not get special attention on the corporate websites, as nearly 80% of the companies do not treat it explicitly, and, of those that do, it is usually diluted in other general issues, such as social action or corporate governance.

4.2. Resources used to present the information on CSR/CC/SD

As for the resources used to present the information on CSR/CC/SD, the results show a clear predominance of the so-called "expositive" resources over the "interactive" resources (Table 3).

Table 3
Use of Information and Feedback Resources (in %)

Issues	Information resources			Feedback resources		
	Expositive		Interactive	Email		Other feedback
	Graphic	Audiovisual		General	Specific	
Corporate profile	100	28.6	51.4	97.1	85.7	0
Corporate governance	100	2.8	0	82.9	20	0
Products and services	100	19.4	22.6	80	20	0
Employment and human resources	100	0	8.5	68.6	54.3	0
Social action	100	5.7	5.7	62.9	14.3	2.8
Environmental action	100	5.7	5.7	54.3	11.4	0
External criteria	100	0	0	48.6	5.7	0
Relationship with publics	100	0	5.7	45.7	11.4	0
Economic action	100	0	0	37.1	2.8	0
Corporate ethics	100	0	0	20	0	0

Graphic resources are the main resources that are used to transmit information on the CSR/CC/SD issues (used by 100% of the companies). The use of audiovisual resources can also be considered highly significant (used by 40% of the companies), because the use of these resources on the Internet is troublesome (it slows website surfing). Interactive resources are used by slightly more than half (57%) of the enterprises. These resources are typical of and inherent in the Internet, and are what make it different from other media. Hence, we can declare that there is little significant presence of interactive resources for CSR/CC/SD issues on the websites studied.

More than a third (37.1%) of the enterprises use only graphic resources to present information on CSR/CC/SD, and another third (34.3%) combine graphic, audiovisual, and interactive resources. The remaining enterprises (28.6%) use graphic and audiovisual resources.

As can be observed in [Table 3](#), the only areas for which a suitable combination of the communication resources available (graphic, audiovisual and interactive) is used are corporate profile (a presentation of the company in general terms) and products and services, which clearly shows the importance and relevance of these sections within the websites, as compared with other CSR/CC/SD issues.

4.3. Feedback resources used with CSR/CC/SD information

With regard to the resources available to facilitate feedback ([Table 3](#)), 100% of the enterprises in the IBEX-35 provided an email address for CSR/CC/SD issues, whereas only one enterprise had another feedback instrument for those matters (an opinion poll on the company's social responsibility report).

With regard to email, 97.1% of the companies have a general email address, which is for the common use of all sections on the website and is always present; 94.3% have a specific email address for some of the concrete CSR/CC/SD issues in the corresponding sections; and 88.6% use both types of email (general and specific) for CSR/CC/SD issues.

The high incidence of the use of email addresses hides two relevant deficiencies. Firstly, there is little stimulus for specific feedback on the concrete CSR/CC/SD issues, as the specific email addresses are a tool almost exclusively offered to shareholders and investors and for economic-financial matters (usually found in the areas devoted to financial, shareholder, or investor information). Secondly, an assessment of the information available on the websites is not favourable, as no evaluation tools (such as interactive opinion polls, opinion forms, etc.) are provided, nor are there interactive feedback tools (such as chat rooms, forums, blogs, etc.) that would allow visitors to interact with the companies or with other people about the CSR/CC/SD topics in real time.

5. Conclusions and discussion

For the majority of the enterprises in the IBEX-35, the issues related to CSR/CC/SD are of great importance. This can be inferred from the fact that there is a large group of enterprises (nearly 70%) that have a section dedicated to CSR/CC/SD issues, and that section is usually situated in the most relevant levels of the websites, mainly on the homepage (almost 80%). The presence of a specific CSR/CC/SD section implies an explicit recognition of the issue, which serves as an indicator of the recognition and importance of CSR/CC/SD for the enterprises on their corporate websites. This conclusion is reinforced by the high hierarchical level at which the information on CSR/CC/SD is placed within the structure of the webpages (mainly between the second and third hierarchical levels), which is a very prominent placement position.

However, the results clearly show that the corporate websites of the companies in the IBEX-35 have a very low interactivity level in connection with issues related to CSR/CC/SD. The websites assume a mainly unidirectional/expositive function, focusing on the presentation of the information content. A high predominance of expositive resources (graphic and audiovisual) rather than interactive resources is observed, and there are no suitable feedback resources for interaction and dialogue with the different publics.

It can be declared that the corporate websites of the companies in the IBEX-35 do not have a bidirectional/dialogic approach for issues related to CSR/CC/SD. They are in a very initial phase of interaction or dialogue with their publics, considering that the resources used to present the information are mainly expositive, and the feedback resources available are minimal. The use of corporate websites for CSR/CC/SD issues is partial and limited, focusing primarily on the dissemination of information, rather than favouring dialogue and interaction with different publics.

Finally, this study has some limitations. It was conducted using a sample of companies on the Spanish Stock Exchange, so the results obtained are not necessarily representative of other enterprises. Nevertheless, the study

provides a methodology by which the CSR/CC/SD information on and the interactivity of the corporate websites of all types of companies can be evaluated. This methodology can also be applied to other countries (in fact, other researchers are already using it) to permit the establishment of comparative studies that will allow us to determine the relevance of CSR/CC/SD issues on an international level and the delimiting patterns in the presentation of that information. This will contribute to a global vision of the present state of CSR/CC/SD in organisations, and it will be a useful tool to improve the relationships and interaction between organisations and their different kinds of publics.

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