

**Corporate Perspectives on the Role of Global Public Relations
in Public Diplomacy**

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Abstract

This study examined the role of multinational corporations as non-state actors in public diplomacy, specifically corporate involvement in supporting diplomatic goals through global public relations and CSR activities. Using the Delphi technique, the research documented the views of corporate public relations and communication executives regarding the reciprocal impacts of corporate and national images and the potential for multinational companies to become involved in strategic partnerships with governments to advance public diplomacy goals. Findings indicate corporate leaders believe positive diplomatic relationships between the United States and the countries in which their companies do business have positive impacts on business. They acknowledge that CSR efforts by U.S. companies operating abroad have a halo effect on national image, and believe the image and reputation of the United States has some effect on corporate image. However, they feel no responsibility to engage directly in U.S. public diplomacy. At the same time, the data showed potential for strategic partnerships, primarily through sharing corporate expertise and/or consulting with public diplomats; however, the executives reported receiving no request from the U.S. government to do so. Findings suggest it is up to the government to initiate the participation of the corporate sector in public diplomacy.

Introduction

Globalization has created a power shift in public diplomacy with greater interdependence of global business and international politics (Muldoon, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). The multi-lateral nature of 21st century public diplomacy means that governments are part of a network rather than always on top of a hierarchy (Hocking, 2004) and non-state actors from both the non-profit and private sectors play increasingly important roles (Lee & Ayhan, 2015). The current study defined public diplomacy as a nation's efforts to engage and build positive, supportive relationships with people of other countries, which is similar to definitions of

international public relations. The convergence between public diplomacy and public relations has been noted by public relations scholars (Signitzer, 2008; Yun & Toth, 2009; Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2015). In addition to the theoretical links between the fields, there may be a role for corporations to be part of the process of public diplomacy as the nature of public diplomacy evolves.

As Fitzpatrick (2007) observed, “Whether one believes that public diplomacy encompasses the actions of non-state entities or is an inherently government enterprise, the reality is that non-state actors have become more involved in efforts to influence foreign publics’ views of nation-states...” (p. 198). In fact, the earliest definition of public diplomacy anticipated a role for the private sector in public diplomacy. Edward Gullion, who introduced the term at Tufts University in 1965, defined public diplomacy as including “the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another” (The Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy, undates). More recently, the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California defined public diplomacy as a country’s efforts, through official and private individuals and institutions, to communicate with publics in other countries and societies (www.uscpubildiplomacy.com). In observing that public diplomacy is no longer “a uniquely state activity,” (p. 6), Melissen (2005) noted that corporations are part of an expanding group of non-state actors participating in public diplomacy processes. He said, “International corporations operating in a global marketplace are now also facing up to their social and ethical responsibilities, and their public diplomacy policies are slowly but surely becoming more sophisticated” (p. 12).

While much has been written about the role of transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in public diplomacy, particularly in regard to global health and human rights issues (e.g., Lord, 2006; Zatepilina, 2009), few empirical studies have looked at the role private-sector corporations play. For example, there has been no empirical research to test the normative assertions that businesses *should* play a role in public diplomacy (e.g., Private Sector Summit, 2007), nor is it known whether private sector corporations are even interested in collaborating with governments on public diplomacy initiatives. Although the emerging concept of “corporate diplomacy” is gaining attention among business scholars (e.g., Westermann-Behaylo, Rehbein & Fort, 2015) and some have called on corporate executives, including those in public relations, to take on the role of “corporate diplomats” (Saner, Yiu & Sondergaard, 2000; Lee, 2004; Henisz, 2016), whether such roles might include direct support for public diplomacy efforts is uncertain. Additionally, there is scant evidence that corporations feel obligated to support government-directed public diplomacy efforts to enhance the national image of their home countries among people abroad.

This study was the first to examine empirically the role of private-sector corporations as non-state actors in public diplomacy through a Delphi-study involving U.S. corporate communications and public relations executives. It expands upon White’s (2015) conceptual work about the potential for multinational corporations to participate in public diplomacy efforts on behalf of governments, which she and others have described as corporate diplomacy. The research specifically explored the views of top corporate public relations executives for U.S.-based multinational companies on links between corporate image and national image and reputation, corporate involvement in supporting diplomatic goals through global public relations

and CSR activities, and the potential for developing strategic public/private partnerships to advance public diplomacy goals.

In studying businesses as political actors involved in diplomatic endeavors, the research helps to advance international political public relations as both a theoretical and practical construct (Hart, 2004). As White (2015) noted, “very little attention has been given to corporate diplomacy in public relations scholarship, despite the overlap in functions between corporate diplomacy and international public relations” (p. 306). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of private sector corporations as non-state actors in public diplomacy, with particular focus on the impacts of global public relations and corporate social responsibility efforts.

Literature Review

As Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2011) observed, “[p]ublic diplomacy efforts are recognized as a major part of successful international relations among nations, and political public relations activities are a key component of those activities” (p. 322). Corporations play a role in creating the image and reputation of the countries with which they are associated. There are often more business people in a country than diplomats, and corporate messages, brands, and products touch the lives of more people than do government messages (White, 2015). White and Kolesnicov (2015) contended that global corporations “play a role in defining the reputation and image of their home country whether or not that role is intentional” (p. 327).

According to Kochhar and Molleda (2015), “Corporate power has the ability to create and redefine the global perception of a nation” (p. 55). Scherer and Palazzo (2011) also noted the growing role that business plays in global governance, particularly through corporate social responsibility activities that often are politicized. They contended that not only do business firms have increased responsibility in a globalized world, but they are increasingly viewed as political actors, noting “current theorizing on the firm in the CSR literature has not yet sufficiently integrated this new political role of private business” (p. 900). These authors proposed a new perspective on “political CSR” described as an “extended model of governance with business firms contributing to global regulation and control of market transactions,” which provides “a more balanced view on political and economic responsibilities in a globalized world” (p. 901).

CSR activities can be a form of “soft” diplomacy as described by Signitzer (2008), and may have the effect of public diplomacy, even if that is not its primary purpose. White, Vanc, and Coman (2011) found that CSR activities of U.S. companies positively affect the image and reputation of the United States although their primary purpose is to benefit the company through building and maintaining relationships with the governments and communities of the countries in which they operate. CSR activities can help promote trust and cultivate positive public opinion, which influences perceptions of the corporation’s home country, which in turn affects public diplomacy outcomes. Furthermore, global companies often are engaged in business practices that promote understanding of national values, not only through CSR practices, but also through cultural exchanges and sponsorships and other activities that impact public diplomacy.

Involvement of private-sector corporations in public diplomacy has been endorsed by governments, political think tanks, academics, and others who perceive expanding roles for

business in global society and opportunities for corporate participation in public diplomacy to advance diplomatic goals (e.g., Goodman, 2006; Wang, 2006; Reinhard, 2009). According to Melissen (2011), “[g]overnments can learn a great deal from corporate-sector practices in areas such as marketing, public relations and branding” (p. 19). The private sector has resources that are perceived to be valuable and important to the process of public diplomacy, including access to research, international and intercultural expertise, large communication budgets, extensive networks and locals on the ground, and the ability to be nimble and efficient (Reinhard, 2009; Zaharna, 2010). As a result, multinationals “can play a role in resolving social or political conflicts, leading to wider societal benefits” (Westermann-Behaylo, Rehbein & Fort, 2015, p. 387).

However, previous scholarly work in public diplomacy and international public relations provides no clear path for non-state actor involvement, even though there have been attempts to involve the private sector in public diplomacy. Lee and Ayhan (2015) noted that “one of the contested areas of public diplomacy literature is how to treat non-state actors in the realm of public diplomacy” (p.58). In the wake of 9/11, the organization Business for Diplomatic Action formed to engage U.S. corporations in efforts to reduce anti-Americanism and improve America’s image abroad (Business for Diplomatic Action, undated). The U.S. State Department later held a “Private Sector Summit” to identify ways in which the U.S. corporations operating abroad might support America’s public diplomacy mission (Private Sector Summit, 2007). Such initiatives, however, seem to have garnered little support among corporations that were called upon to play a more proactive and strategic role in public diplomacy.

White (2015) noted the reason for little corporate support might be that “there is no implementation plan or road map for putting recommendations for changes in public diplomacy into effect” (p. 314; citing Gregory, 2005). Although “the private sector has the *potential* to play a role in public diplomacy” and “public diplomacy is becoming a cooperative process, which can be described as a network of public and private actors using diplomatic channels and processes” (p. 308), exactly “[how] non-state actors, particularly international corporations, will fit a new public diplomacy strategy remains to be seen” (p. 317). According to Lee and Ayhan (2015), in order for non-state actors’ potential for public diplomacy to be tapped, state agencies must approach non-state actors for collaboration and/or open up diplomatic channels for collaborative opportunities presented by non-state actors (p. 71).

The current study addressed gaps in the literature by examining corporate perspectives on the participation of private sector corporations in public diplomacy. The work focused specifically on the views of U.S. corporate public relations and communication executives regarding links between corporate and national images and reputations, and the potential for the multinational companies to become involved in strategic public-private partnerships with governments to advance public diplomacy goals.

Research questions

Based on the literature, the study posed four research questions:

RQ₁ How do corporate public relations executives perceive the relationship between corporate image and reputation and national image and reputation?

RQ₂ How do corporate public relations executives view the participation of multinational corporations in public diplomacy?

RQ₃ Do corporate public relations executives view the direct involvement of multinational corporations in public diplomacy as being part of CSR efforts?

RQ₄ What opportunities exist for U.S. diplomats to partner and cooperate with corporations to advance public diplomacy goals?

Method

The Delphi method, used for this study, is a research technique for consensus building invented by the RAND Corporation in the 1950s. In contrast to a traditional survey, which relies on random sampling and starts from the assumption that the researchers already know what questions need to be asked, the Delphi panel technique is particularly suited for studies that investigate questions for which there is uncertainty or speculation and for which expert judgments are essential (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). Delphi panels begin with carefully chosen experts, regardless of demographics, who are uniquely qualified to answer the questions based on their position and expertise. The method allows questions to be developed and refined as the study progresses. Panelists can offer feedback in each round of data collection and have the opportunity to clarify or reassess their previous responses, which adds validity and trustworthiness to the results (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). The process continues until satisfactory consensus is reached.

Panelists in this study were public relations executives in U.S. multinational corporations who are decision-makers for involvement in global public relations, CSR, or other activities related to public diplomacy. They were selected from the directory of the Arthur W. Page Society, the leading association for senior public relations professionals. After removing agency principals, educators, and those working for companies without a global reach, the list included 99 possible participants. In late February 2016, a letter of invitation explaining the study, along with a consent form, an overview of the Delphi method, and a reply envelope were sent by U.S. mail inviting participation. A follow-up email with the same documents was sent one week later. Fourteen corporate communications executives returned signed consent forms and agreed to serve on the Delphi panel, and nine of them followed through all rounds of data collection. Panelists were anonymous to each other, but known to the researchers; all responses were confidential and names, titles, and/or places of business are not associated with the data. Data collection began after Institutional Review Board approval.

The first wave of data collection was an electronic questionnaire, sent via email in March 2016, which consisted of closed and open-ended questions. After the initial round of data

collection, the researchers analyzed the responses and then designed another questionnaire based on the findings of the first round; open-ended responses from the first round were used to validate constructs from which close-ended questions for the second round were developed. The third round consisted of sending a summary of the findings to the panelists; panelists were asked to comment on the summative conclusions and to respond to one final open-ended question. There was a high level of agreement with the summative findings at this point, so the study was concluded after three waves of data gathering since consensus was reached, which is the goal of the Delphi technique (Dalkey, 1969).

Because of access to such a carefully chosen and elite population, the researchers decided to follow up by e-mail with the communication executives originally identified, but who did not agree to serve on the Delphi panel. They were invited to complete a one-time-only survey with no further obligation to participate in the Delphi study. This survey consisted of the same closed-ended questions posed to the panelists in the first round of data collection. Twenty-one additional corporate communication executives completed the questionnaire in late March. The responses of these participants, in addition to the responses of the Delphi panelists, were considered in the development the second round of questions for the study since there was little difference between the responses of the panelists and the responses of the other participants (See Table 2.) The second instrument was sent to the panelists in April 2016, giving them the opportunity to make further clarifications and comments about both their own judgments and the collective responses.

The qualitative (open-ended) data were analyzed by the researchers working together over a period of several days, using a method of constant comparing and contrasting developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) that uses a process of open, axial, and selective coding to derive overall themes from the data. Categories of themes were created, then considered and reconsidered until agreement was met regarding the central themes. Central themes and ideas emerged for each research question from the aggregate of concepts. Appendix A lists the open-ended questions used in each round of data collection.

Quantitative data from the close-ended questions were analyzed using SPSS; only means and standard deviations were calculated since the samples were small. While the Delphi method is primarily qualitative, close-ended questions were used to confirm constructs, and are presented in the results section below to add insights to the research questions. Because Delphi panels are composed of a small number of highly qualified experts, quantitative results are useful for descriptive purposes but are not statistically generalizable. Data from the third round was qualitative and expressed agreement with the findings of the second round.

Results

Since the Delphi method allows panelists to revise and expand their initial responses in subsequent questionnaires, responses from the first two rounds of data collection were used to derive central themes of responses that corresponded to each of the research questions, which were confirmed in the third round. Quantitative responses, measured on a seven-point scale where 1 is low agreement and 7 is high agreement, are included in the results where appropriate for further understanding.

RQ₁ Relationship between corporate image and reputation and national image and reputation

Two key themes related to the first research question emerged from the data. First, the results showed that corporate public relations executives recognize reciprocal impacts between U.S. image and reputation and company image and reputation. As one panelist put it, “While not critical to our operations, it is easier for us to operate if the U.S. is highly regarded.” Another explained, “U.S. political actions and diplomatic agendas can impact a company’s ability to operate and create and maintain necessary stakeholder relationships in any part of the world. A U.S.-based company must be cognizant of how the United States government is perceived worldwide.”

The panelists also agreed that an enhanced image of the United States could be a by-product of American companies’ global public relations and CSR efforts in other countries. When asked specifically about the impact of corporate CSR activities conducted in countries outside the United States, the panelists reported that CSR efforts make people in those countries view the United States more favorably.

Second, the panelists agreed there is mutual interest in establishing positive, supportive relationships between America and people abroad (which was the definition of public diplomacy provided in the study). One panelist said, “We believe that it is a positive connotation as our practices and standards are typically higher than the countries where we operate.” At the same time, the corporate public relations executives reported “a negative image of the United States had less negative impact on their companies’ brands and products among foreign publics.”

The quantitative responses from the first round of data collection also showed that corporate public relations executives believe “diplomatic relationships between the United States and the countries in which they do business have a positive impact on business in that country” ($M=5.43$, $SD=1.72$) and that “a positive image of the United States abroad has a positive effect on corporate image and reputation among foreign publics” ($M=4.57$, $SD=1.4$). These beliefs were confirmed in the second round. Panelists were asked whether they agreed that “the U.S. government and American companies have a mutual interest in establishing positive, supportive relationships between the United States and people abroad”; they strongly agreed ($M=6.5$; $SD=1.2$).

RQ₂ Corporate participation in public diplomacy

All panelists reported that their companies are not currently participating in U.S. public diplomacy activities. The results revealed four categorical reasons for the lack of involvement (see Table 1). First, they do not perceive it to be in the strategic or financial interest of their companies to engage in activities that promote the image and reputation of the United States abroad. One panelist noted a “level of naïveté” in assuming that American companies might perceive advantages related to direct participation in U.S. public diplomacy. “While in a utopian world, these answers are like motherhood and apple pie, the reality is that businesses have far greater issues to deal with that have a much higher correlation to company reputation.” Another said, “public companies have a responsibility to their shareholders and, thus, are primarily focused on those initiatives.” Similarly, a different panelist said, “While it would be a nice thing to do – to play a role in U.S. efforts to establish positive relationships between the U.S. and people abroad – I’m not sure that is of strategic importance to our future business.” Another said participation might be warranted but “only if the interests of the company and its shareholders

are complimentary [with the interests of the United States].” Still another said, simply, “We have much higher priorities.”

Second, corporate public relations executives see possible political risks in being directly associated with the U.S. government. One panelist explained, “There is risk for a multinational company to be viewed simply as the public relations arm of the U.S. government.” Another said, “It carries the risk that your company ends up on the wrong side of a diplomatic or political issue by implication.” Another noted the “risk of alienation of other stakeholders.”

The third reason was that global, rather than national, positioning is good for business abroad. One panelist reported, “Many companies would like to be viewed as a global citizen with a global mindset versus simply as a U.S. company.” Another noted that “as a GLOBAL company [capitalized in the original comment], we deal with customers in all regions and ‘American’ can sometimes be a loaded term.” Another said it is “important to be global, which means a localized face and an understanding of ‘license to operate’ dynamics in each country and region. Operating with a global mindset creates opportunity, whereas an ‘American’ mindset can be constraining and lead to myopic thinking.” These contentions were supported by quantitative data in the second round that showed agreement with the item, “positioning our company as global, rather than as an American company, is good for business abroad” (M=5.25, 1.52).

Fourth, the panelists said they had not been asked to participate in public diplomacy initiatives nor did they have a good understanding of what such participation might entail. One said, “We need to understand more about what public diplomacy initiatives exist.”

Table 1. Thematic reasons for lack of corporate involvement in U.S. public diplomacy

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not in the strategic and/or financial interest of the company 2. Political risks associated with being labelled an “American” company 3. Importance of global positioning 4. No request from government to participate; lack of understanding of public diplomacy

When asked to elaborate on what they viewed as the *primary* reason American companies spend little resources on initiatives to improve America’s image and reputation abroad, one panelist explained, “Many urgent priorities and too little resources.” Another provided a list:

- 1) The primary focus for a company is to deliver shareholder value and company performance.
- 2) The linkage for positive opportunities and association between American companies and America’s image is not well understood or defined. If anything, the linkage is biased toward risks, given America’s brand overseas has been adversely impacted in recent years.
- 3) It is difficult to establish/prove ROI on this type of resources allocation.
- 4) The risk and complexity associated with interaction between business and government has increased.

RQ₃ Direct involvement in public diplomacy as part of CSR efforts

The panelists said they perceive no obligation or responsibility to promote American society, culture and values among people abroad. Although one panelist said that corporations operating abroad “have a responsibility to uphold high standards of integrity and respect, as aligned generally with U.S. values,” and another observed that companies might participate in efforts to establish positive relationships “within a reasonable bandwidth in what is of mutual interest,” the group overall did not think support for public diplomacy “should be seen as an on-going overt responsibility.” The quantitative data showed that panelists did not agree with the statement: “U.S. corporations operating abroad have an obligation to promote American society, culture, and values to people abroad” (M=2.50, SD=1.2).

They reported that the motivations for corporate involvement in CSR efforts in other countries were not focused on diplomatic objectives – e.g., enhancing America’s image among people abroad or improving relations with foreign governments. Rather, CSR efforts, according to the panelists, are aimed primarily at helping people in other countries. One panelist reported, “We focus locally on issues that are locally relevant. We don’t try to ‘get credit’ with CSR as much as we try to ‘effect change.’” The motive of helping people was followed closely by the motive of enhancing the image of the company. When asked whether their corporations, when engaging in CSR activities abroad, purposely attempt to disassociate their companies with the United States, the panelists resoundingly said no, with one adding “But we don’t emphasize U.S. operations or connections.”

RQ₄ Opportunities for government-corporate cooperation and partnerships

Corporate communication executives do not believe public diplomacy is the responsibility of private-sector companies, and when asked about the likelihood of their companies providing support for U.S. public diplomacy they indicated very little chance for their companies to *initiate* public diplomacy efforts. However, at the same time, the findings showed some potential for strategic partnerships that would advance public diplomacy goals. For example, if government diplomats requested help in diplomatic efforts abroad, the corporate public relations executives said their companies likely would provide support. In terms of specific types of support, they said the corporations they represent would be most likely to provide expertise/consultation, and possibly to provide access to corporate contacts and networks to U.S. diplomats, but less likely to provide resources (personnel, in-kind services, facilities, etc.). (See Table 2.) In the second round, when asked, “if government diplomats requested my company’s help in diplomatic efforts abroad, I believe our company would provide help,” panelists somewhat agreed (M=5.75, SD=1.5). (See Table 3 for all second-round quantitative items.) The data indicated that if there is to be strategic coordination between U.S. corporations and U.S. public diplomats, the lead must come from government.

Table 2. Potential corporate support for U.S. public diplomacy

	Delphi panelists		Corp. Execs. not in panel	
	(n=9) Mean	SD	(n=21) Mean	SD
Question (round 1; 1=not at all likely, 7=extremely likely)				
How likely do you think your company would be to initiate public diplomacy efforts independent of the U.S. government?	2.43	1.618	2.83	1.586
How likely do you think your company would be to provide expertise/counseling/ consultation if requested by government diplomats in support of U.S. public diplomacy efforts?	4.43	.976	4.67	1.55
How likely do you think your company would be to support U.S. public diplomacy through contracts/grants/partnerships with the U.S. government?	3.57	1.134	3.42	1.443
How likely do you think your company would be to provide resources (personnel, in-kind services, facilities, etc.) if requested by government diplomats in support of U.S. public diplomacy efforts?	3.29	1.704	3.92	1.311
How likely do you think your company would be to provide access to corporate contacts and networks to U.S. diplomats?	4.29	1.113	3.58	1.564

Table 3. Second-round questions to Delphi panelists

Question (round 2; 1=not at all likely, 7=extremely likely)	Mean	SD
Local CSR activities in the countries in which we operate make people in that country view the United States more favorably.	5.00	.8165
If government diplomats requested my company’s help in diplomatic efforts abroad, I believe our company would provide help.	5.75	1.50
International diplomacy is not the responsibility of private-sector companies.	2.50	1.29
The U.S. government and American companies have a mutual interest in establishing positive, supportive relationships between America and people abroad.	6.5	1.2
Enhancing the image and reputation of our company is the primary motivation for our CSR efforts in other countries.	5.0	1.414
Enhancing the image of the United States is a by-product of our CSR efforts in other countries.	2.75	.957
Building our brand is the primary motivation for our CSR efforts in other countries.	3.75	1.258
Helping people is the primary motivation for our CSR efforts in other countries.	5.75	1.50
Positioning our company as global, rather than as an American company, is good for business abroad.	5.52	1.258

The panelists also reported that, although they have no direct involvement with U.S. public diplomacy, their companies sometimes work with foreign “host” governments in situations requiring local support for corporate activities, especially in activities related to CSR. One panelist noted, “Our community engagement work sometimes happens in collaboration with local governments.” Another said, “Outside of the United States we partner with our host government on CSR activities as it is very important to them.”

The third round of the study involved a summary of the findings sent to panelists with a request for comments and a request to answer one additional question, How might U.S. public diplomats work with corporations given corporate reluctance to get directly involved in public diplomacy? (See Appendix B). None of the panelists posted a reply to the question, and none of the panelists expressed disagreement with the summary. The comments consisted only of thanking the researchers for the summary, or noting agreement with the findings.

Discussion and Implications

This study provides the first empirical test of a widely-held assumptions that U.S. private companies are poised to play a diplomatic role in advancing the image and reputation of the United States among people abroad (e.g. Private Sector Summit, 2007; Wang, 2006; Reinhard, 2009; White, 2015; Westermann-Behaylo, Rehbein, & Fort, 2015). While public diplomacy increasingly is viewed as involving a network of public and private actors using diplomatic channels and processes to advance public diplomacy goals, the study reveals a significant disconnect in corporate and government views regarding the involvement of private sector corporations in public diplomacy. The findings indicate little support for assertions that U.S. companies play – or should play – an intentional role in advancing public diplomacy outcomes.

Corporate communicators see financial and political risks in involvement with the government in diplomatic efforts. They are concerned about expending resources on efforts that are not in the strategic financial interests of the corporation, and they are concerned that being too closely aligned with the United States detracts from global positioning, which they see as important for business success. The results indicating that direct involvement of companies in diplomatic activities is unlikely are in line with post-9/11 experience of Business for Diplomatic Action, which found that although U.S. corporations might be willing to contribute to public diplomacy, they do not want to be directly associated with the U.S. government (White, 2015). The findings also indicated, as Wang (2006) suggested, that companies may “shy away from engaging in discourses or activities deemed political” (p. 45); corporations exist to make a profit.

Even though the study found no direct involvement in public diplomacy, there was widespread acknowledgement of the symbiotic and mutual interest in good international relationships, and that a positive image of the United States has a positive effect on business. However, one of the most compelling findings was although the corporate public relations executives believe their companies benefit from a positive image of America abroad, they do not see a similar link between a negative country image and negative effect on images of their companies’ brands and products. This perception could be a contributing factor in decisions to not actively engage in public diplomacy initiatives aimed at promoting national image.

The panelists’ agreement that CSR activities in countries outside the United States reflects positively on the image of the country suggests that corporate social responsibility may be a part of the *process* of public diplomacy that contributes to country image, even though not a motivating factor for engaging in CSR initiatives. The fact that the panelists perceived no obligation to directly support public diplomacy goals as part of global public relations and/or CSR efforts indicates a need for corporate outreach on the part of public diplomats, as suggested by Lee and Ayhan (2015).

The study offers important implications for both the scope of and potential for corporate participation as non-state actors in public diplomacy. The findings show that while corporate executives do not feel an obligation to promote American society, culture, and values abroad, they recognize the benefits of a positive country image and would consider involvement in public diplomacy *if asked*. They would not initiate involvement in public diplomacy, but indicated a willingness to provide their expertise to support U.S. public diplomacy efforts. The findings support Reinhard’s (2009) belief that corporations may be more willing to support

rather than to directly engage in public diplomacy in order to protect their economic self-interest and/or to advance a global brand image (White, 2015).

The research sheds light on the potential for governments to engage with private sector companies in efforts to influence and build positive relationships with publics abroad. The barriers cited for the lack of corporate involvement in public diplomacy indicate significant challenges for government diplomats interested in working with corporations to advance public diplomacy goals, but also clarify what must be addressed. It is clear from the study that the government must initiate the partnership. As Lee and Ayhan (2015), observed, “Non-state actors’ potential for public diplomacy can be tapped by states only if state agencies open their channels for collaboration opportunities (passive partnerships) and/or they approach their channels for collaboration (active partnerships)” (p. 72). Certainly, any such efforts would have to begin with greater clarification of exactly what corporate involvement might look like and entail. An important step in effective corporate-government collaboration is the identification of shared interests and goals (Lee & Ayhan, 2015, p. 68).

One possible avenue for involvement in public diplomacy could be through activities related to CSR. Although the study showed that the impact of CSR efforts in enhancing national image was viewed as a by-product of CSR efforts, a better understanding of public diplomacy goals and objectives among corporate executives might lead to greater interest in coordinated strategies for improving the lives of people abroad. As Scherer and Palazzo (2010) argued, there is growing recognition of the “problem-solving potential of non-state actors” in global governance, as well as increasing acceptance on the part of corporations of a more public role for private business, signaling a “politically enlarged concept of responsibility” (p. 906).

As public expectations for socially responsible performance on the part of corporations continues to evolve and expand, corporations may be held to higher standards in terms of their involvement in social issues, requiring corporate executives to rethink their CSR agendas and partnerships. As Moon (2014) noted, “Some of the large corporations most committed to CSR extend their roles as broad social change-agents” through involvement in “new governance type relationships” (p. 135).

As strategic leaders and counselors to their corporations, public relations executives will play key roles in helping their companies understand and adapt to new expectations and demands in the global environment. As noted in a recent Arthur W. Page Society report (2016) on the expanding role of the chief communications officer (CCO), “The CCO, as both monitor of environmental conditions and communicator across the enterprise, is at the center of much of the adaptation that takes place” (p. 2) Partnering with government and other influential actors in the global sphere offers possibilities for working together in advancing both corporate and broader societal goals. In situations requiring negotiations with foreign governments and other entities that affect business practices, corporate efforts may be more effective when coordinated with government diplomats.

A first step in strategic coordination between government and business would be the identification by government diplomats of corporate directors responsible for directing and managing global diplomatic activities. For example, the U.K. has a unit at the center of government that identifies and formally includes business leaders in diplomacy (Lee, 2004). Such efforts to bring business and government leaders together will be essential in advancing corporate diplomacy as a component of public diplomacy. As White (2015) noted, strategic

coordination of state and non-state players in public diplomacy efforts will be essential as the nature of public diplomacy becomes increasingly networked and multi-directional, but it will be a complex process.

Limitations and future research

Since little empirical research has been conducted about corporate involvement in public diplomacy, the Delphi technique was appropriate. However, a limitation of the research is that even though the study used an elite and carefully chosen sample, only a small number of corporate executives (nine) followed through all three rounds of data collection, possibly due to their busy schedules and/or fatigue with the topic. In the third round of data collection, respondents indicated agreement with the summary of the findings, but no one responded to the question: How might U.S. public diplomats work with corporations given corporate reluctance to get directly involved in public diplomacy? This important question begs further study.

The perception among corporate public relations executives that a negative country image does not necessarily have a negative effect on images of their companies' brands and products also warrants further examination. For examples, research studies comparing consumer perceptions of countries and brands, respectively, and links between the two, could help to inform global communication practices on behalf of both business and government.

Additionally, future research could employ interviews or surveys based on the findings of the current study to see if the results are supported in a broader sample. For example, research focused on non-Western corporations would help to shed light on the possible impacts of context and country-of-origin on the perspectives of corporate actors toward public diplomacy. The participation of multinational corporations as non-state actors in public diplomacy also could be further explored in studies involving government diplomats.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by an Arthur W. Page Legacy Scholars Grant. We are very grateful for this support. We also thank Lindsey Bier and Jessica Newman for providing research assistance.

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Appendix A. Open-ended questions

Public diplomacy is defined in this study as the nation's efforts to engage and build positive, supportive relationships with the people of other countries.

Round 1:

When operating outside the United States, do you position your company as an American company? Why or why not? Does your response differ by country or region? Please explain.

Do you believe that citizens in countries outside the United States associate your company with the United States? If yes, do you view this as having a positive or negative effect on your company and/or its brands? Please explain.

Is your company involved in any global public relations efforts to promote the image of the United States among people abroad? If yes, please explain.

Do you believe corporate CSR activities conducted outside the United States help to advance the image and reputation of the United States?

Was the promotion and advancement of America's image and/or national interests abroad motivating factors in your decision to become involved in global CSR efforts? Please explain.

When engaging in CSR activities abroad, do you purposely attempt to disassociate your company with the United States as a country? Please explain.

Are any of your global CSR activities carried out in partnership with governments, either the United States or foreign governments? If yes, please explain.

What roles, if any, do you believe American companies should play in U.S. efforts to establish positive, supportive relationships between America and people abroad? Please explain.

What do you see as the possible advantages of direct corporate participation in U.S. public diplomacy efforts?

Do you believe there are disadvantages to direct corporate participation in U.S. public diplomacy?

Is your company currently involved in U.S. public diplomacy initiatives? If so, what types of initiatives (e.g., partnerships/grants/consultation/contracts/aid)?

If you are involved in U.S. public diplomacy efforts, what was the motivation for your company to become involved?

Are you, as a public relations executive, interested in working with U.S. diplomats on initiatives to improve America's relations and reputation with foreign publics? Why or why not?

What specific types of public diplomacy initiatives, if any, would you (on behalf of your corporation) be interested in becoming involved in?

Had you given any thought to the issues discussed in this survey before today? In what context?

Round 2:

What do you see as the primary reasons American companies spend little resources on initiatives to improve America's image and reputation abroad?

Round 3:

How might U.S. public diplomats work with corporations given corporate reluctance to get directly involved in public diplomacy?

Appendix B. Summary sent to panelists in round three of data collection

Corporate Perspectives on the Role of Global Public Relations and CSR in Public Diplomacy

We greatly appreciate your participation in our study that explored corporate public relations executives' perspectives on the involvement of U.S. global corporations as non-state actors in U.S. public diplomacy. This final email to you includes a report on the findings and a request to respond to one brief question.

Summary Report

- Corporate public relations executives believe there is a relationship between the image of the United States and corporate image; however, enhancing U.S. image is not a strategic priority.
- All respondents reported their companies are not currently involved in public diplomacy initiatives, and feel no responsibility for their companies to engage directly in public diplomacy.
- Corporate self-interests dissuade involvement in public diplomacy.
 - There are risks in being too closely aligned with the U.S. government.
 - Global positioning is often key to corporate success.
- There is a lack of clear understanding of what corporate participation in public diplomacy would entail.
- Respondents reported being unlikely to initiate public diplomacy efforts independent of the U.S. government. However, the data showed potential for strategic partnerships that would advance public diplomacy goals, primarily through a willingness to share corporate expertise and access to contacts and networks with public diplomats.

Question: How might U.S. public diplomats work with corporations given corporate reluctance to get directly involved in public diplomacy?

We invite you to make further clarifications and comments about both your own judgments and the collective responses summarized above by replying to this email or you may [click here](#). Thank you again for taking part in our study.