

## **Corporate Social Responsibility and the Nonprofit Sector: Assessing the Thoughts and Practices Across Three Nonprofit Subsectors**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Scholars have increasingly been studying the impact of corporate social responsibility as a business strategy in for-profit institutions, and results frequently indicate benefits to the organizations such as increased reputation, sales, and reduced reputation damage during crises. Little is known about the impact of corporate social responsibility on organizations from the nonprofit sector, however. Using in-depth interviews with nonprofits sponsoring festivals in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2013-2014, this study examines how nonprofits representing agriculture, arts and culture, and sexual health view corporate social responsibility as it affects their communication efforts. Results indicate that nonprofit communicators downplay the corporate social responsibility behaviors in which they are engaged. When these efforts are communicated to external stakeholders, preference is given to less formal media channels.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades, the concept of corporate social responsibility has gained a significant amount of attention from companies and organizations across the globe. By engaging in corporate social responsibility activities and behaviors, companies can generate favorable attitudes among publics, which can enhance reputation, credibility, and support from stakeholders. In many ways, corporate social responsibility has become an expectation among organizational leaders and stakeholders. That is, current times do not allow for companies and organizations to be in business for the sole purpose of making a profit anymore, as the amount of public good a company or organization is doing is often correlated with consumer loyalty, employee satisfaction, and the company's overall image.

Broadly defined, scholars describe corporate social responsibility as the voluntary actions a company or organization implements to pursue goals, with a responsibility to its stakeholders (Chandler & Werther, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Similarly, the European Commission defines corporate social responsibility as "the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society" (European Commission, 2014). Perhaps the

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most notable definition is proposed by Carroll (1979), who argues that “the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (p. 500). Focusing on the discretionary responsibilities of corporate social responsibility, Kotler and Lee (2005) argue that corporate social responsibility is a “commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributes of corporate resources” (p. 3), which relates to Coombs & Holladay’s (2012) emphasis on the concern for people, profit, and the environment—commonly known as the “triple bottom line.” Furthermore, as the concept of corporate social responsibility has evolved and become more widely examined, scholars have further defined corporate social responsibility into several categories such as ethics, diversity, environmental sustainability, and philanthropy (Chandler & Werther, 2014).

Although the lack of a commonly accepted, universal definition of corporate social responsibility as a concept has caused theoretical confusion among scholars (Dahlsrud, 2008), a common theme among traditional and recently emerging definitions of corporate social responsibility is the notion that corporate social responsibility involves voluntary action above and beyond what is required by law. Modern definitions focus on many of the pro-social, discretionary elements suggested by Chandler and Werther (2014) such as diversity, caring for the environment and community, and benefitting society in an ethically responsible manner that complements a company or organization’s mission, stakeholder goals and expectations, and culture (Beauchamp & O’Connor, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Thus, there has arguably been a shift from examining only the moral dimensions of corporate social responsibility to including the discretionary aspects of corporate social responsibility, which reflect a company or organization’s voluntary efforts to improve society (David, Kline, & Dai, 2005).

These dimensions of corporate social responsibility are closely aligned with the goals of many nonprofit organizations that function primarily to serve the public interest through the distribution of goods and services (Ferris, 1998). However, when viewed in the context of corporate social responsibility, existing research has examined the potential benefits of a corporate social responsibility partnership for the giving corporation and the receiving social causes (Rumsey & White, 2009) but has failed to thoroughly examine the role of the nonprofit organization and the relationship between corporate social responsibility activities and the mission of the nonprofit organization. Furthermore, research has failed to extend beyond a limited understanding of how nonprofit organizations perceive corporate social responsibility relationships. Therefore, there is a need to examine how nonprofit organizations view their corporate social responsibility activities and programming as they relate to the mission of the organization.

Corporate social responsibility efforts have positive impacts on the environment, communities, and individuals, but it is assumed that corporate social responsibility has positive impacts for a range of agencies. This study seeks to determine how corporate social responsibility is viewed by nonprofit sector leaders, who have largely been ignored in discussions of corporate social responsibility. Specifically, the purpose of this

study is to determine how nonprofit leaders view their corporate social responsibility efforts and communicate the results of those efforts to their stakeholders.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Kim and Reber (2008) suggest that corporate social responsibility is a “central relationship-building activity within organizations” (p. 341). As such, there are numerous potential benefits of engaging in corporate social responsibility activities, which may include anything from increased profits to increased levels of volunteerism, positivity in the workplace environment, more media coverage, reduced costs, and a better public image. These benefits may create long-lasting effects such as reputation enhancement, creating organizational value, and stakeholder loyalty.

Research suggests that a company’s corporate social responsibility efforts can positively impact stakeholders’ attitudes toward the company (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004) in several ways, including aspects of reputation (Jo, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2011), greater legitimacy and admiration of the organization (Bortree, 2009), a higher purchase intention among consumers (David, et al., 2005; Lee & Shin, 2010), and an increased level of stakeholder loyalty (Gomez & Chalmeta, 2011). Furthermore, Hong and Rim (2010) explore the link between corporate social responsibility and perceptions of trust among stakeholders to contribute to empirical research conducted in this area. They also suggest that corporate social responsibility has an indirect influence on positive word-of-mouth communication, which contributes to reputation, organizational value, and stakeholder loyalty.

While existing research has primarily examined the corporate social responsibility benefits for contributing corporations, positive outcomes can also benefit nonprofit organizations in the form of increased donations, increased identification, more favorable perceptions among the public (Lichtenstein et al., 2004), as well as increased support behaviors such as volunteerism and positive word of mouth (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004) and the potential to influence the political agenda (Ferris, 1998). However, some scholars argue that more research is needed about the effects of corporate social responsibility initiatives on nonprofits (Lichtenstein et al., 2004), as corporate social responsibility is most often viewed and measured as the efforts of for-profit institutions supporting nonprofits. Therefore, the focus of efforts such as cause-related marketing, community relations, philanthropic donations, and the development of volunteer programs are often in the relation to the corporate social responsibility efforts made by the corporation, not the nonprofit organization itself.

For example, Coombs and Holladay (2012) outline examples of corporations helping nonprofits through contributions to a given cause or a social concern, assisting nonprofits with initiatives such as human rights, labor rights, education, or community relations, but the impacts of the efforts on the nonprofit organization—while potentially just as beneficial as the outcomes are for corporations—are rarely discussed. Arguably, this is a gap in corporate social responsibility research, as nonprofit organizations have similar needs as corporations do: they have clients, can offer products and services, will

need revenue, have a need to market themselves, and must be concerned with the satisfaction of donors, consumers, and other stakeholders, yet these efforts are not examined by scholars.

The broad nature of the definition of corporate social responsibility includes many elements that are directly applicable to the nonprofit sector. Specifically, areas such as workplace diversity, the creation and distribution of safe products and programs, organizational ethics, strong governance, transparency in reporting and corporate social responsibility communication efforts, and monitoring an organization's environmental impact are applicable to the interests of nonprofits and should be examined in greater detail. However, it is important to stress that these benefits have emerged from research conducted on corporate social responsibility from the for-profit perspective. Therefore, there is a great need to expand on the already broad conceptual nature of corporate social responsibility, specifically in regard to how nonprofit leaders may define corporate social responsibility. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the following question:

***RQ1: How do nonprofit organization leaders define corporate social responsibility and do they consider themselves as carrying out corporate social responsibility activities?***

Carroll (1999) describes the history of corporate social responsibility as “long” and “varied” (p. 268). Although most scholars have focused on examining elements of corporate social responsibility from the 1950s on, many acknowledge the existence of a premodern era of corporate social responsibility where the focus was self-interest, or how to simply keep the company or organization's doors open. Little evidence of corporate social responsibility definitions was found before the 1950s (Carroll, 1999) and the concept was not widely embraced in practice. The modern era of corporate social responsibility began in the 1950s when corporate social responsibility was often referred to as “social responsibility” (Carroll, 1999) before literature expanded in the 1960s. During the modern era, businesses recognized that while profits are necessary for survival, organizations are only able to obtain profits because of the society in which they operate (Chandler & Werther, 2014). Therefore, based on McGuire's (1963) definition of corporate social responsibility as an obligation beyond solely legal and economic obligations, businesses began to acknowledge a responsibility to society, or a need to fulfill a social contract. Although many scholars view corporate social responsibility efforts as a practice of addressing societal concerns beyond what is legally required (Beauchamp & O'Connor, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2009; McGuire, 1963), specific details about what societal efforts should be made were not clearly identified in the modern era.

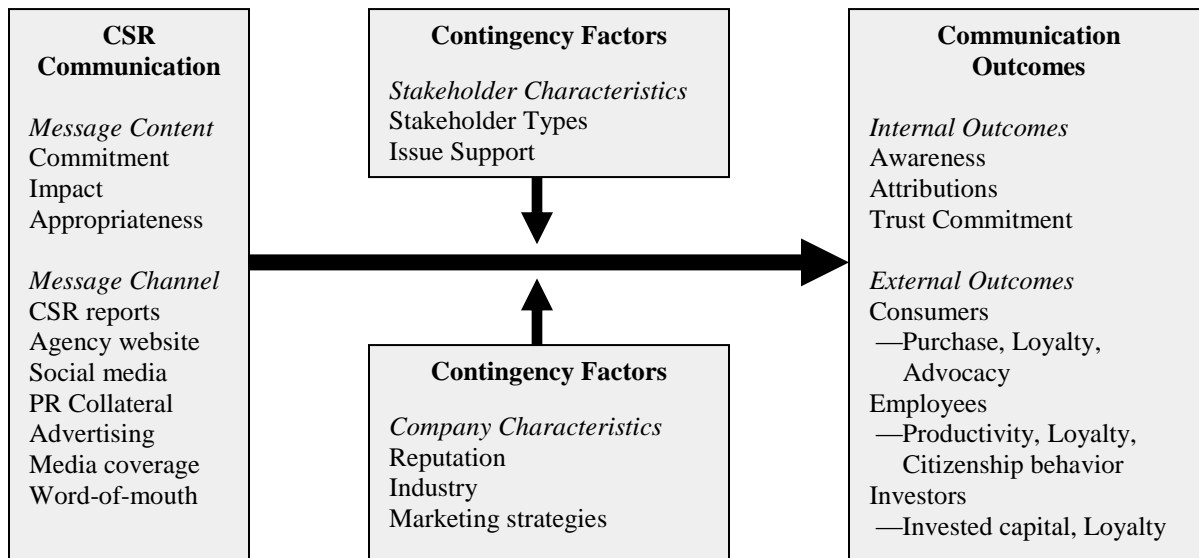
However, the ongoing evolution of societal expectations has created a shift in the definition and context of corporate social responsibility, and several factors distinguish contemporary, or postmodern, corporate social responsibility from its original inception. Corporate social responsibility in the postmodern era is seen as strategic and requires “long-term thinking that is compatible with protecting the environment and building

healthy societies that last” (“Issues for Debate,” 2010, p 16). Corporate social responsibility today encompasses a shift in organizational perspectives, values, and practices that complement a company or organization’s mission, stakeholder goals and expectations, and culture through stakeholder management and stewardship (Beauchamp & O’Connor, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Companies and organizations that are committed to corporate social responsibility efforts strive to truly become community citizens committed to social concerns or causes (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Another area that is underexamined in the context of corporate social responsibility and its impact on organizations from the nonprofit sector is the communication strategy that accompanies corporate social responsibility efforts. Therefore, there is a need to examine not only the corporate social responsibility efforts of nonprofits, but also how these efforts are communicated to stakeholders. Communicating corporate social responsibility efforts can help a business to improve its public image (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2014), build stakeholder trust (Gomez & Chalmeta, 2011; Hong & Rim, 2010; Moreno & Capriotti, 2009) and increase awareness with stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Companies and organizations have utilized a variety of controlled and uncontrolled media to disseminate information about corporate social responsibility efforts, including media outlets, news releases, social media, annual reports, blogs, collateral material, email, company intranet, podcasts, trade shows, sustainability reports, employee newsletters, and websites (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Research has supported the argument that there is a correlation between communication about corporate social responsibility initiatives and stakeholders’ perceptions of a company, suggesting that effective communication can enhance consumer perceptions (Hong & Rim, 2010), company reputation (Kim & Lee, 2011), and lead to a higher level of purchase intention (Lee & Shin, 2010), among other benefits. However, the focus of these studies has been on the channel(s) through which corporate social responsibility communication has been disseminated. Tonello (2011) further examines aspects of communicating corporate social responsibility initiatives with a proposed framework for corporate social responsibility communication.

Figure 1. Tonello's (2011) Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility Communication.



Tonello (2011) proposes a framework that includes aspects of message content and channels and both internal and external outcomes from the communication efforts. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1, he examines the role of moderating variables, including company-specific factors and stakeholder-specific factors. For message content, companies are advised to communicate about corporate social responsibility commitment (e.g., a social cause, volunteerism, etc.), the societal impact of the commitment(s), and the fit, or “perceived congruence between a social issue and the company’s business” (Tonello, 2011, n.p.). Message channels such as a CSR report, corporate website, public relations and advertising efforts, and point of purchase are suggested along with more informal methods such as stakeholder word of mouth. Supporting previous research, potential outcomes include consumer awareness, attributions, trust, purchase intention, loyalty, advocacy, and amount of invested capital. Employee outcomes may include productivity, loyalty, advocacy, and citizenship behavior.

Another approach to effective corporate social responsibility communication was proposed by Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen (2008). This approach, known as the “inside-out approach” (Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008, p. 98), calls for companies to ensure employee commitment, which helps with the facilitation of trustworthy corporate social responsibility communication. Coombs and Holladay (2012) note that employees are often “overlooked in CSR communication in spite of their importance to the success of a CSR initiative” (p. 123). Therefore, involving employees can extend a company’s reach with its communication efforts through social media, blogs, positive word of mouth, and verification of the company’s corporate social responsibility efforts.

While corporate social responsibility communication efforts may vary, companies and organizations are encouraged to be strategic with their efforts and to develop a framework for disseminating information. Both formal and informal media channels may

be effective, but organization leaders should involve both internal and external stakeholders in the process (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). However, prior research has examined how for-profit institutions communicate corporate social responsibility efforts, but little is known about how nonprofit organizations communicate corporate social responsibility efforts to internal and external stakeholders. Therefore, the second research question is proposed:

***RQ2: How well and through what channels do nonprofit organizations communicate their CSR efforts?***

## **METHOD**

Given that these research questions are exploratory in nature when considering the relative recency of connecting corporate social responsibility efforts to the nonprofit sector, a qualitative methodology was chosen over quantitative surveys. Specifically, in-depth interviews were used to allow strategic communicators from nonprofits in the San Francisco Bay Area to discuss corporate social responsibility frankly while discussing trends across the region and the nonprofit sector.

The interviews opened with a grand tour question that asked the participants to define corporate social responsibility in their own words and provide examples of these efforts at their own nonprofit organizations. It should be noted that all nonprofit organizations were screened prior to extending an interview invitation to their communication staff to make sure that the nonprofits were engaged in social responsibility efforts. From there, the researcher allowed participants to explore the concepts in an open manner, only using probing questions to keep the conversation on topic with the two research questions. Direct questions were used as probes to get at the perceived importance of corporate social responsibility as well as how the participants' nonprofits communicated these efforts to their internal and external stakeholders. Topics were pressed during the interview to uncover attitudes of these nonprofit communicators that have not been expressed before in corporate social responsibility literature.

Interviews with 17 communication team members (ranging from organizations' executive directors and board of director members to staff who were specifically hired to focus on nonprofit communications) from eight different nonprofit organizations that were involved in public festivals in the San Francisco Bay Area during Fall, 2013. The interviews reported in the current study are part of a larger project funded by the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication. The larger project sought to determine how nonprofit and for-profit communicators who worked on collaborative efforts, such as community festivals, shared their corporate social responsibility efforts. Therefore, the participants representing the nonprofit sector were purposively chosen because of their partnerships with for-profit entities supporting three very different festivals (agriculture, arts/culture, and sexual health).

Prior to the interviews, participants were guaranteed anonymity and told that identifying-information would be removed from the study; generic descriptors, such as, a 30-year-

old community outreach coordinator, are used to preface specific quotations in this article. After receiving permission from each participant, the interviews were audio-recorded and ranged from 50 minutes to 74 minutes in length.

To allow for a more careful analysis, the researcher transcribed the recordings along with a graduate assistant rather than outsourcing the task to allow for careful thematic analysis of the more than 340 pages of transcriptions. Thematic analysis involves reading the transcriptions and comparing each one with the others while looking for similarities, which are grouped together by category. Using the Miles and Huberman's (1994) thematic conceptual matrix allowed the researcher to cluster and arrange themes to decipher patterns into a meaningful manner. Member checks occurred within two weeks of completing the interviews to ensure that the participants' words were interpreted correctly. During these validity checks, one participant requested that some information be removed because it could be used to identify his or her nonprofit organization based on the behaviors attributed to that organization. Other than this one instance, the transcripts were validated and left intact.

## FINDINGS

The participants in this study represented a range of demographics as 11 participants were female and 6 were male; in terms of their racial/ethnic background, participants described themselves most often as Caucasian (47%), Hispanic/Latino (24%), Asian/Pacific Islander (18%), and African-American/Black (12%). The average age was 37 years of age, though it ranged from 28 to 55. The participants worked in nonprofits with a communication responsibility—even if it was not their main task—for an average of nine years; additionally, they have worked for their current employer an average of six years and have been in their current position for an average of four years, providing evidence that they were well acquainted with their nonprofit's corporate social responsibility efforts and how they were communicated to their stakeholders.

### *Corporate Social Responsibility Defined*

The study's first research question sought to determine how the participants defined corporate social responsibility and whether the nonprofit leaders saw themselves as carrying out these activities. When asked to define corporate social responsibility, participants frequently used phrases like "community well-being" and "community good" as illustrations of what they perceived by the phrase. A 39-year-old executive director of an agriculture-focused nonprofit defined corporate social responsibility as "whatever it takes for us to be a thoughtful member of the community." She went on to explain that being a thoughtful member of the community included representing and maintaining a commitment to the diversity of the region, an appreciation for the employees and volunteers working with her nonprofit, and creating a sustainable business model that does not negatively impact the environment.

Generally, participants saw a strong alignment between corporate social responsibility and their own organizations' missions. A 48-year-old member of an arts organization's



board of directors felt that “CSR efforts seem to be a more natural fit for nonprofits than for-profits since we’re more concerned with improving the community for everyone.” The focus on community good was a fundamental component of the corporate social responsibility definition provided by most of the participants.

Accountability was routinely mentioned by participants in their definitions of corporate social responsibility, though the examples of accountability varied widely. “To me, it seems that accountability and openness are what corporate social responsibility is all about,” said one 34-year-old communications director at an agriculture nonprofit. A 42-year-old fundraiser stressed the importance of following up on what is said during interactions with external stakeholders; “whether it’s a donor or a volunteer, I better do what I promise. Otherwise, I’m putting my organization’s reputation at risk,” she said. A sexual health advocate stressed that his personal accountability could be seen in every community talk he gave and every condom he passed out because his job centered on “working to educate people about the harm of [sexually transmitted diseases] and AIDS” to maintain the region’s declining rates of infections. To him, accountability was something that was noticed every time a public health report was released, and the organization frequently received media attention as a result of these reports. To be accountable to the public, “I have to be out there every day talking and educating about how they can be safe.”

But accountability is not limited to just external stakeholders. The chairman of the board for an arts nonprofit noted that one of his primary duties was to create an environment where all of the nonprofit’s staff felt appreciated, respected, and valued. He noted that “we don’t just follow [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] and state laws. We go beyond that to make sure we don’t lose the talent that we’ve found.” Similarly, the executive director of an agriculture nonprofit stated, “we may be a nonprofit, but we offer great health plans and other benefits like matching contributions to 403B’s (retirement plans).” The same participant further asked, “Is that really considered corporate social responsibility, or is that just being a good employer?”

### *Nonprofit Organizations’ Corporate Social Responsibility Efforts*

Overwhelmingly, participants felt that corporate social responsibility initiatives were something that every organization should be doing, not just for-profit entities. But, participants had a difficult time coming up with concrete examples as to what their organizations were doing that could be labeled as “corporate social responsibility.” The nature of what constitutes corporate social responsibility initiatives was a common point of reflection for many participants. Even though the participants felt that these efforts were something that was a common practice in the nonprofit sector, they felt that it was difficult to pinpoint specific actions.

The most common corporate social responsibility initiative that was discussed focused on environmental impact and sustainability efforts. A 29-year-old community outreach coordinator at a sexual health nonprofit expressed that “We may focus on HIV and AIDS prevention, but that doesn’t mean we won’t recycle or reduce our carbon footprint.”

Recycling and adopting environmentally-friendly practices, such as printing on two-sides of office paper and reducing power consumption, were cited as practices used by nearly two-thirds of the participants' nonprofits.

Nonprofit organizations also stressed that the provision of quality programs and services were something they considered as part of corporate social responsibility. "Many don't consider us to be education-focused, but we do a lot of community presentations about healthy eating," said a 43-year-old community outreach manager at an agriculture nonprofit. She added, "it may seem silly to others, but it's important to us that we give only the best information, which includes recipes that we've tested. Every week I have conversations about recipes we share, so they better be good!" Quality services were also brought up by multiple sexual-health nonprofits. "We offer anonymous [sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy] testing. People depend on us, and we need to make sure we're there whether the test is positive or negative," said one 50-year-old health nonprofit executive director.

It was interesting that in defining corporate social responsibility efforts, participants were willing to think broadly about employee rights, community well-being, yet when they were asked to describe their own corporate social responsibility efforts they largely focused on the environment and quality programming/services. It is true that being a good community neighbor may include reducing environmental impact and providing quality services. Likewise, participants frequently discussed accountability in their definitions of corporate social responsibility but did not link that concept to their own organizational initiatives even though it was clear from their discussion that they were concerned with how they were seen by their external stakeholders. Perhaps the lack of responses about what they were doing in regard to corporate social responsibility was a result of how broadly defined the concept could be, or perhaps there was something more peculiar about their omissions.

### *Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility Efforts*

The second research question asked nonprofit organization representatives how they communicate their corporate social responsibility efforts to their stakeholders. While the interview guide originally focused on channel preferences based on the literature review, it quickly became apparent that message strategy was also an important focal point for the participants. It should be noted that prior to this specific question, the researcher recalled components of corporate social responsibility that were referenced during the definition phase of the interview but omitted when asked about their organizations' own corporate social responsibility efforts.

### **Message Strategy**

When reminded about the examples they provided to illustrate corporate social responsibility, one sexual-health nonprofit executive director commented that "yes, technically that is CSR, but we don't use that label in our office. We just work to do good—good for the community and good for ourselves." The lack of labeling corporate

social responsibility behavior as such quickly became a recognized connection for these very different nonprofit organizations. One board of director said:

Nonprofits generally are going to be involved with activities the business world would call corporate social responsibility. I see what we do at my position with [a financial institution, *name excluded at the request of participant*], and they're doing similar CSR work here. The big difference is what it's called. At work, it's labeled CSR, and we try to make sure everyone knows we're involved with the community. Here, it's downplayed because it's not seen as being mission-driven by donors.

This echoed the sentiments of the executive director of an arts nonprofit who said, "We may be involved with CSR work, but we don't promote it. That's something Corporate America does. We'd lose credibility if we did that." Universally, nonprofit organization representatives from boards of directors, executive director positions, and mid-level management all were concerned with how it would appear to their stakeholders if they were seen as being too focused on corporate social responsibility initiatives.

The executive director of an agriculture nonprofit reflected that their stakeholders generally were favorable when they addressed environmental efforts because of their focus on "living with the land." But, in the past "when we featured workplace diversity initiatives and community involvement in partnerships that were not mission-focused, donors were vocal that we were not using their money wisely," she added. The focus on staying true to the mission was evident by arts and humanities nonprofits, as well. A 30-year-old membership coordinator noted, "We are a business; but the second we start looking like a business and moving away from arts education, we lose support."

### Media Channel

Given that nonprofit organizations are engaging in corporate social responsibility behaviors but consciously choosing not to label them as such, as would be expected, it is imperative to see how they discuss these efforts with their stakeholders. Nonprofits in this study did not shy away from speaking about what they were doing, especially their environmental efforts and focus on quality services. Participants from arts and agricultural nonprofits even mentioned communicating about their workplace safety and commitment to diversity in their social responsibility communication. However, the channels they used were unlike some of the channels used by for-profit counterparts.

"Ultimately, I want to keep these efforts out of our printed materials," said one sexual-health nonprofit. Instead of placing stories about behaviors normally falling under the corporate social responsibility umbrella in annual reports, newsletters, or community presentations, participants mentioned that informal channels were preferred for relaying messages about their efforts. Informal communication channels, such as social media and one-on-one conversations, were generally the preferred outlets.

One arts/culture nonprofit executive director recalled the outcry that the organization received after featuring their environmental impact report in their annual report:

You would have thought we were doing things that our supporters didn't believe in. But we weren't. They recycle and conserve energy, too. They just didn't expect to see that as a main item in our annual report. They came to us because of our focus on the arts. That's what they wanted to see. We didn't lose donors or volunteers, that I know of, because of that story, but it taught me a lesson that we have to stay focused on our core programs and services. There are other nonprofits focused on conservation. If they wanted to support those programs, they would have donated to them.

Though other participants did not have a specific moment that they referred to that grounded their perspectives on corporate social responsibility communication, they all seemed to recognize that the focus on any socially responsible behavior that was not squarely centered on their mission was a distraction for their community supporters. That did not take away from some participants' desire to share these messages—even if it had to be done informally and under their stakeholders' radar. For example, the 30-year-old social media marketer for an agriculture nonprofit said, "I'll post messages about [our philanthropic partnerships] and commitment to diversity on Twitter or Facebook, but I have learned that I need to follow it with a picture focused on agriculture to draw attention back to our mission."

Similarly, a sexual-health communicator noted that the executive director was supportive of using social media to discuss these initiatives, but only rarely. He said, "I generally am given the go ahead with publishing one blog post per quarter about our CSR work. I can tweet links to it and post it on Facebook, but probably only because our followers don't do much online other than hit the like button."

A development officer for an arts/humanities nonprofit provided information that might hint at the start of a shift in how corporate social responsibility is viewed by nonprofit supporters. "I work with donors that recognize value in what we do—not just our programs but in our support for the entire community," she said. "They appreciate that we are socially responsible, but their main connections to us are still focused on the arts. They're not ready to see us promoting things we do that don't advance the mission."

## **DISCUSSION**

This study found that nonprofit organizations are engaging in CSR behaviors, but they are largely reluctant to label them as such because they are uncomfortable with the term "corporate social responsibility." This is due to their status as a nonprofit and because they see the term as corporate strategy, not relevant to the public sector. They preferred terms such as "community well-being" or "community good" to refer to their social and environmental responsibility. The second important finding in this study is that nonprofits are not communicating about their social and environmental responsibility unless it is directly related to their mission because they believe stakeholders will see these efforts as distracting from the purpose of the nonprofit.

Nonprofit representatives supported Kotler and Lee's (2005) definition of corporate social responsibility in that it involves organizations focused on improving the community. In defining corporate social responsibility, nonprofit organizations expressed a range of activities but mostly focused on the community good and demonstrating that the organization is accountable in a variety of ways. In illustrating community citizenship and accountability, a range of activities were discussed—many of them echoing the pro-social behaviors suggested by Chandler and Werther (2014). The range expressed when asked to define corporate social responsibility was not shown when asked to discuss their nonprofit's corporate social responsibility efforts. This is particularly striking given that the behaviors outlined as being corporate social responsibility strategies by scholarly literature and named as definitional examples by this study's participants were also carried out by many of the nonprofit organizations.

Even though nonprofits could benefit from increased reputation as a result of corporate social responsibility, the participants seem to have placed a significant amount of stigma on being seen as business-like. The nonprofits represented in this study were created to address specific missions, and publicizing their social responsibility was seen as a faux pas because this caused the organization to sway its focus away from its mission. Nonprofit organizations are dependent on voluntary community support from donors and volunteers, and the participants experienced and surmised that concentrating their resources on discussing social responsibility was a turn off for these stakeholders. This appears to leave the nonprofits caught between the pressures of society to appear socially responsible and the interests of the volunteers and donors to focus on the mission of the organization. As a result, nonprofit organizations quietly carry out their social responsibility behaviors.

Nonprofit organizations are expected to be working for the betterment of communities. These participants felt that there was no need for formal communication messages about the work they were doing that would normally fall under the scope of corporate social responsibility. Participants acknowledged that their organizations were committed to diversity, equitable treatment of volunteers and staff, organizational ethics and transparency, and being socially accountable to their communities. These actions certainly reflect contemporary definitions of corporate social responsibility.

Tonello (2011) argued that corporate social responsibility communication had a positive impact on audiences when the right combination of message characteristics, media channels, and organizational reputation are factored into his proposed framework of corporate social responsibility communication. However, Figure 1 highlights an additional variable that centers on stakeholder characteristics and support for the corporate social responsibility endeavors. For the nonprofit representatives who participated in this project, stakeholder concern was the most pressing factor in their corporate social responsibility communication. Their personal experiences with pushback from stakeholders when communicating about socially responsible organizational behaviors raised a cautionary flag for their continued use of corporate social responsibility communication.

Unlike Tonello's (2011) framework that showed positive outcomes from corporate social responsibility communication, the nonprofits represented in this study were more concerned about negative outcomes, such as loss of support due to their straying from organizational mission and using resources for efforts other than quality programs and services.

The proposed framework did not reflect the experiences of the interview subjects. Representatives from management and staff commented that focusing on corporate social responsibility efforts would risk the loss of donor and volunteer support; however, no one specifically stated instances where there was a documented loss of financial or volunteer support. Instead, it was a hypothetical fear based on outspoken stakeholders who voiced concern when these organizations experimented with corporate social responsibility communication in the past. The risk of losing donor and community support was enough to silence nonprofits about pro-social behaviors outside of their missions.

The tide may be changing for corporate social responsibility and nonprofits given the few voices of hope from within the nonprofits that mentioned that a few stakeholders were supportive of their efforts to diversify the workplace, become an environmentally-friendly organization, support ethical behaviors and strong governance, and other socially responsible actions. However, the results of this interview indicate that the corporate social responsibility communication still faces an uphill battle before it becomes widespread in the nonprofit sector.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

This study was one of the first to examine attitudes toward corporate social responsibility among nonprofit sector leaders. Even though the sector is working toward improving the community, nonprofits seemingly are dedicated to remaining quiet about their socially responsible work unless it is grounded in their missions. The corporate social responsibility actions described by literature are generally ones that nonprofit organizations advocate for; however, this advocacy only surfaces from nonprofits whose missions are also connected to those actions. For example, environmental nonprofits are expected to prepare a report on their sustainability efforts, but a religious organization is not.

An important implication of this research is the acknowledgement by nonprofit leaders that they are uncomfortable with the term "corporate social responsibility." Although this term is commonly accepted by the literature and by the field, a new term will need to be developed to capture the responsible actions of nonprofits.

As one participant noted, "We just work to do good—good for the community and good for ourselves." Nonprofit leaders maintain that that good work should be its own reward. They believe publicizing their corporate social responsibility efforts takes away from the good and becomes a business strategy, which is a step that some nonprofit sector leaders do not wish to cross even though one executive director from a sexual-health

nonprofit recognized, “We aren’t just touchy-feely organizations. We are businesses, but it’s a fine line we walk when working with community supporters.” For now, nonprofit organizations walking that line require a delicate balancing act of stakeholder expectations, socially responsible behaviors, and following the crowd with a mission-first orientation. However, someday the tides will shift so that nonprofit organizations can reap the same reputation and behavioral benefits from being able to openly discuss their social and environmentally responsibility efforts.

## LIMITATIONS

Though the interview subjects who participated in this study represent a range of nonprofit interests, the study ultimately only included eight nonprofits who were affiliated with public festivals in the San Francisco Bay Area in late 2013. These eight nonprofits represented the arts and humanities, health, and agriculture subsectors. Missing from this article are the insights from education, public/society benefit, religion, and social service nonprofits. Nonetheless, the 17 people provided insights into how corporate social responsibility was defined in the sector and how it was communicated. Although a saturation point was reached during the data collection process, there may be a regional bias in their responses. San Francisco and Northern California is noted for its support of socially responsible businesses. Given the public’s expectations of corporate social responsibility from the private sector, it may be that nonprofits in the area are more inclined to think of corporate social responsibility as a business strategy. Additional research is needed to confirm whether the ideas expressed in this article are representative of the larger nonprofit sector as the current findings cannot be generalized beyond the participants in the study.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the increasing interest on corporate social responsibility in the nonprofit sector, it is important to provide more scholarly grounding to this line of inquiry. This initial qualitative study has provided a framework that can be used to examine nonprofits’ socially responsible behaviors using a quantitative approach to provide a generalizable measure of attitudes toward corporate social responsibility. Additionally, it would be helpful to replicate some of the many experimental approaches that have been carried out using for-profit corporations to determine whether nonprofit organizations might actually receive a reputation or behavioral intention advantage over their competitors. Similarly, it would be helpful to evaluate the other side of the nonprofit organization-stakeholder relationship to determine how donors, volunteers, and other vocal advocates truly feel about nonprofits engaging in corporate social responsibility efforts and communication. Perhaps the results from this study come from continued conversations with a few loud voices among these organizations’ supporters and do not reflect the overall attitudes toward the nonprofits pro-social, non-mission specific endeavors. Future research can clarify this picture for organizations across the entire nonprofit spectrum.

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