

# NAMA Members' Perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility

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## Abstract

As corporate social responsibility becomes increasingly important within organizations, it is imperative that professionals define their role in setting the CSR agenda. Through a descriptive survey, this study investigated National Agri-Marketing Association members' perceptions of their roles in CSR and acceptable practices for releasing data about an organization. Respondents were neutral that the agricultural communications industry has a clear code of ethics and standards of performance. NAMA members agreed that developing programs that are good for society is both good for business and good citizenship, and that public relations professionals should be deeply involved in helping management define an organization's social role. A majority of respondents reported working for an organization that recruited and hired employees who had an agricultural communications major, and had worked with someone who had an agricultural communications major, but were unsure of their preparation, management skills, and strategic thinking skills. Agricultural communications programs should take this perception into account and incorporate these three issues into their curriculum. No research was found that discussed CSR and public relations in the agriculture industry. With this study, agricultural public relations practitioners might see their role in CSR and the need for a clear code of ethics to unify the industry. This study creates a foundation for additional studies of agricultural public relations professionals, delving deeper into more specific roles related to CSR.

## Keywords

corporate social responsibility, public relations, agricultural communications, National Agri-Marketing Association, business

## Introduction

Public relations began in the early 1900s and, for many years, was used synonymously with advertising and marketing until it became its own niche of the business world in the 1960s

(Podnar & Golob, 2009). Since its inception, public relations has been a broad field, which makes its exact role difficult to define (L'Etang, 1994).

Hutton (1999) concluded that only one definition could truly define public relations: managing strategic relationships. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) formally adopted an official statement on public relations in 1982 by stating that public relations contributes to a mutual understanding among groups and institutions, and it "serves to bring private and public policies into harmony" (PRSA, n.d., p. 1). Heath (2006) concluded that:

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Public relations is a piece of some whole. The challenge is to continue to search to discover the whole and public relations' place in it. One view of that whole is the nature of society and, consequently, the constructive and destructive roles that public relations can play to that end (p. 110).

In the media, public relations often is used as a negative term, although it is rarely used correctly (White & Park, 2010). Persuasion is seen as a central part of the public relations practice, which is preferable to being seen as manipulative (Fawkes, 2007). Because of negative perceptions associated with manipulation by the public, companies need to assess and adopt a PR approach that is effective and not offensive (Khodarahmi, 2009). Thus, this study was conducted to describe agricultural public relations professionals' perceptions about corporate social responsibility and its application in their profession.

### **Public Relations in Action**

In early 2003, a children's hospital in Seattle, Washington, reported a high number of *E. coli* infections, and two days later, the health department determined that food sold at Jack in the Box restaurants was at least partly responsible (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). After three children died from *E. coli* and 400 were infected with the bacterium, Jack in the Box was unwilling to take responsibility for the issue, as it was able to trace the contaminated meat to a single supplier.

Ulmer and Sellnow concluded ambiguity is a component of effective crisis communication, but that ambiguity can raise ethical issues because of the negative effects it has on stakeholders.

Johnson & Johnson, during the Tylenol-tamper scare, redeemed all previous purchases, recalled all products on store shelves, and took preventive measures by creating a new product seal (Murray & Vogel, 1997). "Indeed, as a result of its public actions as a responsible pharmaceutical producer, Johnson & Johnson enhanced its public image by taking decisive action" (Murray & Vogel, p. 143). An outbreak of *E. coli* was linked to Taco Bell restaurants in 2006 (Miller, 2006).

Although it waited until six days after the incident to address the public, Taco Bell controlled the damage by closing a number of restaurants and switching produce suppliers, and by pulling green onions from 5,800 stores (Miller).

### **Public Relations in Agriculture**

Many issues with important public relations aspects are related to agriculture, including food safety and security, animal welfare and production, pollution and environmental sustainability (Busch, 2003), technological change and agricultural production techniques, and corruption of regulators and policy makers (James & Hendrickson, 2008).

A study by Langosch and Schlenz (1990) examined the agricultural sector, focusing on public image and how the field can improve as a whole, and found that public relations requires that the entire industry realize the necessity and possibilities of public relations, even beginning with the farmer himself. Bhardwaj, MacKawa, Nimura and Macer (2003) found that information dissemination is central to the modern information society, and that the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization viewed it as a major role. For example, the media has created a negative opinion of genetically modified (GM) technologies, and ethics should be involved in providing people unbiased information at the community level and the country level (Bhardwaj et al.). Tockman (1993) said that finding ways to educate consumers about four major issues affecting agriculture—food safety,

environmental concerns, biotechnology, and animal rights/welfare—was critical to communications and marketing-related jobs. Public relations must be handled differently depending on the situation, but a disconnect between interests of individuals in the field detract from an overall positive image for the farm sector (Langosch & Schlenz).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Grunig and Hunt (1984) identified four models of public relations: press agency/publicity, which concentrated on propaganda; public information, which was used for the dissemination of information; two-way asymmetric, which used scientific persuasion; and two-way symmetric, which concentrated on mutual understanding (p. 22.). In modern society, the two-way symmetric model is more utilized by PR representatives and companies and is the most pertinent to current PR scholars (Khodarahmi, 2009). Edward Bernays, commonly known as the “Father of Public Relations,” was quoted as saying, “Public relations is the practice of social responsibility” (p. 47) at the 1980 meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (Bernays, 1980, as cited in Clark, 2000).

As long ago as the 1920s, practitioners began to pay more attention to the idea of social responsibility, noting that it was good for public relations and thus, good for business (Clark, 2000). “At the start of the 21st century, Corporate Social Responsibility seems to be a leading principle in innovating business practices with a positive impact on People, Planet and Profit” (Zwetsloot, 2003, p. 202). Campbell (2007) concluded:

CSR might include measures of how the corporation treats its employees with respect to wages, benefits, and levels of workplace safety; how it treats its customers with respect to product quality, truth in advertising, and pricing; how it treats its suppliers with respect to its willingness to uphold contracts and honor more informal commitments; how it treats the government with respect to operating within the law and not trying to subvert it; and how it treats the community with respect to making charitable contributions, ensuring not to foul the environment, and so forth (p. 950).

CSR is essentially corporate attempts to meet the expectations of the society and at the same time maintain and improve their reputations (Murray & Vogel, 1997). Ethical public relations practitioners can be enormously useful to corporations wishing to make the transition from a state in which the sole emphasis is on capital accumulation to one in which equal emphasis is placed on profit generation and on socially responsible action (Ryan, 1986, p. 741). Prabu (2004) suggested that social responsibility demands require corporations to accommodate the social good, and that public relations could play a critical role in fostering corporate citizenship.

“Interdependence means that the success of the organization rests on its effectiveness in selling products while at the same time winning public approval for its mission, citizenship, and practices” (Stoker, 2005, p. 276). Heath (2006) wrote that the expectations that people create, negotiate, manage, and apply in their social actions as they work and live in societal arrangements is important to this interdependency. “Interdependence and relationships assume that all stakeholders share universal norms and values—the deeper loyalties. Unlike marketing, public relations must communicate the organization’s deeper loyalties if it hopes to create relationships based on interdependence” (Stoker, p. 276).

Most executives recognize the importance of social and environmental responsibility to the bottom line, to their companies' reputations, and to their customers, but without customer satisfaction in

the social responsibility of the company, the bottom line will suffer (Zhang & Swanson, 2006). Kim and Reber (2008) found that public relations professionals' personal viewpoints in ethics or their personal experiences seem to be a key factor in how they see their part in CSR. "Some companies (like Wal-Mart) are beginning to require their vendors and suppliers to adhere to a strict code of conduct, and to report on how they manage environmental, social, and governance issues" (KPMG, 2008, p. 6).

Clark (2000) explored the link between public relations and CSR, tracing the origins of both, in an attempt to gain insight into how to optimize their effectiveness and their impact on the corporate world. She suggested that the link between public relations and CSR began in 1973 with the Texas Gulf Sulfur (TGS) case and was reinforced when public relations leaders began to recognize that a role of public relations is to assist organizations with developing appropriate responses (Clark). TGS was indicted because officials of TGS purchased shares in the company based on undisclosed information regarding the discovery of silver and copper deposits in Canada and did not publicly disclose this information until 5 years after the discovery (Allen, 1990). The TGS case changed the practice of public relations by creating the need for public relations practitioners to "focus on their role as insiders and make sure they did not arbitrarily select what information to reveal and what to conceal" (Clark, p. 365).

Kim and Reber (2008) suggested that acting in a socially responsible way could have an effect on public relations attaining professionalism, as professionalism and CSR are closely intertwined (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2003). Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) said that public responsibility has been understood and emphasized as nearly synonymous with the concept of public relations.

"It is clear that corporate public relations and CSR have, throughout this last century, a set of similarities, which provide clues to their integration and increased joint effectiveness" (Clark, 2000, p. 376). In 2008, Podnar found that both scholars and managers have paid greater attention to CSR, as a company has a social responsibility to its stakeholders. The connection between the two suggests that public relations and CSR have similar objectives; both disciplines are seeking to enhance the quality of the relationship of an organization among key stakeholder groups (Clark).

### **Corporate Social Responsibility and Agriculture**

CSR is especially important in agriculture because of the many ethical issues faced by the industry and because of the consequences that could result from poor judgment on the part of agricultural organizations. Agribusinesses should be very concerned with responsibility to stakeholders, as many ethical issues facing agriculture could have a negative effect on human health and safety (Murphy-Lawless, 2004). As Whitaker (2005, as cited in McCleneghan 2005) pointed out:

Public trust—from both my internal and external publics—is everything. Without it, the organization quite likely could cease to exist; or, at a minimum, will function only marginally effectively. If we do not perform our mission responsibly and with integrity, our support will be withdrawn and our leaders replaced.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to describe National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA) members' perceptions of corporate social responsibility in agriculture and their roles related to corporate social responsibility. Specific objectives in meeting the purpose of this study were to:

1. Describe NAMA members' perceptions of their roles in corporate social responsibility.
2. Describe NAMA members' perceptions of career practices in the agricultural communications industry.
3. Describe relationships between NAMA members' demographic characteristics and their perceptions of CSR.

## Methods

This study used a descriptive online questionnaire to gather information related to NAMA members' perceptions of corporate social responsibility. The questions were adapted to reflect the NAMA membership from two previous surveys of public relations practitioners about professionalism and CSR (Kim & Reber, 2008; Ryan, 1986). The questionnaire included 46 close-ended questions divided among three sections: Career Practices, Social Responsibility, and Career and Organization Demographics. Questions in the Career Practices and Social Responsibility sections were answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1="strongly disagree," 2="disagree," 3="somewhat disagree," 4="neutral," 5="somewhat agree," 6="agree," and 7="strongly agree." Questions in the Career and Organization Demographics section were multiple-choice.

A panel of experts that included an agricultural communications faculty member, NAMA organizational staff member, and NAMA member was used to confirm the face and content validity of the original questionnaire were maintained. A post-hoc Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the scaled items because a pilot test with a similar population could not be conducted. The Cronbach's alpha for 15 items related to perceptions of CSR was .750 and the Cronbach's alpha for 15 items related to career practices was .758; both values fall within the acceptable range of coefficients for scaled items.

A census of professionals registered as members of NAMA who were accessible via email (N=1,623) was conducted. At the request of the organization, all messages containing the link to the online questionnaire were sent by NAMA staff members to the organization's email list. An introductory message was distributed as part of the National NAMA e-News, followed by a reminder in an agri-marketing special edition e-news email 10 days later. A second reminder was sent 13 days after the first reminder as part of a NAMA agri-marketing conference attendee update. Three hundred seven responses were obtained for a response rate of 18.9%.

The characteristics of early and late respondents were compared to control for nonresponse error (Lindner & Wingenbach, 2002). Members who responded following the introductory message were classified as early respondents ( $n=163$ ), and members who responded after the first reminder message were classified as late respondents ( $n=144$ ). No differences in the responses of early and late respondents were found, so all responses were pooled for analysis and interpretation.

## Findings

Of the 307 survey respondents, 54.5% were female and 45.5% were male. More than half (53.4%) of the respondents were between 40 and 59 years of age, with 23.9% between 40 and 49 years, and 29.5% between 50 and 59 years. Also, 21.6% of respondents were between 20 and 29 years old, 17% between 30 and 39 years, 6.8% between 60 and 69 years, and 1.1% over 70 years. About one-quarter of respondents (26.3%) earned degrees in business, followed by respondents with degrees in mass communications (22.3%), public relations (5.7%), advertising (5.7%), speech communication (2.9%), and English (2.3%). About one-third of respondents (34.9%) indicated they earned degrees in other fields.

A summary of respondents' years of experience in public relations, in their present organizations, and in their current positions is presented in Figure 1. A majority of respondents (73.9%) indicated their current positions involved public relations. The greatest proportion of respondents (18.2%) reported having between 16 and 20 years of public relations experience, while the smallest proportion of respondents (5.3%) had between 21 and 25 years of public relations experience. In addition, the highest number of respondents (29.4%) had 1 to 2 years of experience in their present organizations, while the lowest number of respondents (2.8%) had 26 to 30 years of experience in their present organizations. The highest number of respondents (38.6%) had between 1 and 2 years of experience in their current positions, and the lowest number of respondents (1.1%) had between 26 and 30 years in their current positions. Those positions included manager (19.1%), CEO/president/owner (15.7%), director (12.9%), vice president (12.4%), other (12.4%), communication specialist (10.1%), account executive (5.1%), assistant account executive (2.8%), and public relations specialist (2.2%).

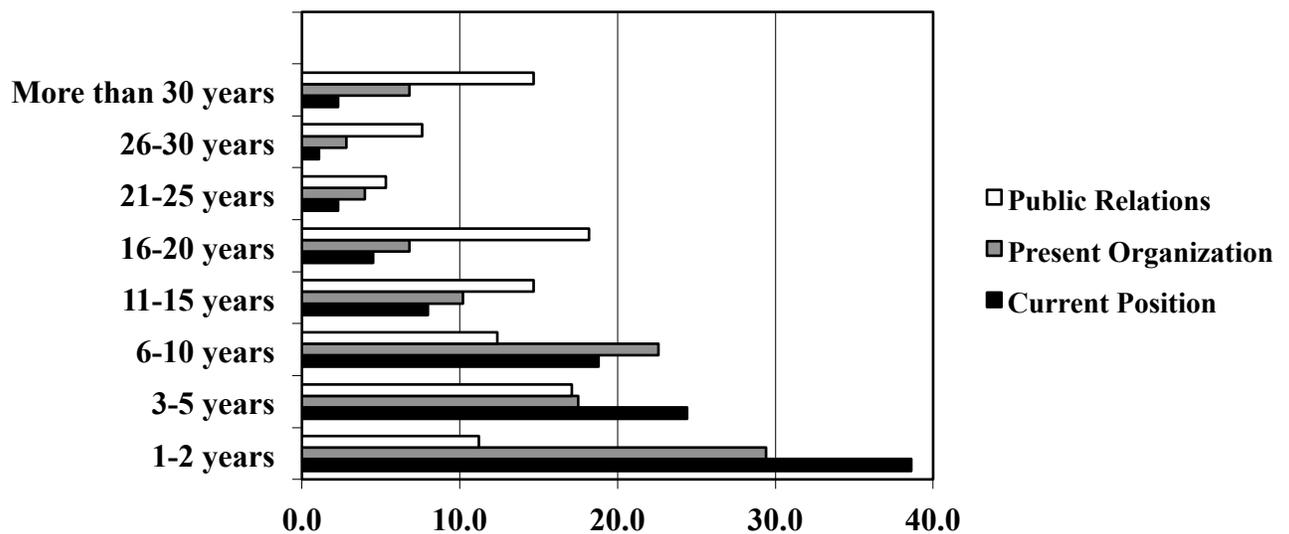


Figure 1. Respondents' experience in public relations, in their present organizations, and in their presentation positions.

A majority of respondents reported that their organizations had recruited employees who had an agricultural communications major (65.0%) and had hired employees who had an agricultural communications major (70.6%). In addition, a majority of respondents (83.6%) had worked with someone who had an agricultural communications major. Of the respondents' organizations, 47.8% were corporate, 21.9% were public relations agencies, 19.1% were "other," 4.5% were nonprofit organizations, 2.8% were trade associations, 2.2% were independent public relations consultants, and 1.7% were education-related. Those organizations had annual revenues of less than \$1 million (9.6%), \$1-5 million (16.6%), \$5-10 million (10.2%), \$10-50 million (21.7%), \$50-100 million (5.1%), \$100-500 million (5.7%), \$500 million to \$1 billion (5.1%), more than \$1 billion (15.3%), and other (10.8%). Revenues specified as other included respondents who chose not to share the information because of corporate policies or unknown reasons, or who were unsure of the correct answer.

A majority of respondents (75.5%) worked for organizations with fewer than 500 employees, with 33.5% reporting fewer than 50 employees, 21.0% reporting 50-100 employees, and 21.0% reporting 100-500 employees. The remaining respondents reported working for organizations with 500-1,000 employees (2.3%), 1,000-5,000 employees (6.3%), 5,000-10,000 employees (7.4%), 10,000-25,000

employees (4.0%), 25,000-50,000 employees (1.1%), 50,000-75,000 employees (1.1%), and 75,000-100,000 employees (0.6%). The mean number of employees in the organizations' public relations department was 8.83 (SD=16.70).

### **Perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility**

Fifteen items related to respondents' perceptions of CSR were included in the questionnaire. The 7-point Likert-type scale for each item was interpreted as follows: 1.00 – 1.49="strongly disagree," 1.50 – 2.49="disagree," 2.50 – 3.49="somewhat disagree," 3.50 – 4.49="neutral," 4.50 – 5.49="somewhat agree," 5.50 – 6.49="agree," and 6.50 – 7.00="strongly agree."

Respondents agreed that developing programs that are good for society is good for business and good citizenship (M=6.11, SD=.90, Mdn=6.00), that an organization that is socially responsible over a long period is more credible with the public than one that is not (M=6.19, SD=.91, Mdn=6.00), and that the pursuit of social goals strengthens an organization's ability to earn a fair profit (M=5.50, SD=1.19, Mdn=6.00). Respondents also agreed that management must act socially responsible regardless of how those actions influence profit (M=5.74, SD=1.30, Mdn=6.00), and that corporate social responsibility must stem from a firm, deep-seated conviction of management that it is important for organizations to act in the public interest, and not just when it is convenient to do so (M=6.15, SD=1.07, Mdn=6.00). In addition, respondents agreed that organizations must try to calculate the social impacts of major decisions before implementing policies or taking actions (M=5.78, SD=1.05, Mdn=6.00).

Respondents somewhat agreed that public relations professionals should act as the consciences of the organizations for which they work (M=5.14, SD=1.42, Mdn=5.00), and they agreed that public relations professionals should be deeply involved in helping management define an organization's social role (M=5.67, SD=1.07, Mdn=6.00). Respondents somewhat agreed that public relations professionals must avoid putting organizational obedience ahead of personal conscience (M=4.99, SD=1.55, Mdn=5.00) and agreed that public relations professionals must work hard to ensure that organizational secrecy is not used to hide organizational misconduct (M=5.93, SD=1.09, Mdn=6.00). Respondents agreed that a socially responsible public relations staff presents several sides of an issue and provides an objective appraisal of conflicting opinions when it disseminates information (M=5.56, SD=1.29, Mdn=6.00), but they were neutral about the statement that presenting all sides of an issue and providing an objective appraisal of conflicting opinions is the job of the news media, not public relations (M=3.92, SD=1.94, Mdn=4.00).

Respondents somewhat agreed that they thought that the agricultural communications industry has a clear code of ethics (M=4.89, SD=1.25, Mdn=5.00) and that the agricultural communications industry has clear standards of performance (M=4.77, SD=1.27, Mdn=5.00).

Respondents somewhat disagreed that it is right for an individual to have one ethical standard in his or her private life and a different standard in business affairs (M=3.01, SD=1.78, Mdn=2.00).

### **Career Practices**

Fifteen items related to career practices were included in the questionnaire. The 7-point Likert-type scale for each item was interpreted as follows: 1.00 – 1.49="strongly disagree," 1.50 – 2.49="disagree," 2.50 – 3.49="somewhat disagree," 3.50 – 4.49="neutral," 4.50 – 5.49="somewhat agree," 5.50 – 6.49="agree," and 6.50 – 7.00="strongly agree."

Respondents agreed that they set strategic goals (M=5.76, SD=1.11, Mdn=6.00) and quantifi-

able objectives ( $M=5.57$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ) often, and that their organization was considered an industry leader ( $M=5.95$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ). Respondents somewhat agreed that they consider themselves a long-time employee in their organization ( $M=5.35$ ,  $SD=1.84$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ) and were neutral that their organization had a large executive staff ( $M=4.08$ ,  $SD=2.00$ ,  $Mdn=4.00$ ). Respondents somewhat agreed that they decide on communication policy often ( $M=5.17$ ,  $SD=1.60$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ) and that their clients/organization asked the agency/communications department to get involved in strategic planning ( $M=5.38$ ,  $SD=1.51$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ). Respondents agreed that their clients/organization asked for communications programs that go beyond media relations ( $M=5.74$ ,  $SD=1.43$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ).

Respondents agreed that they thought professional associations contribute to professionalism ( $M=5.79$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ) and that professional associations have membership benefits ( $M=5.76$ ,  $SD=.97$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ). Respondents agreed that academic training was important for communications professionals ( $M=5.55$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ,  $Mdn=6.00$ ), but were neutral in their agreement that agricultural communications graduates' overall preparation was excellent, ( $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ,  $Mdn=4.00$ ) agricultural communications graduates' management skills were excellent ( $M=4.06$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ,  $Mdn=4.00$ ), and agricultural communications graduates' strategic thinking was excellent ( $M=4.04$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ,  $Mdn=4.00$ ). Respondents somewhat agreed that formal qualifications should be compulsory to be a communications professional ( $M=4.56$ ,  $SD=1.44$ ,  $Mdn=5.00$ ).

### ***Relationships among Demographics and Perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility***

Differences among responses based on demographics were examined using analysis of variance. Two significant differences were found. Females had a higher level of agreement than males,  $F(1, 172)=8.23$ ,  $p=.005$ , that management must act socially responsible, regardless of how those actions influence profit. Females also had a higher level of agreement than males,  $F(1,173)=12.64$ ,  $p=.000$ , that organizations must try to calculate the social impacts of major decisions before implementing policies or taking actions.

### ***Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications***

Most respondents were a manager, CEO/president/owner, director, or vice president, and were employed by corporations, public relations agencies, or other organizations, such as media, marketing agencies, and associations. This is representative of the NAMA membership. NAMA members come from agribusiness companies (corporations), marketing communications firms (public relations agency), or other organizations, such as media and associations/organizations.

Most respondents reported that their organization's annual revenue is less \$50 million and had fewer than 500 employees. About half (54.3%) of respondents in Kim and Reber's (2008) study also reported fewer than 500 employees.

Most respondents had 16 to 20 years of experience in public relations, but only 1 to 2 years of experience in both their present organization and current position. More than half of respondents were between the ages of 40 and 59. This closely follows Buck and Barrick's (1995) study, in which it was found that the typical agricultural communicator was 45 years of age and had around 20 years of experience. A difference between the two studies is that a greater amount of respondents in this study were female (54.5%), and a majority of respondents (63.4 %) in the Buck and Barrick study were male. This difference may be attributed to the increase in female college graduates over the years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Buck and Barrick's study included respondents who were members of six different professional organizations in 1992. Respondents who were 45 years of age in 1992

should have graduated from college in the late 1960s or early 1970s. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of females that were enrolled in college in 1969 was 40.17%, and in 1970 was 40.64%. Half of the respondents from the current study should have graduated from college between 1974 and 1993. The U.S. Census Bureau found that there were 45.16% females in 1974 and 54.15% females in 1993. The late 1960s marked the beginning of a steady increase in female college students. Agricultural communications programs also have shown an increase in the number of females. In 1970, Kansas State University had 100% males in their agricultural communications program, compared to 23.26% males in 1995.

The greatest amount of respondents agreed that academic training was important for communications professionals, but were mostly neutral on their evaluation of graduates' overall preparation, management skills, and strategic thinking, as excellent. Despite their uncertainty, respondents reported that their organization had recruited and hired employees who had an agricultural communications major, and had worked with someone who had an agricultural communications major. Irlbeck and Akers (2009) found that agricultural communications professionals would like to see improvements among graduates in critical thinking and business etiquette. Even though NAMA members were unsure of graduates' skills coming out of college, agricultural communications students are sought after and are valuable to the agricultural communications industry.

### **Conclusions Related to NAMA Members' Perceptions of CSR**

Respondents agreed that the pursuit of social goals strengthens a corporation's ability to earn a fair profit, but that management must act socially responsible, regardless of how those actions influence profit. This supports Johnson's (1971) view of CSR called "utility maximization." In utility maximization, maximum profit is not the only goal. Although CSR can influence profit, it should not be the primary goal related to CSR efforts. Zhang and Swanson (2006) concluded that although the bottom line is important, it will suffer without the presence of CSR.

Respondents agreed that developing programs that are good for society is good for business and good citizenship; that an organization that is socially responsible over a long period of time is more credible; that CSR must stem from a firm, deep seated conviction of management that is important for organizations to act in the public interest, and not just when it is convenient to do so; and that organizations must try to calculate the social impacts of major decisions before implementing policies or taking actions. Ryan's (1986) study, which asked 135 public relations practitioners who were not specifically in the agriculture industry the same questions, agreed with all of these statements as well. This also further supports the findings of Jahdi and Acikdilli (2009) that the commitment and dedication of senior-management to CSR in a holistic manner is unquestionably crucial.

Respondents also agreed that organizations must try to calculate the social impacts of major decisions before implementing policies or taking actions. This supports research that has shown that public relations is the managing of relationships internally and externally (Hutton, 1999), as well as the PRSA's statement that public relations professionals are concerned with bringing private and public policies into harmony (PRSA, n.d.). Respondents also agreed that public relations professionals should be deeply involved in helping management define an organization's social role. Most professionals who provide public relations services offer counsel regarding the public implications of an institution's decisions and actions (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001).

Respondents agreed that a socially responsible public relations staff presents several sides of an issue and provides an objective appraisal of conflicting opinions when it disseminates information,

but varied greatly in their view that presenting all sides of an issue and providing an objective appraisal of conflicting opinions is the job of the news media, not public relations. It was surprising that respondents were neutral in their level of agreement that it is the job of the news media, as the core requirement of giving adequate information to make voluntary, informed, rational, and reflective decisions is essential to the ethics of persuasion (Messina, 2007). Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) concluded that “selective communication is morally suspect when it is intended to mislead or when it is used to conceal information that others need to make their own life decisions” (p. 209).

Respondents somewhat agreed that public relations professionals must avoid putting organizational obedience ahead of personal conscience and that public relations professionals should act as the consciences of the organizations for which they work and agreed that public relations professionals must work hard to insure that organizational secrecy is not used to hide organizational misconduct. Gersuny (1967) wrote that different individuals will make different appraisals of the values controlled by management, and that varying degrees of compliance may be anticipated. He concluded that there is a point in which the employee will view the effort required to obey the organization as requiring too much effort, and is no longer worth it (Gersuny). Employees tend to work for organizations that have the same set of values as themselves, so organizational obedience might not challenge personal conscience very much.

Fawkes (2007) concluded that because of reluctance to discuss propaganda and persuasion in public relations, the field has not developed a set of ethics. This conclusion was represented by respondents’ in their level of agreement with a statement that the agricultural communications industry has a clear code of ethics and standards of performance. In a 1992 public personnel inventory, it was found that half of the respondents had their own code of conduct (Sanders, 1992). It should not be left up to the individual to decide what is right or wrong in business. Professional associations and public relations organizations typically have codes of ethics in place for their members and employees, but there still fails to be a general set of ethics for the public relations industry as a whole. Fitzpatrick and Guthier (2001) wrote, “Although industry associations have done a laudable job in developing codes of conduct for their members, the codes stop short of providing a theoretical basis for ethical decision making.”

Respondents somewhat disagreed that it is all right for an individual to have one ethical standard in his or her private life and a different standard in business affairs. This supports Fitzpatrick and Gauthier’s (2001) conclusion that in ethical situations, “the decision maker must employ his or her own values, moral intuition, and character to determine which principle is most important and most controlling in the particular context” (p. 207-208).

### **Conclusions Related to Career Practices**

Kim and Reber (2008) did not specifically survey professionals in the agriculture industry, but the responses related to career practices that they received were very similar to the responses obtained in this study. In both studies, respondents agreed that they set strategic goals and quantifiable objectives often, and that their clients/company ask for communications programs that go beyond media relations; somewhat agreed that they considered themselves a long-time employee in their organization and that their clients/company ask the agency/communications department to get involved in their strategic planning; and were neutral that their organization has a large executive staff. Also, in both studies, respondents agreed that professional associations contribute to professionalism and have membership benefits and that academic training is important for communications professionals;

somewhat agreed that formal qualifications should be compulsory to be a communications professional; and were neutral that communications graduates' overall preparation, management skills, and strategic thinking are excellent.

Of the 17 statements related to career practices, only two statements yielded different levels of agreement across the two studies. Respondents in the Kim and Reber (2008) study agreed, while respondents in this study somewhat agreed, that they decide on communication policy often. Respondents in this study agreed that their organization is considered an industry leader, while Kim and Reber's respondents were neutral.

The similarities between the responses in both studies show that public relations serves the same roles across industries. Public Relations Society of America members and NAMA members have the same level of agreement with most career practices.

### **Conclusions Related to Comparisons Between Demographics and CSR Perceptions**

The differences based on gender found in this study agree with Lund's (2008) study that found that female marketing professionals showed considerably higher ethics judgment than their male counterparts. It also agrees with Kim and Reber's (2008) finding that gender of respondents was significantly related to practitioners' attitudes towards CSR.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Professional development programs for members of professional organizations should continue to be used to ensure that members are educated about current issues, including CSR. In addition, agricultural communications academic programs should consider the perceptions of their graduates when making curriculum decisions and work toward improving the perceptions of graduates as prepared to enter the workforce, particularly in relation to management and strategic thinking skills. Also, codes of ethics for professional associations and organizations should be examined to develop a code of ethics for public relations professionals as a whole, so that there is a unified professional set of guidelines for students and professionals to follow.

### **Recommendations for Research**

The response rate was likely low because the introductory and reminder messages were sent with other NAMA updates instead of as individual, personalized emails, as suggested by Dillman (2000). Future investigators should ensure that, regardless of distribution methods, messages are focused on research and are personalized. In addition, a clear definition of CSR should be provided to create a consistent context for all questions. This study should be replicated with other professional agricultural organizations, such as production organizations, as well as with agricultural producers.

### **Implications**

Despite many studies of CSR and public relations, no research was found that discussed CSR and public relations in the agriculture industry. With this study, agricultural public relations practitioners may begin to consider their roles in CSR and may see the need for a clear code of ethics to better unify the industry. This study creates a foundation for additional studies of agricultural public relations professionals that may examine more deeply specific roles related to

CSR. As NAMA and its members consider the results of this study, steps can be taken to ensure proper education related to ethics and CSR is provided where deficiencies are present.

## About the Author

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