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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND *PRO BONO* CAMPAIGNS

ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concept in which a business subject willingly and in interaction with other parties decides to contribute to a better society. CSR builds and connects businesses, employees and the community. One example of such business is taking on cases *pro bono* (Latin: for the public good). Representing clients for free on a volunteering basis is an acceptable and welcome way of solving business problems, mostly for financial reasons. For companies and organizations, it is a method of building new social and professional relationships through the active building of image and expanding their list of satisfied clients.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, public relations, *pro bono*

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1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility is a positive practice and its benefits have been recognized on the market. Public relations companies especially understand the contribution and reach of corporate social responsibility (CSR). *Pro bono* is a form of CSR that takes up probably the largest efforts in human resources. However, it is financially the least demanding. It also provides great visibility to the target public.

When people hear the expression *pro bono*, they usually think of a well-intentioned lawyer in the field of criminal law who works for free to save an innocent client that cannot afford a lawyer. In the world of public relations, these are PR agencies that take on events or campaigns for free, usually for non-profit organisations. When we say *pro bono*, we mean sharing one's time and knowledge for free.

This paper aims to explore the motivation behind free sharing of knowledge and time in market-oriented business and the mutual benefits of such a relationship. *Pro bono* campaigns by PR agencies are fairly common, yet only one scientific paper in the world has been written on this topic. Here lie the uniqueness and value of this paper. To gain insight into this topic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three experts and one client who worked on *pro bono* campaigns.

2. Defining the problem

The Croatian Public Relations Association (HUOJ) does not mention or govern *pro bono* cooperation of PR agencies in its strategic documents³, although it does promote it through several projects. The profession of public relations, unlike the law profession, does not recognize its own responsibility towards society (Bivins, 1993, p. 126), and *pro bono* work is seen as a good deed and/or a way of (self-) promotion. The aim of this paper is to present *pro bono* work as a necessary part of corporate social responsibility as well as the intentions of both sides, wishes, and conditions of such cooperation. It also aims to emphasize the importance of taking on *pro bono* cases as part of the corporate social responsibility of public relations agencies.

³HUOJ Status and Code of Ethics

2.1 Limitations

This paper relates to public relations agencies in Croatia and is not representative of other companies which decide to take on *pro bono* work or engage in corporate social responsibility. Regardless, the results of this research can be used to question the intentions, conditions and desired results of taking on *pro bono* cases. Furthermore, this paper indicates but does not problematize, the relationship between corporate social responsibility and public relations and their interdependence.

3. Corporate social responsibility

Since it is difficult to precisely define what corporate social responsibility is and where it ends, there are a couple of generally accepted definitions. Accepting corporate social responsibility (CSR) depends on the culture of individual organizations and this means the totality of collective values, beliefs, norms, and principles of the organization and its members (Needle, 2004). The trends are clear and show a growth rate of implementing social responsibility into business, including gender equality and environmental protection, declarative acceptance of CSR and a strategic approach to long-term sustainable development.

According to Andrews (1971), corporate social responsibility refers to intelligent and objective care of the well-being of the entire society that limits individual and corporate behaviour from engaging in very destructive behaviour, no matter how profitable, with the aim of achieving positive contribution for the benefit of all people (Peterson and Hermans 2004, p. 199). Kundid (2012, p. 499) states that “CSR means that the people, the community and the environment are not subordinate to the economic goals of corporations”.

Businesses are an active part of their community and have the responsibility of taking care of and contributing to its future (Pratt, 2006, p. 224). Therefore, corporate social responsibility can be defined as a conscious decision made by the organisation itself to conduct business in a way that will benefit the community and society by striving for ecological, economic and social goals, by setting higher standards not determined by law and in a way that is contrary to the market logic of solely gaining profit. It is a self-imposed plan fueled by a desire to build a better relationship with

the community and society in general which is why corporate social responsibility is not motivated by short-term goals, but it brings long-term advantages and benefits.

3.1 Public relations and corporate social responsibility

There are still differing opinions on the relationship between public relations and corporate social responsibility even though they have been intertwining over time. Many authors state that the similarity of their aims and roles as well as the need for cooperation is unquestionable (Siltaoja, 2006; Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006; Sohn & Lariscy, 2014). Clark (2000, p. 373) states that public relations and corporate social responsibility are in no way the same thing, even though they share a similar aim towards an improved relationship between an organization and its key stakeholders. Corporate social responsibility has to involve a common effort made by the management team, the employees and public relations. Although PR companies mostly advise their clients on matters of corporate social responsibility, they are also on the market aware of their moral obligation and necessity to maintain a positive image. These companies usually do not have a large number of employees or a large influence on the environment, which is why they can focus on taking care of their employees and the broader community. Therefore, the simplest way of cooperation between public relations experts and their community is through common projects with the non-profit sector. The definition of *pro bono*

Pro bono comes from the Latin *pro bono publico*, which means „for the benefit of the public“. It is a professional engagement done through voluntary work for free or cheaper than the price determined by the market, all for the public good. *Pro bono* work includes using specific professional knowledge and skills. It is about the private sector, which usually follows the rules of the market, trying to take part in improving the community. The United States' President's Council on Service and Civic Participation state that *pro bono* means „the donation of professional services that are included in an employees' job description and for which the recipient would otherwise have to pay. It is a subset of skilled volunteering that gives nonprofits access to professional experience.“⁴ This definition contains the essence and motivation of non-profit organizations for *pro bono* cooperation in relation to a long tradition of providing *pro bono* services throughout history.

⁴ The Summit on Corporate Volunteerism: Toward a New Definition of Pro Bono, New York City, 2008

4.1 CSR and *pro bono* (the relationship)

CSR builds and connects companies, employees and the community, and one example of such a way of conducting business is taking on *pro bono* cases. Representing clients for free voluntarily is an acceptable and welcome way of solving business problems for the clients, mostly for financial reasons. For companies and organizations, it is a method of building new social and professional relationships by actively building a positive image and growing their list of satisfied clients.

Social engagement, advising on the first assessment to conducting all four phases of public relations, is most commonly limited in duration by a special communication campaign in which public relations experts help primarily with the strategic approach to communication. *Pro bono* work is an effort under the theory of corporate social responsibility, even though it carries mutual benefit for the company and the client. Its only prerequisite is that it benefits the community – with it being humanitarian or, for example, supporting their client's positive efforts. Waller (2010, p. 444) states that advertising agencies also benefit from *pro bono* cooperation: increasing visibility, growing a positive image, increasing the number of clients and achieving greater employee satisfaction through philanthropic work and strengthening personal skills.

4. Public relations companies and *pro bono*

The only scientific research on relatively frequent *pro bono* campaigns done by public relations companies studied 271 members of The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) as well as their opinions on taking part in *pro bono* campaigns (Ferré 1993:59). According to the author, most (87%) American public relations experts, both employed in agencies and those working freelance, work *pro bono* – for free or with lower rates. He states that there is „a lack of a systematic assessment of the nature and extent of *pro bono* work done by public relations advisers.“ The participants took on 60% of *pro bono* work offered to them.

Morosoff (2014, p. 12) writes about the frequency of public relations companies taking on *pro bono* campaigns. He lists a couple of examples of the largest companies in the United States and the world that have incorporated this form of corporate social responsibility into their written policies. Furthermore, he emphasizes that a poll devised by the *Council of Public Relations Firms* in which its members took part showed that more than 70% of member companies work on *pro bono* campaigns.

5.1 Reasons for *pro bono* cooperation

F Ferré lists the following reasons for taking on free work: doing a good deed, getting more contacts, increasing visibility, new – exciting and innovative programs, trusting the client's concept, greater freedom in creating content, cooperation with local leaders, personal involvement, personal connections with the clients or their goals, doing favours to existing clients. Although the reasons for this type of cooperation are guided by short-term goals, the advantages are primarily long-term – the knowledge and experience gained by the organization. Of course, there are more reasons for taking on *pro bono* work, they mostly overlap and intertwine. Public relations companies and experts decide to take on *pro bono* work for several related reasons.

According to Ferré, only 9% of participants have a developed policy (reasons and conditions of cooperation) on taking on *pro bono* cases, which leaves a lot of space for improvement as well as a suggestion for creating a handbook with advice for successful *pro bono* cooperation.

5. Methodology

Qualitative research is directed in a multiparadigmatic and multimethod fashion and includes a naturalistic and interpretative approach to the subject of study, studying subjects in their historical and social context in order to understand and interpret the point or meaning of their actions and experiences (Halmi, 2003, p. 195).

In order to study the quality of the situation, reality, processes, and relationship of *pro bono* work with public relations from the perspective of the participants themselves, a qualitative research method was used in this paper because quantitative research would result in information on how common *pro bono* cases are and not the reasons for such cooperation as well as its possible negative aspects.

For the strategy of this research, the starting point of a defined study includes looking at all important aspects of a phenomenon, occurrence or situation, with units of study being individuals, groups, organisations, local communities, entire cultures or any other system seen as a whole or a separate entity (Halmi, 2005, according to Miočić, 2018, 178). A relatively limited object or process that can be theoretical and/or empirical and can be defined as a phenomenon specific to a certain space or time is called a case. A case can be an individual, several individuals or an entire group, a program, an event, an activity, a multi-stage process, an institution or organization (Miočić, 2018, 182) and it has two components: the subject and the object. The subject of a case

is not treated as a sample, but it represents an interesting, unusual or so far undiscovered phenomenon that is defined by spatial boundaries and placed in a specific period. The object of a case is more difficult to identify unambiguously since it represents an analytical or theoretical context through which the subject is researched (Miočić, 2018,182). The subject of this *pro bono* case study is activity and its object is the chosen participants who have spoken about it through the method of semi-structured interviews. Since *pro bono* activity is the phenomenon of this research, participants were chosen based on information on the case because the aim was to get as much as possible information from the participants, assuming that the participants of the research had information that was in its focus (Miočić, 2018, 182). The goal of this research was to illustrate and describe the *pro bono* activity as an expression of CSR in public relations and the means with which it can be understood in more detail. It is important to emphasize that the aim of this case study was not to generalize on the conclusions but to generalize based on a broader theory. That is, the results are not meant to provide evidence on “what works”, but to summarise and inform relational practices and the reasons for taking on *pro bono* work in public relations. The value of this study lies in providing better insight into the problem, while the point of the illustrations in the results is to make professional analogies based on judgment easier, not those based on applying evidence-based methods.

After contacting the Croatian Public Relations Association in order to identify PR agencies that have worked on *pro bono* projects, according to available and relevant data, three agencies were selected at random. They were invited to take part in the research as well as a *pro bono* project of creating a crisis communication manual which is being made *pro bono* for the Croatian Association of Primary School Principals by students of communication science (public relations course) and their mentoring professor. Two agencies accepted the invitation and their employees took part in a semi-structured interview because “it represents the golden mean between control and freedom of asking research questions” (Miočić, 2018: 185). Since the aim of this research was to identify reasons for taking on *pro bono* cases and the free offer of PR services as well as reasons behind accepting free PR advice, a semi-structured interview was also conducted with a representative from the Croatian Association of Primary School Principals as a way of illustrating the aspect, motivation and expectations of the client as well, not just experts in a *pro bono* relationship and a way of observing the integration and implementation of CSR in higher education in the educational process of maintaining good relationships and striving for the general good of

the society. Since stories are central to research on teaching because narratives are often used to report on knowledge and educational practices, the interviews with the speakers, all of whom were leaders of some *pro bono* project in the field of public relations, were also focused on getting stories out of the speakers and thinking about *pro bono* work in order to investigate the motivation of the speakers behind doing *pro bono* work and its consequences. Since the participants took part in this research voluntarily and without receiving any payment, their names are not listed to protect their confidentiality and identity out of ethical reasons.

6. Results

6.1 The usefulness and potential problems of *pro bono* work

According to the participants, *pro bono* work is defined by volunteering to contribute to social good through a variety of projects, including knowledge and service. In order to contribute to society through corporate social responsibility for which they feel both the responsibility and need, PR agencies take part in *pro bono* projects which have goals and values of their corporate culture and this is done by them offering their resources. Non-profit organizations decide to take part in a *pro bono* activity because they consider it as their duty. Since it is especially difficult to understand rules and demands of communication, they need and welcome any help and education, especially when it comes to crisis communication, which is one of the biggest reasons why they contact PR agencies and engage in *pro bono* cooperation.

The reasons and mutual benefit gained by working *pro bono* in profit and non-profit sectors, especially if the common *pro bono* campaigns and engagement have the same target public, include increased visibility, building the image of the organization, approaching common goals and visions, which also builds a common image on achieving success. The PR agency increases its legitimacy and builds its network of satisfied clients, associates and the press, and opens up new spheres of employment and practice, especially for students as *pro bono* work in a PR agency presents a chance to implement new techniques and tools to achieve something. Therefore, this calls for a bigger number of volunteers that non-profit organizations usually have.

Increasing the satisfaction of employees who take part in improving their community through *pro bono* activities is also meaningful to the rest of the employees, further education and achieving defined goals since PR is one of the most stressful professions. Therefore, *pro bono* activities and campaigns in PR present a chance for new and creative solutions since PR agencies are braver and

more determined when their every move is not directly linked to the goal of payment. This is why younger colleagues are often encouraged to take part in *pro bono* work and this is their space to grow as professionals. *Pro bono* campaigns increase personal satisfaction because, when we talk about *pro bono*, we mostly talk about social sensitivity and a human and humanitarian aspect of campaigning for a good cause. Since psychological research on giving has shown that doing good deeds makes people happier, healthier and more satisfied, connecting the agency to what it is/wants to be, with improving its public image, a *pro bono* activity most certainly has a positive effect and brings many benefits to the employees.

Non-profit organisations allow *pro bono* campaigns, which are mostly clients in the *pro bono* relationship, free access to expert and professional advice on communicating with certain publics that they could not achieve on their own for a lack of knowledge, financial means, human resources, the possibility of using marketing tools, media connections, etc. Because of a spike in short term interest of the public in the organization, they can position their brand for the long term as the most lucrative way of cooperation and achieving certain goals that benefit society.

Although they mostly engage in an affirmative relationship, the participants stressed a couple of problems and emphasized the importance of precisely defining the relationship and obligations on both sides from the very beginning, which is why they expressed a possibility of forming a cooperation contract. Both sides expect the *pro bono* relationship to be professional and to be of the same quality as paid services, which is why they stress the importance of planning expenses and establishing who will cover them and in what period. Also, they state it is very important to set a time limit on the campaign and *pro bono* cooperation because of the danger of disturbing usual business, possibility of lowering the value and price of public relations services and a potential clash of interests relating to other clients. It is interesting to notice that younger public relations experts who are not yet established in the market do not see this problem, but see *pro bono* cooperation as the best way of getting new clients. When it comes to working with students, the participants agreed that working on a *pro bono* case in public relations does not mean only gaining practical knowledge, but also the enthusiasm of exploring a new world and experiences, giving, feeling like you belong and feeling useful to your community in corporate social responsibility.

7.2 Types of *pro bono* cooperation in public relations

Different types of *pro bono* cooperation are defined based on the experiences and answers of the participants. They differ in their volume and duration of cooperation, desired goal, and type of client and their efforts.

According to the volume of cooperation, *pro bono* activity in public relations can involve:

- leading the entire communication campaign
- coordinating some segments of the campaign or communication channels – for example, media relations or managing social networks
- providing advice
- loaning (mostly young) employees
- working in the preliminary phase, preparing communication – brainstorming ideas
- loaning a certain resource – tool, software, etc.

According to duration, there are two types of cooperation:

- *ad hoc* campaigns
- long term engagement (a usually less demanding form of cooperation)

According to the client's desired goal:

- setting a communication strategy
- increasing visibility and presence in the media
- gaining the support of the public
- raising funds (humanitarian)
- changing the image

According to the type of client and their efforts we can recognize the following types:

- charity/humanitarian
- environmental
- educational
- human rights
- religious communities

- etc.

7.3 Advice for clients seeking pro bono services

Finally, the conversation with the participants resulted in a set of advice for clients seeking *pro bono* services. Public relations agencies are more likely to accept *pro bono* cooperation if:

- there is a common interest between the client and the experts
- the goals of the client and/or campaign are strongly supported by the public
- there is an obvious benefit to the society
- the target publics of the client and public relations companies overlap
- there is a clearly defined time frame
- there are secured funds to cover the entry expenses of the campaign
- the client has a valid need for advice in the area of public relations
- the client is not able to pay regular price for the service
- it differs from their usual approach to campaigning and routine work

8. Conclusion

Pro bono cooperation has greatly contributed to the professionalization of communication in the nonprofit sector. The reasons behind such cooperation as well as its benefits for both sides are investigated in this paper. Although they do not directly profit financially, public relations companies are aware of their contribution to their communities and their indirect profit. Free (*pro bono*) investment of resources for the better community is part of the concept of corporate social responsibility.

This research presents the only newer insight into the large area of cooperation between the profit sector and the public and non-profit sector. It would be beneficial to investigate what are the real achievements and consequences of such cooperation on competitive relationships and the market.

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ODNOSI S JAVNOŠĆU I *PRO BONO* KAMPANJE

SAŽETAK

Korporativna društvena odgovornost (CSR) koncept je u kojem poslovni subjekt voljno i u interakciji s drugim strankama odlučuje pridonijeti boljem društvu. DOP gradi i povezuje tvrtke, zaposlenike i zajednicu. Jedan od primjera takvog poslovanja je uzimanje slučajeva pro bono (latinsko: za opće dobro). Besplatno predstavljanje klijenata na volonterskoj osnovi prihvatljiv je i dobrodošao način rješavanja poslovnih problema, uglavnom iz financijskih razloga. Za tvrtke i organizacije to je metoda izgradnje novih socijalnih i profesionalnih odnosa kroz aktivnu izgradnju imidža i proširivanje njihovog popisa zadovoljnih klijenata.

Ključne riječi: društvena odgovornost poduzeća, odnosi s javnošću, pro bono