

Corporate Social Responsibility: A Model for Analyzing Managerial and Communicational Approaches

Introduction

The multidimensional nature of *Corporate Social Responsibility*, which adds to the difficulty of reaching a shared definition, often impedes a clear and univocal comprehension of its contents (Carroll, 1979; Lantos, 2001; Sacconi, 2005; Caramazza, Carroli, Monaci, Pini, 2006; Palazzi, Starcher, 2006). In particular, if for some companies, most of all American (Juholin, 2004; Kampf, 2007), CSR is synonymous of corporate philanthropy and it is managed in a marginal way to the core business (Brønn, Vrioni, 2001; Frankental, 2001; Bhattacharya, Smith, Vogel, 2004; Sciarelli, 2007), for other companies, specially European, it is conceived as an extended corporate governance model open to stakeholder expectations and integrated in the business strategy (Bhattacharya, Smith, Vogel, 2004; Sacconi, 2004; Bovini, Mendica, Oppenheim, 2006; Freeman, 2006).

The existence of such different conceptions of the phenomenon contributes to the diffusion of deeply diverging approaches that companies can adopt toward CSR. In particular, from the analysis of the international literature, it emerges that the main divergences between potential approaches to CSR exist in at least two dimensions: the *managerial dimension* of CSR (Sacconi, 2004; Hemler, 2005; Caramazza, Carroli, Monaci, Pini, 2006) and the *communicational dimension* (Dawkins, 2004; David, Kline, Dai, 2005; Freeman, 2006; Nielsen, Thomsen, 2007).

The *managerial dimension* refers to the company's conception of CSR and to the impact that it has on social responsibility management and on corporate strategy. The *communicational dimension*, however, is the specific aim of the communication of the corporate social commitment and the communicational strategy of CSR adopted by companies.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a model which integrates both the dimensions considered, managerial and communicational, to detect and analyze some potential approaches to CSR that companies can adopt. From the description of the model, it appears that the intersection of these two dimensions, which are the research variables, would allow us to identify four possible CSR approaches.

Following the first paragraph dedicated to reviewing the international literature on CSR management and communication, this paper goes on to describing the model suggested. In particular, the paper tries to look at the characteristics of the four approaches identified more in depth and to suggest three possible evolving processes to adopt a strategic CSR approach. The paper ends with some suggestions for future empirical research to test the model.

Literature Review

International literature shows that many authors have dealt with Corporate Social Responsibility. They have tried to discover origins and historical evolution, characteristics and other concepts related to CSR, highlighting its multidimensional nature. In particular, many authors have tried to form a universally shared definition of CSR. Despite numerous efforts, however, a unanimous

agreement on a definition of CSR has not yet been reached (Carroll, 1979; Lantos, 2001; Youjeong, 2004; Sacconi, 2005; Caramazza, Carroli, Monaci, Pini, 2006; Carroll, Buchholtz, 2006; Palazzi, Starcher, 2006).

One of the main reasons that add to the difficulty of reaching a shared definition of CSR is the multidimensional nature of this concept that makes it difficult to identify its specific contents (Garriga, Melé, 2004; Vogel, 2005; Zambon, Del Bello, 2005; Caramazza, Carroli, Monaci, Pini, 2006; Palazzi, Starcher, 2006). In particular, the description and the analysis made by some scholars about company social behaviour have allowed us to identify at least two different conceptions of CSR: the first one identifies CSR with *corporate philanthropy* (Werbel, Wortman, 2000; Sen, Bhattacharya, 2001; McAlister, Ferrell, 2002; Youjeong, 2004; Genest, 2005; Lafferty, Goldsmith, 2005; Bae, Cameron, 2006) while the second conception considers CSR in terms of an *extended corporate governance model* integrated in the core business and corporate strategy (Frankental, 2001; Waddock, Bodwell, Graves, 2002; Battacharya, Smith, Vogel, 2004; Sacconi, 2004 e 2005; Alfonso, 2005; Bovini, Mendica, Oppenheim, 2006; Invernizzi, 2006).

The difference between these conceptions of CSR can strongly influences the first of the two dimensions considered by the model: the *CSR managerial perspective*. Below the principal aspects that characterize these conceptions of CSR and their impacts on the specific way that company adopts to manage its social responsibility are described.

Regarding the first conception we can say that some companies, most of all American (Juholin, 2004; Kampf, 2007), tend to conceive CSR only in terms of *corporate philanthropy*. In this conception, the socially responsible company carries out charitable initiatives, in great part money giving, in support of specific good social causes, ONG (Brønn, Vrioni, 2001; McAlister, Ferrell, 2002; Kotler, Lee, 2005) or defined sectors like arts and culture. In most cases, these initiatives are not linked to the core business and to the overall managerial strategy of the company. For this reason, some authors talk about *marginal corporate activities* (Bhattacharya, Smith, Vogel, 2004).

To complete this description, we can note that some marketing and public relations activities like social marketing, social sponsorship and cause-related marketing belong to this first CSR conception (Brønn, Vrioni, 2001; Invernizzi, 2006). These activities, like corporate philanthropy, often are not linked to the core business and to the managerial company strategy, so they can be considered marginal initiatives (Kotler, Lee, 2005; Lafferty, Goldsmith, 2005).

The marginal effect of these initiatives on the core business and on the managerial strategy does not imply relevant changes in the company organization or to the company policy (Vogel, 2005). In general, indeed, the main commitment requested by a marginal CSR conception consists in giving part of corporate profits to a good social cause or a non profit association (Brønn, Vrioni, 2001; Kotler, Lee, 2005). Some authors think that these aspects of corporate philanthropy do not imply real company ethical awareness, rather, they only transform it in an efficient tactic to improve corporate image. To support this position, a lot of studies show how corporate philanthropy and social marketing can generate scepticism in stakeholder attitudes toward the authenticity of corporate social behaviour (Brønn, Vrioni, 2001). Corporate philanthropy, indeed, is often conceived and implemented by companies like advertising tools, only to obtain an immediate economic return independently of an authentic and conscious social commitment (Frankental, 2001; Bazzardi, 2004; Genest, 2005; Bae, Cameron, 2006).

The second CSR conception is principally adopted by European companies (Juholin, 2004) that consider social responsibility as an *extended corporate governance model* (Sacconi, 2004; The Economist, 2005). This specific expression recognizes CSR as a new way to manage a company and its core business, honouring economic, social and environmental responsibility. The adjective “extended”, in particular, emphasises that a company has to recognize its responsibility to shareholders but also to all the numerous stakeholders and their specific expectations. Some authors express the same concept talking about CSR in terms of *principle of administration of the company* (Clark, 2000). So, in this conception, CSR would not be a marginal phenomenon to the business conduct and it would not be identified only with corporate philanthropy (Sacconi, 2004). On the contrary, CSR would be fully integrated into the corporate strategy (Sacconi, 2004; Vogel, 2005; Freeman, 2006) because it would represent the foundation for a strategic and responsible management of the company and its relationships with stakeholders (Frankental, 2001; Waddock, Bodwell, Graves, 2002; Bhattacharya, Smith, Vogel, 2004; Sacconi, 2004; Alfonso, 2005; Bovini, Mendica, Oppenheim, 2006; Invernizzi, 2006; Porter, Kramer, 2006).

In this conception, CSR is a model of company management and it would influence and modify, sometimes in a substantial way, the organizational asset and the corporate policies, making it necessary to rethink the entire governance in terms of attention to the society, to the environment and to manifold stakeholder expectations. The deeply organizational commitment, requested by such CSR conception, requires the development of a real ethic and social commitment from the company. It is necessary for the company not only to declare its social commitment but prove this commitment pragmatically aligning behaviour and declarations (Freeman, 2006). The effective integration of CSR to the corporate strategy and the coherence of the corporate behaviour to communications would support the social responsible reputation of the company (Freeman, 2006; Invernizzi, 2006). In this context, the company is not prevented from undergoing philanthropic or social marketing initiatives, but these initiatives cannot represent the only behaviour to demonstrate an authentic corporate responsibility to society and to the environment (Carroll, 1991; Invernizzi, 2006).

Many authors have gone into the two counter posed CSR conceptions and their impacts on managerial approach in a greater depth, but few of them have tried to study the approach and the communicational strategy of the company connected to the phenomenon (Morsing, Schultz, 2006). From literature analysis, it seems that the study of CSR communication is principally concentrated on circumscribed aspects and referred almost exclusively to the description of the tools used for social and environmental accountability. Most of the studies on CSR communication, indeed, have looked into topics like content analysis of social and sustainability reports (De Colle, Gonella, 2002; Piechocki, 2004; Zambon, Del Bello, 2005; Nielsen, Thomsen, 2007) and of web sites dedicated to CSR (Branco, Rodrigues, 2006; Kampf, 2007), or focus on the description of the structure that social reports can assume (Cerana, 2004; Hinna, 2005).

This paper therefore intends to deal with an aspect of the CSR communication that does not find an appropriate in-depth examination in the specific literature on this topic: the analysis of the intents and of the approaches that companies can adopt to communicate to stakeholders their social responsibility. To realize this analysis the paper refers to the Grunig and Hunt's studies on corporate communications and public relations, because they are also applicable in the specific field of CSR communication.

From the four models of public relations identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984), corporate communication can have very different intents. In particular, for this analysis it is appropriate to

consider two opposite communicational intents that coincide with another two public relations models: the *Press agency-publicity model* and the *Two-way symmetric model*. The first model suggests a communication aimed at influencing stakeholder expectations with activities of propaganda and spin doctoring. It pays scarce attention to the truth and to the completeness of the information disseminated. Instead, the aim of the second model is to realize a two-way symmetric communication to establishing a dialogue between company and stakeholders which allows mutual comprehension (Grunig, Hunt, 1984; Invernizzi, 2002, 2006).

In the specific case of CSR communication, the adoption of the *Press agency-Publicity model* suggests a communication of the social initiatives realized to improve corporate image influencing stakeholder perceptions, regardless of the transparency and the coherence between communications and behaviour. On the contrary, CSR communication suggested by the *Two-way symmetric model* would have the scope to create a symmetric relationship with stakeholders and to support a positive corporate reputation. The transparency of the information allows the company to legitimate its behaviour towards stakeholders. In this context, we have to remember that *Legitimate Theory* is based on the social contract that exists between business and society. In this contract, society allows the existence of business only if business behaves in a coherent way with social values and norms (Branco, Rodrigues, 2006).

The importance of analyzing the specific aim with which the company communicates its social commitment to stakeholders depends on the consequent impact that this aim can exercise on the communicational approach and on the strategy adopted.

From the comparison between the possible aims of CSR communication another important aspect emerges: the difference between the concepts of *corporate image* and *corporate reputation*. In this context, the *image* is the exterior appearance of the company, that can be easily manipulated via propaganda and spin doctoring (Invernizzi, 2006). On the contrary, the *reputation* is the "...amalgamation of all expectations, perceptions and opinions of an organisation developed over time by customers, employees, suppliers, investors and the public at large in relation to the organisation's qualities, characteristics and behaviour, based on personal experience, hearsay or the organisation's observed past actions" (Invernizzi, 2006:29). Thus, companies can develop a solid reputation only in the course of the time through their behaviour and actions and assuring coherence with communications (Invernizzi, 2002, 2006).

The next paragraph describes the model of analysis of the potential CSR managerial and communicational approaches that companies can adopt. Moreover, it suggests three evolving paths that companies can undertake to adopt a strategic CSR managerial and communicational approach.

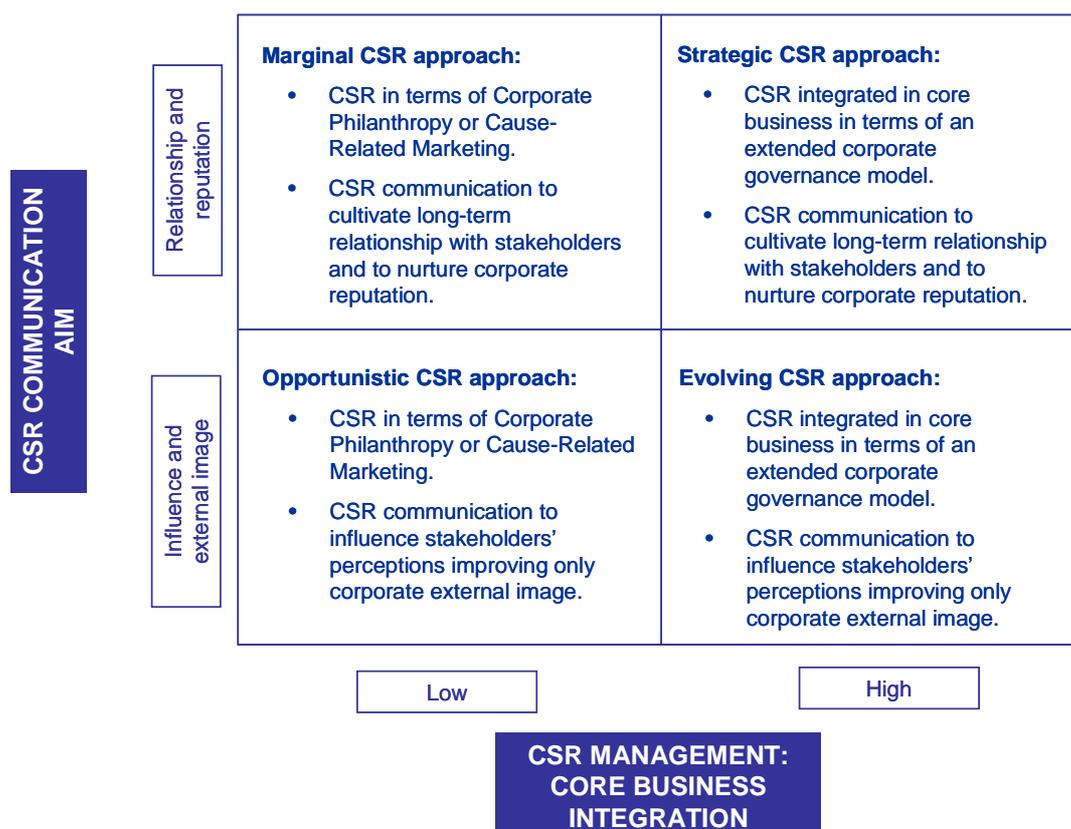
Model description

The model used analyse CSR managerial and communicational approaches, suggested in this paper. It is displayed in the figure 1. It is characterised by the fact that it jointly considers the managerial and the communicational dimensions of the CSR, which are the variables of this research.

The managerial dimension is represented by the variable "*CSR management: core business integration*", which refers to the degree of CSR integration in the core business and can adopt two extremes. On the right of the model, this variable adopts the "*High*" value because it

indicates a management that foresees an elevated CSR integration in the core business, like an extended corporate governance model. Companies that have high CSR integration in their core business and consider CSR as an extended corporate governance model, tend to reengineer their daily business activities trying to satisfy all the stakeholders' expectations. For example these companies work to improve the efficiency of their manufacturing processes, eliminating energy wastes, optimizing the utilization of raw materials and reducing pollutant emissions. Moreover, these companies can work to realize safer products for their consumers and to create a better working place for their employees. On the contrary, on the left of the model, the managerial variable adopts the "Low" value because it indicates a CSR management that is marginal to the core business and nearest to corporate philanthropy. Companies that have a low CSR integration in their core business tend to consider CSR only in terms of corporate philanthropy, like a marginal and additional factor to the business activities. For example these companies are involved only in charitable donations or Cause-related marketing campaigns which can be considered altruistic initiatives but, unlike the previous case, do not imply a reorganization of the daily business activities of the company to satisfy all the stakeholders' expectations and do not require the development of a real ethical commitment from the company.

Figure 1, "A model for analysing CSR managerial and communicational approaches":



Source: personal elaboration.

The communicational dimension is represented by the variable “*CSR communication aim*”, which can adopt two extremes. At the bottom of the model, this variable adopts the “*Influence and external image*” value, that is referred to a communication that only intends influencing stakeholder perceptions, improving the corporate image with spin doctoring and Press agency-Publicity. On the contrary, at the top of the model, the communicational variable adopts the “*Relationship and reputation*” value to indicate a symmetric and transparent communication that is coherent with corporate behaviour and aimed at supporting long-lasting relationships with stakeholders and a socially responsible corporate reputation.

Crossing the two variables considered we can obtain a matrix with four quadrants which correspond to the same number of potential CSR managerial and communicational approaches of the companies: the *strategic approach*, the *opportunistic approach*, the *evolving approach* and the *marginal approach*. In the next part of the paragraph, all of these four approaches will be described and analyzed to detect the specific contents.

The CSR *strategic approach* is situated in the top right quadrant of the matrix, where the variable “*High core business integration*” which represents the CSR managerial dimension, meets the variable “*Relationship and reputation*” that represents the CSR communicational dimension. Companies adopting the strategic approach would conceive CSR in terms of an extended corporate governance model that is opened to all the stakeholder expectations. Thus, they would manage CSR fully integrating it into the core business and the corporate strategy. On the communicational level, such companies would communicate their social commitment with the aim to inform stakeholders in a transparent way and coherently with their real behaviour. This communicational strategy would allow these companies to develop a stabile and long-lasting dialogue and relationship with stakeholders and to support a socially responsible corporate reputation.

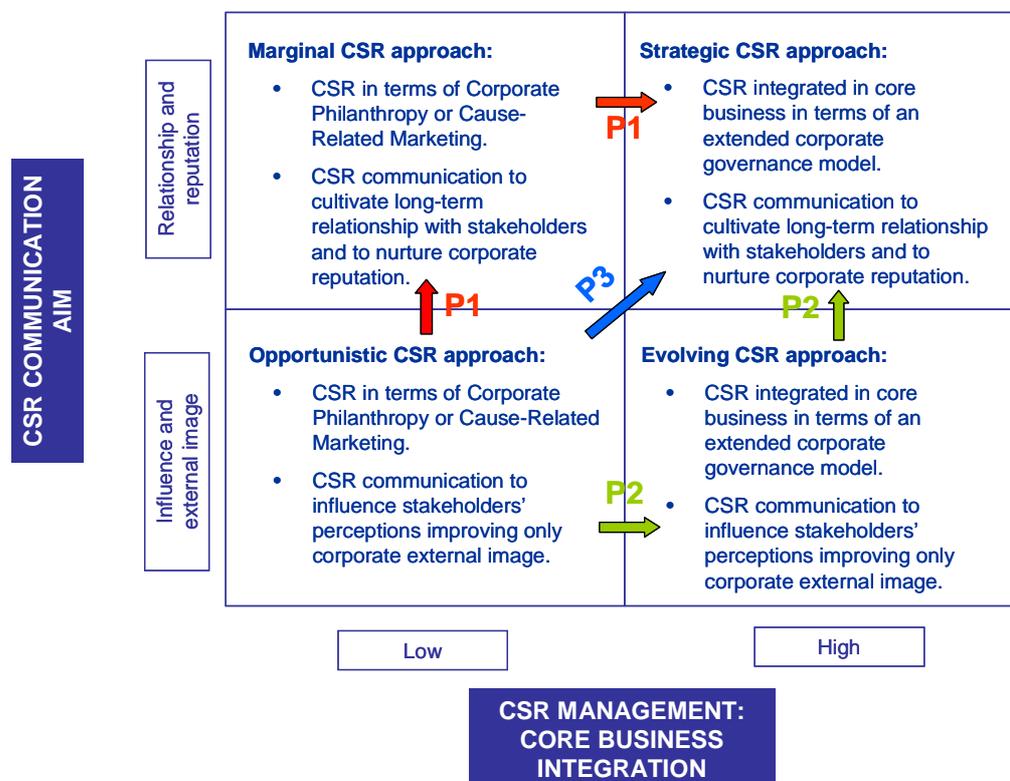
The CSR *opportunistic approach*, in the bottom left quadrant of the matrix, is characterized by the meeting between the variable “*Low core business integration*” and the variable “*Influence and external image*”. Such approach would be adopted by companies that conceive CSR only in terms of corporate philanthropy and manage it in a marginal way to the core business and to the corporate strategy. This management would not imply an impact of CSR on the entire corporate policy, but it would imply only money giving to specific good social causes. These companies would communicate their CSR commitment with the aim to influence stakeholder perceptions, only improving corporate external image but without worrying about the transparency and the coherence between communications and behaviour. Thus, in these cases, CSR communication would represent the typical characteristics of spin doctoring and of the Press agency-Publicity model of public relations (David, Kline, Dai, 2005).

The CSR *evolving approach*, in the bottom right quadrant of the matrix, is adopted by companies that we presume have faced a first evolution, in terms of development of their CSR approach. This approach is based on the meeting between the variable “*High core business integration*” and the variable “*Influence and external image*”. Companies that adopt the evolving approach would have already understood the importance of conceiving CSR in terms of an extended corporate governance model and not only in terms of corporate philanthropy. Changing their conception of the phenomenon, such companies would have also modified their management approach, beginning to integrate CSR to the core business and to the corporate strategy. However, this development on a managerial level does not correspond to the development on a communicational level, because at this second level companies have not yet completed the same evolution. Indeed, these companies would not yet have understood the

importance of communicating their social commitment to stakeholders in a transparent way, to develop long-lasting relationships with them and to support a socially responsible corporate reputation. On the contrary, these companies would continue to communicate their social commitment to the publics only to influence their perceptions with spin doctoring and Press agency-Publicity activities, which are aimed at improving the external image (David, Kline, Dai, 2005).

Finally, the fourth and last quadrant of the matrix, at the top left, corresponds to the CSR *marginal approach*. Such approach is obtained from the meeting between the variable “*Low integration to core business*” and the variable “*Relationship and reputation*”. Companies adopting this approach would conceive CSR in a marginal way to their core business, only in terms of corporate philanthropy. Thus, at a managerial level, these companies would adopt CSR without realizing any organizational change and only giving part of their profits to a specific good social cause. Such a managerial approach would indicate that the company has not yet developed a mature and conscious conception of the CSR in terms of an extended corporate governance model. However, this lack of managerial development does not exclude that, at a communicational level, the company could have already reached an upper level of development. This communicational development can be found in the awareness of the importance to inform the stakeholders in a transparent way and coherently with the real corporate social behaviour. Companies that fall into this quadrant make strategic use of communication but have not matured a strategic CSR management.

Figure 2, “Three potential evolving paths to adopt the strategic CSR approach”:



Source: personal elaboration.

As mentioned earlier, in addition to proposing a categorisation of the potential CSR approaches, the model described in this paper hypothesizes three evolving paths for opportunistic companies that have not yet developed a strategic approach, but want to adopt one. Such paths are depicted in figure 2, respectively as *P1*, *P2* and *P3* and all of them entail a risk for those companies that begin the path but that do not complete it.

The first path *P1* foresees that the company with an opportunistic CSR approach would realize two consequent steps to adopt a strategic approach: in the first step, the company would evolve adopting a marginal approach; in the second step, it would abandon the marginal approach to adopt the strategic one.

The transit from the opportunistic to the marginal approach implies a development of the company at a communicational level, with the adoption of a transparent communication that is coherent with the behaviour. This development at a communicational level does not correspond to development at a managerial level, because the company continues to conceive CSR only in terms of corporate philanthropy, thus in a marginal way to the core business. As soon as this first step is achieved, the company can face the second adopting the strategic approach. In this way, the company adds to the development reached at the communicational level the development reached at the managerial one, which foresees the CSR integration in the core business and to the global managerial strategy. This first path ends with a full development of the managerial and communicational approaches of the company that would in this way become a strategic approach.

As also mentioned earlier, however, all the evolving paths described by the model present some risks. Path *P1* implies a risk when the company decides to end it at the first step, without finish it, and so maintaining a marginal CSR approach. Such risk can be avoided only if the company decides to complete its evolving path, facing full development also at the managerial level.

Similarly to the first evolving path also *P2*, the second one, foresees two steps to develop a strategic CSR approach. In the first step the opportunistic company would adopt the evolving CSR approach, whereas, in the second step it would develop the strategic approach.

The transit from the opportunistic to the evolving approach is characterized by the development of the company at the managerial level, with a full CSR integration in the core business and in the global managerial strategy. However, this managerial development would not correspond to the communicational one, because the CSR communication would continue to have the unique intent to improve the corporate image with spin doctoring and Press agency-Publicity. To complete the second path, the company would have to adopt a strategic approach also evolving at a communicational level and communicating its social commitment in a transparent way and coherent with the behaviour. Similarly to the first path, also *P2* would allow the company to reach a complete development of the managerial and communicational approaches that would thus become a strategic approach.

There is also a big risk in the second evolving path if the company decides to stop at the first step and to maintain an evolving CSR approach, thus not developing at a communicational level. Such risk could be avoided only if the company decides to conclude the path adopting a CSR strategic approach.

Finally, unlike the other paths, *P3* foresees only a step that an opportunistic company would have to take to adopt a strategic approach. Taking this step the company would develop both at the managerial and communicational level. Also this third path implies a risk for the company.

Such risk comes if the company cannot complete the development on both managerial and communicational levels. In this case, the company would risk to develop a CSR marginal or evolving approach, it depends on the less developed dimension, thus a not fully mature and strategic approach.

Conclusions

This paper stems from the fact that, the literature on Corporate Social Responsibility lacks a model to jointly analyse the potential managerial and communicational approaches companies take towards CSR. In particular, in addition to identifying two different conceptions of the phenomenon which can impact on corporate managerial approaches, this paper looks at the aspect of CSR communication in more depth. Unlike other authors that have focused their studies only on the description and on the content analysis of the accountability reports, this study is focused on the analysis of the communicational aims and strategies of CSR.

In addition to the description of the model and of the potential corporate approaches to the CSR management and communication, this paper has hypothesized three potential evolving paths for the companies that have not yet developed a strategic approach but that would like to. For each path, the paper has described the steps and the main correlated risks.

From this study further suggestions for future research emerge. An empirical research could be planned to test the model and to verify the real consistency of the managerial and communicational approaches described and of the three evolving paths hypothesized. The more appropriate methodology to realize this empirical research would be the case study. The result of this research would consist in an attempt to map out a model of the companies studied and to track the possible evolving paths realized in the course of time. The empirical character of this research would allow us to both verify the identified approaches and to discover others by exploring the conduct of the companies studied.

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