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## Corporate social responsibility and the oil industry: Theory and perspective fuel a longitudinal view

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### ABSTRACT

To gain an in-depth theoretically-grounded understanding of managing corporate social responsibility (CSR), the current study offers four key propositions for CSR theory development: (1) Living corporate social responsibility from the inside out, (2) Earning trust of the public and the media, (3) Giving back as a community citizen, and (4) Accepting that we're all in this together, but still unique. Also offered are five best practices for public relations in the oil industry. All emerged during in-depth interviews with three senior public relations managers of a leading independent US oil company; executives who have navigated CSR decision making and practices through nearly five decades (1966–2010) at different points in time. In the wake of two massive 2010 oil spill crises in North American waters that garnered extensive media attention, findings are particularly relevant for advancing CSR theory and for providing complex insider perspectives less traveled in the public relations literature.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, many corporations prioritize society's needs and use strategic communications to maintain positive, cohesive stakeholder relationships which are an intangible asset. Failure to integrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) principles into business practices leaves companies vulnerable to negative stakeholder perceptions; especially when bad news erupts. People have their own ideas about appropriate corporate behavior and businesses rely on their goodwill to maximize profits and maintain reputation—a climate that can foster mutually beneficial relationships when expectations on both sides are met.

Undeniably, CSR's guiding principle is that business and society are interwoven rather than distinct, separate entities (Wood, 1991a). The goal of the UN Global Compact's 10 points for corporate reporting procedures is to prevent “negative consequences associated with globalization,” including human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption categories (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, pp. 48–49)—so that CSR and crisis communication literatures often overlap. The current study presents a longitudinal behind-the-scenes view of one US-based oil company's public relations strategies, wherein three of its senior public relations managers were interviewed for perspectives on CSR during 1966–2010—closely mirroring the emergence of CSR 50 years ago (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007). Findings offer a significant contribution to the public relations literature and expand upon lesser-examined insider perspectives, given that the oil industry has been notoriously silent about its practices.

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The company examined for this study serves as the lens through which we make visible principles of emerging CSR theory (CSRT) in order to assess oil industry best practices. Alcohol, chemical, oil, pharmaceutical, and tobacco industries often are perceived as “being out of step with social values” (O’Connor, 2006, p. 81) and rarely are absent from the US media spotlight. From the 1969 Santa Barbara California oil spill, through the Exxon Valdez crash into the Alaskan Blich Reef in 1989, up to the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico, oil companies are met with public and media distrust when they should be proactive, transparent, and open to external criticism and new ideas.

## 2. Review of the literature

### 2.1. Theory building and corporate social responsibility

Even though CSR is *emerging*, it does not yet resemble a *theory*—“systematic sets of interrelated statements intended to explain some aspect of social life” (Babbie, 2007, p. 43). CSR studies offer benefits, strategies, principles, and categories used to develop theory—even though the path has been “controversial, complex, and unclear” (Garriga & Mele, 2004, p. 51). Some posit that CSRT is overly broad with loose boundaries (e.g., Podnar, 2008). Despite challenges, we see great value in infusing the public relations body of knowledge with CSR perspectives.

CSR is synonymous with good governance. Global economic growth and an increasingly information-rich socio-political climate by 2000 called for greater integration and co-dependence (Waddock, 2004). Wood (1991b) characterized this as a move from business *in* society to business *and* society [italics added] and Brown (2008) defined CSR as a philosophy in “. . . reaction to political and cultural crisis” (p. 1). CSR and organizational reputation are closely linked (Hamann & Acutt, 2003) and industry integrates social demands into business practices to reap CSR benefits of: (1) enhanced organizational attractiveness (Luce, Barber, & Hillman, 2001); (2) improved corporate social performance (Carpenter, 2003); and (3) positive perceptions among customers, employees, investors and suppliers (Wigley, 2008).

Yet critics charge that CSR is an attempt to pre-empt and preclude accountability and compliance standards (Hamann & Acutt, 2003); in effect, a smokescreen to mask short-term profit making. Corporations such as Chevron-Texaco interpret CSR as philanthropy and community relations via third parties—with efforts sometimes considered inauthentic (O’Connor, Shumate, & Meister, 2008), drawing media skepticism (Tench, Bowd, & Jones, 2007). CSR may be manipulated by internal managers toward their own ends (Crouch, 2006), so that it seems like “misguided virtue” (Henderson, 2001). Perhaps the term “CSR” is unsuitable. “Public responsibility” puts the focus on stakeholders (Preston & Post, 1981, p. 60), and “corporate externality recognition” accounts for an organization’s cultural effects not captured by market transactions (Crouch, 2006, p. 1534).

In serving the liaison function linking top management with constituents, public relations managers have a unique vantage point from which to impact organizations’ CSR strategies. Yet, corporate managers may be challenged to fully satisfy CSR objectives because a gap exists between societal expectations of corporations and the reality of deliverables (Lehman, 2007)—and few managers have absolute freedom in CSR implementation since interests and best practices often are predefined at higher organizational levels (Banerjee, 2008).

### 2.2. US oil companies, bad news, and the media

A rhetoric of arrogance has permeated oil operations for decades. The Standard Oil Trust discovered that size is insufficient to absolve corporations of attending to public interests (Boyd, 2001). The 1969 Union Oil Company drilling site eruption off the California shore incited shareholder activism, profits taxation, growing public hostility (Brown, 2008), and led to creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. The 1970s saw OPEC oil cutoffs, environmental concerns, and disparaging corporate leaders. Exxon used “displacement” as an image restoration technique when the Exxon Valdez crashed into the Alaskan Blich Reef in 1989, claiming “that the captain of the vessel had consumed alcohol. . . and was to blame, not the company” (Zaremba, 2010, p. 117). The event also incited unprecedented outrage at initial corporate CEO insensitivity and proved that financial reparations alone are inadequate for reputation preservation (Small, 1991).

It is little wonder that oil companies consistently are named among the least trusted corporations, for survey findings suggest that the oil industry ranks foremost in the public mind as needing more regulation (Corso, 2009). Complexity of the oil business, large profit margins, and environmental risk all play into the public’s critical view (O’Hara, 2005). When Americans are asked who they blame for skyrocketing gas prices – more than any other source – they blame oil companies (“Chevron CEO: Market, not greed, driving gas prices,” 2008). With an increasing demand for corporate transparency and stakeholder dialogue, oil companies must find ways to decrease the gap separating them from stakeholders.

There is much to discover about how one of the most distrusted industries in the US regards CSR, makes decisions about issues that impact stakeholders, and why lessons spotlighted in extreme negative media attention seem to go unheeded. This review of literature logically leads to two research questions: RQ1: What role has corporate social responsibility (CSR) played in Independent Oil Company’s (IOC) public relations efforts over the past five decades? RQ2: What advice does Independent Oil Company’s (IOC) senior public relations officers offer to public relations managers at other oil companies to ensure attention to corporate social responsibility (CSR)?

### 3. Method

An in-depth interview qualitative research method was deemed most appropriate; often used when a researcher has identified a few experts whose knowledge and participation in a specific field will shed significant light on the area of research interest (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The premise here was to draw on experiences and understandings of experts in a high-profile industry lacking in transparency. Researcher–respondent exchanges during interviews promote maximum mutual understanding of phenomena—and detail and richness of words come through best in an interview format with ample space for elaboration and introspection. Interview data often serve as an initial phase in hypothesis development. Thus, non-generalizability of findings to larger populations is a major disadvantage of the interview method.

“Independent Oil Company (IOC)” was selected as a pseudonym for the organization examined for this study to ensure confidentiality. An integrated oil company is involved in the upstream (exploration/production) and downstream (refining, marketing, distribution, and retailing) segments of the industry, whereas an independent is only involved in a certain segment. IOC focuses on the downstream segment and is a leading manufacturer and marketer of petroleum and petrochemical products. As one of the largest independent refiners and marketers in the United States, the company operates domestic refineries and markets gasoline through approximately 5000 retail outlets in 24 states. It is not a multinational company.

Because most studies of communication practices in the oil industry rely on media, pressure group, consumer, and financial officer perspectives (e.g., Brown, 2008; Golob, Lah, & Jancic, 2008; Heath, 1998; Ihlen, 2008), the current study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of how oil companies strategically operate on the inside as navigated by its senior public relations managers. Offered is a longitudinal study wherein three communication managers, each employed by the same company during different time periods from 1966 to 2010, offer perspectives on IOC’s (in)attention to CSR over the past five decades. In-depth interviews were conducted during September 2008 and in October 2010 to capture perceptions of two major North American oil spills in 2010 that received extensive news media coverage.

#### 3.1. Respondents and topic guide

Three IOC senior public relations executives whose primary responsibility involved managing corporate communication and attending to CSR were selected for interviews—two retired African-American males and one Caucasian male. Respondents ranged in age from 40 to 72, each with an average of 16.7 years’ corporate communications experience. All had graduate school training and developed public relations careers in industries of oil, chemical, and pharmaceuticals. Respondent A retired from senior public relations management for IOC in 2008 following a 9-year career and earlier worked for 31 years as a media and public relations executive in oil, chemical, and pharmaceutical industry companies. Respondent B retired from IOC in 1999 after a 44-year career that began in marketing and sales before senior management in public relations. Respondent C joined IOC as a senior-level public relations executive in 2008 and was employed there at the time of the interview. Respondents A and B agreed to be audio taped, while Respondent C declined to have his interviews recorded. The principal researcher took field notes to record key points and direct observations. No incentives were offered to respondents. Findings were mined from 46 single-spaced pages of typed interview transcripts and 15 pages of field notes over the course of 8 h.

A topic guide instrument of 30 probes was developed and tested for interviews—and made available to respondents in advance upon request. Informed consent forms were supplied preceding interviews as per the researchers’ university Institutional Review Board requirements. Respondents were asked questions about their public relations experience in the oil industry, CSR, decision-making processes, and for examples to support statements. Probes were open-ended to ensure the conversations were not restrictive and encouraged respondents to self-report in as much detail as they felt comfortable sharing. Respondents were provided copies of transcripts before data were analyzed to assure accuracy and an early draft of the study was provided to them to ensure that their words were represented in context.

#### 3.2. Data analysis

An innovative technique for textual analysis of qualitative data is to use a computer rather than human analysts. Computer-assisted textual analysis (CATA) proves useful when the a priori meaning categories required might not be easily identified by a human (Rice & Danowski, 1993)—whereby algorithms, or “rules for coding text are made explicit . . . [and] the computer provides perfect coder reliability” (Weber, 1984, pp. 127–128). High coder reliability frees investigators to concentrate on other aspects of inquiry, such as interpretation and explanation.

With regard to validity, it has been argued that the term is not applicable to qualitative research. Some researchers have urged for development of one’s own concept of validity and adoption of terms such as *quality* and *rigor* (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Stenbacka, 2001). For rigor, we used the qualitative research method of in-depth interviews to collect data (text) after carefully developing and testing the topic guide (as well as involving respondents at two different points of entry to ensure accuracy of their words)—and then used CATA to help identify themes in the text for highest quality outcomes.

The CATA program used was centering resonance analysis (CRA), or Crawdad, to analyze text files (Corman, Kuhn, McPhee, & Dooley, 2002). The CRA concept suggests that texts cohere via noun “centers” and graphically illustrates linked word associations according to their importance, or betweenness centrality in a network. Resonance is the frequency and influential position in which words appear. CRA benefits include preserving context, as well as distancing researcher subjectivity

from the process (Kosiki, 1993) since word associations used to analyze textual meaning are determined by mathematical procedures' decision rules. CRA's validity and reliability measures are true (Corman et al., 2002).

Finally, Crawdad's Browser function provides a list of mapped Word-Pairs, while the Highlighted Words Display function shows word associations in context of the original text. Crawdad's Network Map function also illustrates Word-Pair relationships and the strength of those relationships. Outcomes of CRA runs also include unique highlighting of "strong words" using different colors to show where they appear in texts. Independently, and then jointly, researchers considered CRA outputs and named themes (and some sub-themes) interpreted as key propositions for CSRT development and CSR best practices.

#### 4. Findings

Word-Pairs discovered by Crawdad software after scanning through 46 single-spaced pages of interview texts focused on "company," "oil," and "industry" – which regularly were associated with: (1) people, public; (2) chairman, CEO, manager, executive; and (3) media, communication. Importantly, the most influential (central) words have the darkest boxes; words with slightly lesser influence appear in paler boxes; and words with still less influence are unboxed. Lines indicate links among words wherein the heavier the line, the stronger the link.

##### 4.1. RQ1: What role has corporate social responsibility (CSR) played in Independent Oil Company's (IOC) public relations efforts over the past five decades?

Word-Pairs in context suggested themes for responding to RQ1 that were interpreted as four key propositions for CSRT development.

###### 4.1.1. Living corporate social responsibility from the inside out

Two sub-themes emerged: (a) nurturing top-down organizational attention to CSR and (b) developing an employee focus and a community relations point of view.

Emphasizing the role of a Chairman or CEO in embracing CSR, Respondent A said:

"It starts at the top with the Chairman setting the tone. . . The CEO is a very powerful person in the organization and he or she has to let the senior team, the next level, and all the employees know what is important. And then people will respond to that. If that doesn't happen, then nothing happens. . . I spent 40 years around oil companies, the first subject discussed at the refinery or a meeting that our Chairman might hold is safety and then profitability, not the other way around. Not making money at the expense of safety. . ."

Respondent B agreed that top-level responsibility to employees and other important stakeholders also was a CSR driver during his IOC years:

"The motivation has to go beyond financial. . . When you are the man, the CEO, just because you take your necktie off and roll up your sleeves but you are saying all the wrong things, the image part isn't going to help you at all. Because they (the public) expect you to have answers, or at least answers that will give them some sense of comfort, some sense of 'Yes I care about this and we are going to get it done'. . . You have to be honest and upfront with them. . ."

Using the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico as a benchmark, Respondent A noted the devastating effects of lack of top-down organizational attention to CSR:

"When that situation happened, I looked at that and I said, 'He just did not take people into consideration'. He didn't really think how the people were going to feel as a result of what he said. He just did that on an emotional level. And again, I think that is endemic and inherent in the individual, but that is when the PR, the handlers if you will, have to come in and sit him down and look him in the eye. . . I remember my Chairman telling me that 'when bad things happen, people may or may not understand what you tell them or what you do, but people will always understand and believe how you make them feel'."

Respondents also noted that CSR at IOC also focused on developing an employee focus and a community relations point of view. Respondent A said:

"First off, our employees should come to that facility with the full expectation that they are going to go home to their loved ones at night. . . the people right outside that gate because they are the ones, other than the employees, who are impacted, affected by what takes place in that plant if something should happen. . . you want to make sure you are part of that community. . . Having open houses so the people can come in and talk to the people in the plant about what they do and how they go about it and why it's important to them – to put a human face on everything. We aren't just a big monolith down there with towers and steam and pressure; these are people that are operating that facility. Our oil company is made up of people, not things. . . we are there at their invitation. . . You have to coexist. . . This one lady said to me, Do me a favor, tell your plant manager over there 'cause he doesn't really communicate with us. . . tell him we are poor, but we're not dumb'. . . I think the oil companies perhaps looked at people as they don't need to know."

Respondent B recalled when industries left cities during the 1970s' economic downturn, and IOC stayed due to a deep sense of CSR:

“What are we going to do, take the refinery out of there and go someplace? . . . So we said we better start putting together some strategies that say we are committed to this city and we are going to make contributions and involve our people.”

#### 4.1.2. *Earning trust of the public and the media*

Two sub-themes emerged: (a) public trust and (b) media trust.

CSR depends on trust earned among the public and media. Respondent A explained:

“[W]hat has to happen is oil companies have to be more open and receptive, more participative, not viewed that things are done in some back room. I think transparency goes a long way. . . You have to have some corrective action when something bad happens and to communicate to people that you are going to see what you can do to make sure it doesn't happen again. The only way to build that credibility up is to get in front of that. The same kind of relationship you have with the community is the same one you have with the media.”

Technology enables IOC to be transparent, as shared by Respondent C:

“The game has changed. . . With technology you have to respond faster. There is a higher standard for openness that people expect from companies. People want more transparency and accountability. . . Things shift gears when there is bad news. [IOC's] guiding principles are to get the bad news out, take responsibility, inspire confidence and get out – share as much info as possible [because] people have a need and right to know what is going on. The response needs to be immediate and effective in order to gain the public's trust.”

According to Respondent B, perhaps one of the most effective means for earning public trust is to win the support of staunch critics—even when management colleagues resist:

“You always had that inside conflict with those who thought we didn't have to talk to ‘those tree-huggers’ – those people who are ‘intruding in our lives’. You let them blow off steam a little and you say ‘Look, we are going to do it’. The enlightened manager eventually says, ‘We are going to try to address this and if we can't, we can't, but we're going to try’. That would always win out – that we would give it a try.”

Using what he considered to be IOC's worst crises as examples, Respondent B explained how operating by CSR principles can help organizations survive an environmental disaster with human and wildlife fatalities—by responding quickly and with third-party support:

“We responded to it quickly. The CEO just had to come out and talk about it, but there wasn't a whole lot you could do. . . It helped that we always try to maintain a good relationship with the media because they went to great lengths to explain how it happened. . . . When we got word, we certainly dispatched our contractors and our own people to get on it right away. . . fumes. . . right up to the big shopping center. . . the homes right in the area could smell petroleum. We preempted the ambulance chasers, we sent people out and knocked on those doors to present a card to them that had a hotline number for them to call if anyone got sick or ill. We did it through a third person medical contractor . . . We had managed it as well as any company could given the circumstances.”

Respondent B also described CSR outreach in terms of community ambassadors speaking at Rotary and Kiwanis meetings, chambers of commerce, and church groups. During 1980s fuel shortages, Respondent B explained:

“We marshaled anyone who could put two words together to get out there and speak to various audiences. We had built some goodwill. . . It was tough because we still had the Big 7 out there who were still dominating the media.”

Respondent A described CSR outcomes during another oil spill:

“All the politicians, the community, environmentalists, everyone was down on us. . . We made ourselves highly visible. . . It appeared as if we were sincere about the efforts and were accessible and tried to do the right thing to fix it. It was good to see somebody that is forthcoming to step up to the plate and say, OK we didn't do the job. It shouldn't have happened. . . It wasn't just the PR guy who was available. I made sure other people were available.”

Respondent C explained IOC's contemporary view on media relations:

“We do not promote ourselves. [We] usually decline requests to speak to the media and keep as low a profile as possible. . . What happens inside fence lines stays inside fence lines, except when community or the environment is concerned. . .”

#### 4.1.3. *Giving back as a community citizen*

IOC's CSR outreach facilitated genuine community citizenship ranging from sponsorship of highly visible community events like horticulture shows and Fourth of July celebrations, as well as community theatre groups, museums, and the

public zoo. Respondent B opined:

“You can’t just continue to extract from the public these tremendous profits and not expect to give back. . . There was a time when ‘if it isn’t market driven, we shouldn’t do it’. I guess I was in between that era saying ‘Everything shouldn’t be market driven. You should still have some discretionary dollars that you put out there because it’s the right thing to do’. . . I used to have to argue my way into that, but I got my way most of the time. . . The people who work behind that oil company symbol, they have as many thoughts and sensibilities towards their community as you do. You just try to bring the two closer together. That was my theory anyway.”

Respondent B explained that IOC also interpreted CSR as enabling community members to thrive economically by underwriting small business loans:

“We had clinics and things about what it would take to go into business. It didn’t necessarily have to be a gasoline service station. . . If you can make it over the two-year hump, make it through two cycles, and put money back into the business. That’s where [IOC] served some of that social responsibility to a population of people who didn’t know about business.”

Beyond corporate sponsorships, Respondent A told of how IOC incorporates volunteerism in CSR:

“I was so impressed with the amount of activities and the diversity of activities that people at IOC were involved in. We are always the leader in United Way.” Similarly, Respondent B said: “I served on several boards where [IOC CEO] lent his name. If he couldn’t make it, as the PR guy, I’d go sit in on that meeting.”

#### 4.1.4. *Accepting that we’re all in this together, but still unique*

All IOC respondents lamented that, unfortunately, news media stories of Big Oil profits and crises tend to keep the oil industry on the news media agenda – for better or for worse – so that what happens to one oil company affects all others. As Respondent C explained:

“Oil is never completely out of the spotlight, but these incidents have reignited skepticism of industry and big business as a whole. . . On an individual level I think people get the basic difference between oil companies. . . but emotionally, we all get lumped together as Big Oil, even though IOC is small and very different in comparison.”

Distancing IOC from Big Oil proved challenging for Respondent B:

“We had to show a face of [IOC] as different from big, bad oil. . . That was constantly a conscious part of [IOC] to try to distinguish itself from big oil. . . [W]hen I was VP [title], I had the responsibility of all those refineries and had to have a manager of communications and press at the refineries that would talk directly to people if we had difficulty. We amplified our contributions and did a lot of things to give ourselves visibility to show we wanted to be good citizens and we are not Big Oil to the extent you think we are.”

Yet, the national media spotlight on individual oil companies’ crises complicates any attempts at individuality, as Respondent A recalled:

“Exxon Valdez has set us back light years and that is what people remember and we have been fighting ever since. . . Valdez, Exxon’s classic 101 screw-up in terms of public relations. . . we are all painted with the same brush. And so, it’s not just that BP is some monolith; it’s all of us.”

Similarly, Respondent C said:

“Consumer perceptions were deeply shaken by the Deepwater Horizon disaster. . . put the oil industry front and center again. The Gulf Oil Crisis made people look closely at all aspects of the oil business from drilling to refineries. There is now a heightened attention to safety record/regulation.”

## 4.2. *RQ2: What advice does Independent Oil Company’s (IOC) senior public relations officers offer to public relations managers at other oil companies to ensure attention to corporate social responsibility (CSR)?*

Embedded among respondents’ voices were five best practices for public relations in the oil industry that are philosophically consistent with CSR tenets.

### 4.2.1. *Operate with integrity and offer the best advice without being a self-interested promoter*

Respondent A emphatically denounced counterparts who fail to responsibly offer advice:

“What is the worst thing that could happen if you were to confront Tony Hayward as a subordinate, get fired?. . . You have a fiduciary responsibility to do that, to ask that question and ask the next question. Say, ‘Mr. Hayward, we really have to think about what we are going to say. This is a very sensitive matter. We can’t make chicken salad out of chicken feet, but we can do something to make this better today. . . The process is going to be long, but we have to start here.’”

#### 4.2.2. *Establish open communication and positive relationships before problems arise*

Respondent A supported open, two-way symmetrical communication at all times:

“My job as spokesperson was to represent the interests of my company, but I also had to establish communications in those down periods, which were not that often frankly, but I had to allocate X amount of time in my day to foster media relations. I think I had good relationships with the daily newspapers, and the local community papers near the plants. Also, my responsibilities were more broad.”

#### 4.2.3. *Nurture personal relationships with the Chair/CEO and earn a policy-making table seat*

Respondent A explained that public relations as a relationship-building function still has not entirely earned its due in the oil industry:

“I’m an early riser, so I’d be at the office early and so would the executive VP. He would always come by and we would sit down, talk and have coffee. I would ask him questions about the business and he would take the time to tell me. He understood that the better I did my job, the better off we are as a company, so it’s in his interest. As they understand the value of the job that we do, they are more receptive. . . They don’t love the function, but they understand the function. I spent a lot of time with the Chairman. . . [when] traveling, when he was finished with his paperwork, he would want to talk. . . It gets back to integrity, trust.”

#### 4.2.4. *Know when to put the Chair/CEO in front and when to keep her/him out of the spotlight*

Reflecting on IOC’s history, as well as other oil companies’ missteps, respondents offered mixed feelings about the role of the Chair/CEO—but all agreed on her/his importance to reputation. Respondent C said:

“Well if we compare the approach to crisis communications and public relations between Exxon Valdez and the BP Gulf Crisis for lesson learned – the Exxon chairman was invisible for weeks and then when he did speak he was so unprepared, unsympathetic, and out of touch. Now compare that to Tony Hayward who was visible from the start, showed leadership and that he was in charge, vocal and accessible. Now, he was not the best spokesperson, but who am I to say that given the pressure he was under.”

Often, egos get in the way, explained Respondent B:

“[I]t was pretty difficult to understand what BP’s core culture is all about as it relates to the public. . . You can’t bring your ego to the party; all it does is get in the way. It was very evident that Hayward thought that ‘If there is anyone to give the answers, I am the one to give them’. Well sure, you might be the ultimate spokesperson, but someone has to filter or should edit what you are going to say because you have an awful lot at stake. That doesn’t mean you don’t lawyer up. . . but are you the *appropriate* spokesperson? What is it that you want to convey to the public in a time of crisis?”

Historically at IOC, being able to “control the ego” of the Chair/CEO rarely was easy, but it was critical to retaining company reputation. Respondent B recalled a public relations team consultation with a resistant CEO during an oil spill:

“‘[We want you] to stay in the office. We know you are upset’. He felt he could explain to people what’s wrong because [he was] ‘an old operating guy, I know what makes pipelines work and refineries’. . . ‘Yes, but you aren’t talking to a group of mechanical-minded and technical-minded people, you are talking about emotions, people upset’. . . I think that was our biggest achievement to get him to shut up, sit down, stay in the office, let the public relations group handle this. . . We said to our CEO, ‘sit tight, hold your ego and anger in check. Let the public relations department handle it’. . .”

Respondents also posited that having CSR principles in place can go a long way in convincing a Chair/CEO about who the best spokesperson should be.

#### 4.2.5. *Communicate plainly, but avoid talking down to people*

All respondents agreed that speedy, open, truthful, and respectful communication with stakeholders is crucial at all times and critical during crises. Respondents B and C encouraged public relations to keep messages the same—not to mix them, but to tailor messages for each audience. Moreover, Respondent A said: “Form is more important than substance. . . the tone of what you say is as important as the message.” Respondent B suggested that a tone associated with calling community members “the little people,” combined with the Chair/CEO’s continental accent was a bad combination for BP:

“Anybody who works in public relations was like, ‘What the hell is going on with these people’? And you know there is also this issue of socioeconomic difference between persons who might live in that part of the country versus the polished Englishman and the other polished Belgian. . . I was saying, ‘Oh my God, someone get the hooks out and get those persons off stage’.”

## 5. Conclusions and discussion

Criticism of corporate management attitudes toward business operations and outcomes has grown increasingly severe in the third millennium since collapses of Worldcom, Enron and allegations that deceptive tactics were used by the once-iconic Johnson & Johnson in handling of its 1982 Tylenol recall (Veil & Kent, 2008). Against this backdrop – as well as two major 2010 North American oil spills – the current study was designed to scrutinize the oil industry by using a corporate social responsibility (CSR) lens and perspectives of insiders for a longitudinal view of the past five decades when attention to CSR began. Each of three senior public relations managers at an independent oil company interviewed shared 50 years' worth of anecdotes about CSR and crises that put principles to the test—including oil spills, leaks, fires, explosions, contamination and wildlife devastation, as well as rising petroleum costs, economic downturns, and riots and social strife.

As CSR still is developing as a theory, we offer four key propositions that emerged among research participants' voices as important ingredients for further hypothesis testing. *Propositions* are “specific conclusions derived from axiomatic groundwork” wherein *axioms* “are fundamental assertions, taken to be true, on which a theory is grounded” (Babbie, 2007, pp. 43–44). Moreover, these propositions offer public relations practitioners useful, applied guidance for thinking about CSR in their organizations and for their clients. Also offered are five best practices for public relations in the oil industry. All findings build upon earlier CSR research of public relations' key role in helping organizations to become more socially responsible (e.g., Kim & Reber, 2008) via integrated, open systems (Nijhof et al., 2006).

Despite the varied path that CSR has taken in advancing toward a full-fledged theory, we cannot ignore its relevance to public relations in terms of normatively prescribing behaviors. CSR inherently is linked to strategic management decision making, budgeting, and policy making and implementation (Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007). Current findings all add texture to earlier CSR principles of legitimacy, public responsibility, managerial discretion (Wood, 1991a), and efficiency (Banerjee, 2008)—and substance for applied public relations practice in an industry that ranks among the most distrusted in the US.

## 6. Limitations and future directions

Study limitations include non-generalizeability of qualitative findings. Moreover, interviews with three respondents of the same independent oil company preclude comparison/contrast with views of CSR in other oil companies or other industries. Indeed, there is much to discover about CSR and public relations' role as we continue developing theory in this fertile arena. Future study designs could consider invoking additional research methods and using respondents who represent various industries – in the US and globally – as well as larger data sets for further hypothesis testing. Considering CSR principle development and implementation challenges that public relations staffs encounter in organizational hierarchies (e.g., Banerjee, 2008; Lehman, 2007) – such as the context of the public relations-legal counselor relationship and other internal “tugs of war” – deserves greater scrutiny.

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