

**La responsabilità sociale di una associazione professionale:  
il caso della Ferpi**  
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*L'applicazione dei principi della responsabilità sociale alle attività di una associazione professionale*

1.

Thirteen important national and international corporations operating in Italy have accepted to participate, through senior executives in charge of communication of their respective CSR programs, to a working group, promoted by Ferpi (Italian Federation of Public Relations), which in coincidence with the beginning of the European year dedicated to CSR in 2004, will lead to the publication of a 'manual for communicating csr in Italy', including best practices and general guidelines.

The concrete objective of this initiative is to help guide the many public relations professionals - somewhat confused and in search of accountable and effective references - who have in these recent months been entrusted by their organisations/clients to plan, develop and implement CSR communication plans.

The political objective is, instead, to develop a specifically communicative (rather than olistic) model in order to avoid the already perceivable risk that CSR be assumed as mere communications, and to reaffirm the general principle that public relations are effective when they communicate behaviours rather than intentions or, even worse, when they manipulate stakeholder expectations.

This well defined position of Ferpi - representing some one thousand professionals, public, private and social sector executives as well as solo or agency consultants - finds its roots in a defined social responsibility policy carried out in these recent years: a policy implemented through various and parallel programs which thematise the CSR issue as an extremely relevant opportunity for public relations as long as their support function, as much as strategic, is explicit and interiorised by the professional community.

In other terms, without excluding that in specific and contingent cases public relations actually may happen to guide a CSR project, the most important legitimacy for the same concept of social responsibility, together with the certainty that it is not only a 'façade operation', is obtained when, guided by the Ceo, the entire dominant coalition of an organisation implements directly the CSR program versus respective stakeholder groups...

2.

The social responsibility policy of a professional association implicitly extends the same concept of csr to osr (organisations social responsibility).

As a matter of fact, there appears to be little reason why only corporations are called upon to be socially responsible and not also public or social sector organisations: and this, even more so in a situation in which the Government, as is the Italian case, overtly pressures companies to commit to subsidiarity financial support versus the non profit sector, interpreting this support as a strategic part of CSR policies, when it is only marginal. Even more so, there is no guarantee that an organisation is socially responsible simply because it financially supports the non profit sector of the economy and, from this point of view one could even say that CSR policies of the Italian Government, by

incentivating financial support to non profit organisations, risk the diversion of corporate attention from priority stakeholder groups (defined as subjects aware and interested in a relationship with an organisation whose activities are perceived to produce consequences on them).

3.

The first principle of Ferpi's ASR (association social responsibility) policy adopted in 2001, is that the association will not protect 'a priori' and 'in any case' the interests of its members when these are, also potentially, in contrast with those of their respective stakeholder groups and/or the public interest.

This is a relevant option as it assumes that members are satisfied in their expectancies from their professional association only if their respective stakeholder groups are also satisfied.

And, in turn, the latter are satisfied of their relationship with the professional association only when they are relatively comfortable that any individual Ferpi member represents the best quality segment of an enlarged professional community which is 70 thousand person strong in Italy, while only 1.000 of these are members of Ferpi: individuals who take an examination to enter after at least three years of full time professional activity, who sign and swear to respect the code of ethics which in its specific practice area part is constantly reviewed, and who participates to continued and compulsory professional development courses.

A second principle, recently confirmed at the Rome World Public Relations Festival held in June 2003, is the need for the association to orient its members through an ad hoc policy, accompanied by specific actions, proving capable of reconciling the contradiction which emerges from the effectively demonstrable positive relationship between economic performance and strong CSR policy of an organisation, while this same statement is, in itself, ethically debatable.

This is a highly delicate issue, and not only from a communication viewpoint.

On the other hand if this positive relationship is proven, the contrary is not. Even when one looks at the devastating cases of Enron or Worldcom, no one is entitled to confirm that only cases which become public are referred to misbehaving corporations. All the evidence seems to point to the exact opposite: in most cases one can safely say that socially irresponsible behaviour does not necessarily become public nor does it produce negative effects on organisations.

4.

Ferpi has so far implemented these principles by thematising an extensive internal debate through its highly visited Internet site and by organising an intense training course for members on the communication of social responsibility. As a result of this course, Ferpi also developed, with the cooperation of Sodalitas and Anima (two well known associations of business interests in the non profit sector), an ad hoc offer to Italy's medium sized businesses to 'replay' a similar course in-house, in the sole exchange of a pro bono contribution to the National League against Cistic Fibrosis.

5.

Also, considering the 'migrants' issue and the progressive (albeit difficult) transition of Italian society to multicultural and multiethnic subjects as one of the most relevant national emergencies, Ferpi has also initiated with Unicom (association of small advertising companies) and etnica.biz (a specialised non profit organisation), a multi phase project to train members to the direct professional

implications of the issue leading from a bilateral and symmetrical approach to communications management.

Since its recent inception in May 2003, this project has so far seen three experimental courses in Milan and, from next autumn will be reformatted and activated in other major Italian cities.

6.

Finally, it is necessary to rationalise why social responsibility is not in itself exhausting as a communication issue. Leaving aside theoretical arguments, this assumption is unequivocally demonstrated by the early results of the working group indicated at the beginning of this paper.

A highly articulated questionnaire, compiled by communication executives of the thirteen participant organisations, shows that (in order of importance) internal, financial and corporate communications are most directly impacted by CSR projects, followed at a distance by local communities.

A correct interpretation would lead to the conclusion that – admitting that participants effectively represent bench-mark practice- stakeholder groups more directly involved are employees, followed by shareholders and public authorities and at some length local communities which are more likely to include civil society and non profit organisations.

Employee communication contents seem to focus on human resource policies (equal opportunities, multicultural and diversity management and social services for families). Shareholder contents are mostly centred on corporate governance policies while public institution contents rely principally on reaffirming compliance not only to the letter but also to the spirit of the laws.

Essentially, all these issues require the proactive management of corporate executives respectively in charge of human resources, finance and, directly, the Ceo.

An extraordinary opportunity for the public relator to participate to the decision making process of the organisation's 'dominant coalition' and voicing his/her contribution by an attentive listening and interpreting of the expectancies of other influential publics, like for example the media (who are horizontal), activist groups and other opinion leaders who usually do not consider them-selves holding any stake but certainly exert strong influence on the organisation's actions.

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