

# **Corporate Public Orientation in the German Agribusiness: Empirical findings**

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# **Corporate Public Orientation in the German Agribusiness: Empirical findings**

## **Executive Summary**

More than ever, stakeholders, especially Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the media set boundaries for managerial management strategies and exert high influence on public opinion. These critical groups appear as bearers of social concerns and direct public attention towards various problems in the economy. To prevent reputational damage from stakeholder campaigns and to preserve the corporate policy scope, companies increasingly have to face the challenge of responding to these claims in their public relations. This is especially true for companies in the agribusiness since they are short of experience with critical groups.

Analogous to the concept of market orientation, the central assumption is that social legitimation is supported by an appropriate corporate culture and an adequate behavior. This managerial attitude will subsequently be described as public orientation. The objective of this contribution is to analyze the status quo of corporate public orientation in the German agribusiness. Therefore, a measurement scale for corporate public orientation is developed and the model is tested.

The study demonstrates the great relevance of critical stakeholders. Nevertheless, most companies ranked the relevance of NGOs for their corporate policy very low, which is quite contradictory. The attitude towards journalists is mostly negative. This may partly be due to the shortcomings of the top management with respect to public relations. It became obvious that companies which show more active behavior and a desire for dialogue with NGOs are more successful in their reputation management. All in all, weaknesses with regard to social responsiveness could be revealed for most agribusiness companies – the majority lacks a structural approach to the handling of critical stakeholders. The concept of public orientation offers a helpful starting point for the establishment of such an instrument.

# **Corporate Public Orientation in the German Agribusiness: Empirical findings**

## **Abstract**

Increasingly, critical stakeholders appear as bearers of social concerns and direct public attention towards problems in the economy. To prevent reputational damage from stakeholder campaigns, companies have to respond to these problems in their public relations. This is especially true for companies in the agribusiness which have limited experience with stakeholders. Hence, the objective of this contribution is to develop a measurement scale for corporate public orientation and to test the model with the example of the German agribusiness. All in all, weaknesses with regard to social responsiveness could be revealed. A structural approach to the handling of critical groups is lacking for most companies.

**Key words:** Public Orientation, Agribusiness, Public Relations, Corporate Social Responsibility

## **Introduction**

More than ever, stakeholders and mass media set boundaries for corporate management strategies and exert high influence on public opinion. In particular, Non-Governmental Organizations (e. g., Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Friends of the Earth, Fairtrade movement) increasingly appear as bearers of social concerns. In this respect, feedback from society is the primary success factor for these institutions, especially in areas such as fundraising and lobbying. Consequently, stakeholders have to aim for a close connection to the media and to public institutions. These relations are essential since the process of public opinion shaping is derived from a competitive struggle for public attention between policy, economy and NGOs (Liebl 2002, Zürn 2004). In campaigns which largely attract media attention, public awareness is directed towards specific issues (Behrent/Mentner 2001). Selected companies with a high level of awareness – in general, branded companies – are representatively chosen to demonstrate a problem within the whole sector (Gereffi et al. 2001, O’Rourke 2004).

However, the intensity with which the different public demands are included in the corporate policy is influenced by various factors – inter alia, the political strength and actions of the respective stakeholder, the media response, as well as, the sociopolitical mindset of the corporate management. Issues addressed by stakeholders are manifold. They primarily include aspects dealing with environmental protection, working conditions for employees or globalization. The long lasting and still current discussion on green biotechnology or the case of the planned sinking of the oil platform „Brent Spar“ by the Shell group are just two examples which show the immense influencing potential of critical groups on businesses (Liebl 2002). In order to prevent reputational damage from such stakeholder campaigns and to preserve the corporate policy scope, companies increasingly have to face the challenge of response to public claims and expectations in their public relations (PR) (Freeman 1984, Kotler 1971/1988, Harrison/Freeman 1999, Liebl 2002, Tucker/Melewar 2005).

In this contribution, the German agribusiness is analysed, since this sector is short of experience with critical stakeholders. This lack is attributed to political regulations and, especially, to a prevalent lobbying which has been the traditional PR instrument of the sector. Since agricultural policy has been of primary economic interest due to the high amount of subsidies, the agribusiness has focused more on its political environment than on consumer

concerns (Waskow/Rehaag 2004). Additionally, agriculture has been dominated by joint marketing strategies. PR concepts on a corporate level are missing to a large extent.

The changing stakeholder environment in the agribusiness is highlighted by the establishment of NGOs which especially focus on the agribusiness, and also a rising number of citizens' initiatives which protest against different agri-food projects (e. g., animal and biogas plants or windmills). Moreover, the agribusiness has to handle a growing public alienation from food production and a shift in agricultural issues. Nowadays, not only does classical agricultural policy appear on the public agenda but also social issues such as food safety, animal welfare, organic production and human diet.

Against this background, the objective of the presented study is to analyze the current level of the management of public concerns within agribusiness companies. It should be clarified whether the companies give consideration to the challenges resulting from the increasing public and media attention. In the first part of this contribution the most important management and marketing research theories are presented with respect to public orientation. Subsequently, a model is developed with which to analyze the openness and sensitivity of companies towards their sociopolitical public. The conceptual framework presents the operationalization of this model which relies on the well known market orientation approach (Narver/Slater 1990; Kohli/Jaworski 1990; Deshpandé et al. 1993/2004).

### **Theories of Public Orientation: State of the Art**

The examination of public demands with regard to managerial action is subject matter of economic research. This issue can be traced back to the establishment of economics and business administration (Wieland 1997). More recently, four central streams of research dealing with this subject can be found in literature. Two of these are associated with the management theory and the other two with marketing research. In general, management research on public orientation is reflected in the debate on Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), on the one hand, and Stakeholder Management and Strategic Foresight, which are more focused on implementation on the other hand. A comparable dichotomy in a principally normative analysis and an implementation-based alternative exists in marketing and communication research. These are described by the concepts of Social Marketing and newer forms of Public Relations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Theories of social orientation

	Normative Approach	Implementation-oriented Approach
Management Theory	Corporate Social Responsibility Business Ethics	Stakeholder Management Strategic Foresight
Marketing Theory	Social Marketing	Theory of Organizational Communication

Source: Authors' figure

Important contributions concerned with the discussion on Business Ethics derive from the theory of Discourse Ethics by Habermas (1992, 1993). This concept claims an orientation based on corporate communicative action which should be reflected in manifold democratic communication processes between business and stakeholders. The debate on Corporate Social Responsibility (Bowen 1953, Brummer 1991, Cannon 1992, Frederick 1994, Carroll 1999, Smith 2003) and Corporate Citizenship (Saiia/Cyphert 2003), however, mirrors a strategy which concentrates more on the responsible consideration of business ethics and emphasizes the necessity to regularly review one's own corporate policy with respect to the global social compatibility (De Geer 2004, Crane/Matten 2007).

The stakeholder concept is one of the most famous and earliest concepts dealing with the integration of social requirements (Freeman 1984). Its focus is primarily on the factor of success. That means that stakeholders are relevant as much as they bear a realistic threat potential. While the Stakeholder Approach is more geared to individuals, the theory of Strategic Foresight (Ansoff 1976) is directed to the life cycle of issues. However, the poorly realized managerial implementation of the above-mentioned concepts in practice sharply contrasts with the high diffusion of these approaches in management theory (Zühlendorf 2002).

From an institutional perspective, the responsibility to consider stakeholders normally lies in the working field of the marketing or PR section. Thus, it is not astonishing that these disciplines deal with the intersection between company and society. In the seventies, the marketing approach first concentrated on this research area in terms of the concept of Social Marketing (Kotler 1971, 1988) or, rather, the Human Concept of Marketing (Dawson 1969). Herein, the expansion of the corporate policy objectives concerning non-economical criteria

were discussed. Issues such as the welfare of the consumer and the total society were under consideration. Since this time, especially from a consumer and environmental angle, various further versions of a socially oriented marketing (Wiedmann 1993) have been postulated. A comparable discussion occurred with the idea of dialogue-oriented PR (Grunig/Hunt 1984) in the PR research of the 1990ies.

In contrast to this rather abstract discussion, the newer PR theory developed more managerial approaches which were based on experience from communication science and, especially, from media research. With the News-Value Theory (Galtung/Ruge 1965) and, in particular, with system-theoretical approaches, the selectivity of the media system was elaborated by media research. Since the capacity of news covering is limited, only very small parts of real events can attract interest (Luhmann 1996). In particular, in crisis situations, this spotlighting function turns media coverage into a very incalculable factor for businesses since this process follows its own specific logic. The question of which issues come to the fore and how these can be identified at an early stage is the subject of the so-called Issues Management (Ansoff 1980, Chase 1984, Wartick/Rude 1986, Coates et al. 1986, Dutton/Ottensmeyer 1987, Liebl 2002). With reference to the developments of the political landscape in the past few years, Issues Management puts emphasis on strategically designed issue campaigns which aim to influence public opinion. Especially NGOs – such as Greenpeace – have taken up and successfully exploited the possibilities of the media society in the struggle for attention (Hecker 1997).

The above-mentioned theories of different research fields, however, have either a theoretical-abstract nature or represent a rather conceptual-management oriented area. To the best of our knowledge, so far little empirical research has been done on the implementation of ethics in the corporate management process in practice (Grunig/Hunt 1984/1996, Zühlsdorf 2002, Nabil/Faramarz 2005, Garcia de Madariaga/Valor 2007).

The subsequent study concentrates on a specific subproblem of the debate on social responsibility and responsiveness of companies. This is the sensitivity of the management and especially of the PR towards public demands. Therefore, a model is developed to operationalize and measure the degree to which agribusiness firms are public-orientated. This enables a comparison between different companies and branches regarding the performance of their PR.

Until now only very little research has been done on PR management within the agribusiness. Some results can be found in studies dealing with effects of food safety crises, which highlight, for instance, the relevance of media (Miller/Reilly 1995, Kitzinger 1999), as well as the dynamics and duration of consumer reactions (Frewer 1996/1998, Bocker/Hanf 2000, Pennings et al. 2002). Furthermore, empirical image research can be added. It mainly draws a positive picture of the single farmer in the public eye. However, this contrasts with the almost totally missing trust in the up- and downstream companies of the agribusiness and public institutions (Piel 2003). Against this background, recapitulating it can be assumed that a particularly broad gap exists between growing public exposure and corporate controllability.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Market Orientation as a Basic Research Concept**

The concept of Market Orientation was developed at the beginning of the 1990ies and applied to measure and control the implementation of marketing concepts in businesses (Narver/Slater 1990, Kohli/Jaworski 1990, Deshpandé et al. 1993). Nowadays, Market Orientation stands for a customization and competitive orientation, as well as for a coordinated marketing (Kotler 1988). Customization contains the identification of already established and future customer needs. In order to attain an organizational development, knowledge about customer wishes has to be spread among all business departments. This can be achieved by generating corporation-wide market intelligence. In contrast, competitive orientation focuses on the consideration of the contention and the corporate ability to appropriately react to competitive signals (Slater/Narver 1998, Kohli/Jaworski 1990, Narver/Slater 1990).

Various studies have clearly revealed the existing relation between market orientation and corporate success (Narver/Slater 1990, Fritz 1996, Deshpandé/Farley 2004). They point out that, in practice there is, obviously, a large difference between the companies with respect to their ability to perceive market information soon enough and to gradually realize new strategies (Garcia de Madariaga/Valor 2007). Thereby, the degree to which a company is market oriented is manifested in aspects of corporate culture (Schein 1990) and corporate behavior (Avlonitis/Gounaris 1999, Slater/Narver 1995/1998). Whereas, cultural perspective concentrates on basic assumptions, values and codes of conduct (Grether 2003), the behavioral prospect is aligned with the gathering, diffusion and processing of market information (Langerak 2003). Hence, for the implementation of market orientation, it is essential to anchor both of these elements in the corporation. Consequently, the subject matter



of the numerous empirical research papers dealing with the topic is the identification of behavioral, cultural and organizational determinants of market orientation as well as the measurement of the respective effectiveness.

### **Definition of the Research Model**

The increasing public exposure of agribusiness companies gives a reason why a single alignment to achieve customer and competitive advantages should be critically reconsidered. It can be assumed that the social legitimation is a crucial success factor especially for larger companies and industries which attract high public interest (e. g., meat) (Dyllick 1990). Hence, analogous to the concept of Market Orientation, it is assumed that social legitimation is supported by an appropriate corporate culture and an adequate behavior (Slater/Narver 1995; Avlonitis/Gounaris 1995). Such a managerial behavior is described as public orientation or social responsiveness (Sturdivant/Ginter 1977; Murphy 1978; Welcomer et al. 2003). Hence, a completion of the Market Orientation concept by the public dimension is proposed in this contribution. Public orientation describes the additional adjustment of a corporation to public demands which are raised by various stakeholders.

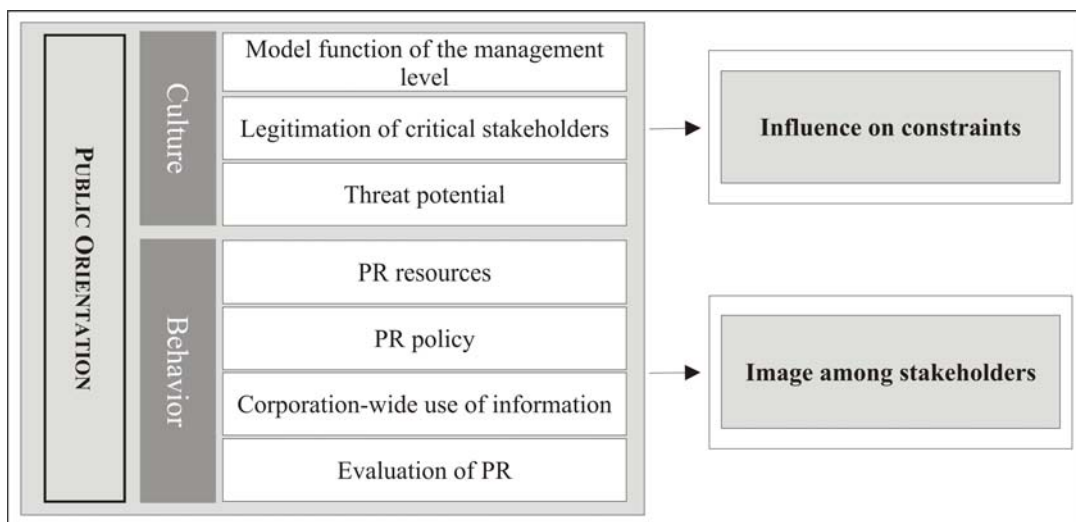
In addition to public institutions, especially NGOs, media and the general public are involved. The common ground for these stakeholders is their influence on the production and provision of goods and services. In this respect, the flow of goods can be encouraged or constrained by support or cancelation of legitimation (Berg 2003, Welcomer et al. 2003). NGOs gain their legitimation as a part of a deliberate policy model in which the civil society is constituted as an independent institution situated between state and economy. Often, the social exertion of influence is particularly large in business sectors where state control decreases or fails (Eisenegger/Vonwil 2004).

A public oriented company is characterized by the consideration of stakeholder demands through internal and external actions. The corporation is open to the outside world, behaves proactively and tries to identify concerns at an early stage. Public demands are discussed in the management process and partly integrated – partly rejected. Such behavior towards social claims should result in a legitimation of corporate action and, hence, offer better chances for the realization of economic objectives (Avenarius 2000). Thereby this concept follows strategic success considerations.

The central hypothesis of this contribution states that social legitimation is supported by an appropriate corporate culture and a respective corporate behavior by which the corporate success is secured in the long run. Two sub-objectives – the action-oriented and image-orientated aim – are thereby connected. The action-oriented objective of public orientation is the attempt to exert **influence on constraints** from the public discussions. These factors include the influence on media coverage, on public opinion, on legal requirements and on actions of critical stakeholders against the company. The image-oriented objective of public orientation addresses the positive profiling of the company. A high level of popularity, credibility and a favorable **image among stakeholders** have to be assured and maintained (Goldsmith et al. 2000). In this respect the positive image stretches across non-market stakeholders (e. g., public institutions, politicians, NGOs, journalists and general public), but also across market partners (e. g., customers). The intact corporate reputation is an essential factor since it safeguards stakeholder support for corporate actions.

Both factors, “influence on constraints“ and “image among stakeholders“, represent the dependent variables of the model of public orientation (see Figure 2). In addition to these target variables, appropriate dimensions of public orientation are defined which, analogous to the Market Orientation concept, account for cultural and behavioral aspects. The influencing factors rely on theories from socially oriented management and PR science (Zerfaß 1996).

Figure 2: Model of corporate public orientation



Source: Authors' figure

In line with our central hypothesis it is presumed that corporate public orientation increases, if

- a positive and open attitude towards social claims is anchored in the **corporate culture**.

- the firm cumulatively adjusts its **corporate behavior** towards social claims.

The construct “corporate culture” is defined by three essential variables. These are the model function of the management level, legitimation of critical stakeholders and the perceived threat potential. The **model function of the management level** should demonstrate the maxim of the executives since it represents a model function for the whole company (Schein 1995). This means that the better the seriousness of the management level behaves in its model function, the higher the level of corporate public orientation will be. In their study dealing with the identification of influencing factors of corporate social programs, Weaver et al. (1999) revealed, that the top management level is the most important driver for an intra-corporate ethical debate.

Another important variable is the **legitimation of critical stakeholders**. The more positive the attitude towards these groups, the higher the perception of their legitimation, the more distinctive is the public orientation of the company. Legitimation of critical stakeholders on the one hand relates to their basic claim for the procurement of social concerns, as well as the content and the realization of their demands (Beckert/Eckert 2004).

The strategy which the NGOs or other critical stakeholders choose to assert can be either confrontative or cooperative (Winston 2002). In the same way, companies can take stakeholder claims seriously using them as useful complaints or they can perceive them as aggressive and uninformative threats. The perception of the critics, hence, affects the design of the corporate public orientation. It is assumed that the more the critical stakeholders are perceived only as a **threat potential** for business actions, the fewer these groups are considered in corporate processes.

The construct of corporate behavior is defined by four variables: PR resources, PR policy, corporation-wide use of information and the evaluation of the PR. The **PR resources** ensure that the PR section has the capacity to act in the case of a conflict situation (Schneidewind 1998, Morley 1998). Hence, sufficient financial and human resources for the PR as well as decision-making authorities have to be available in order to improve the public orientation.

The **PR policy** is based on instruments such as strategic stakeholder analysis, an open behavior towards non-market groups, strategic planning of corporate campaigns and broadly applied PR instruments which also contain parts of Public Affairs. The PR is marked by a reconciliation of interests and an open behavior towards critical groups – it strives rather for a

cooperative than for a confrontative style. Hence, cooperative PR instruments are applied which largely determine the corporate alignment towards sociopolitical claims by especially addressing influential parts of the public and focusing on cooperation with opinion makers. Whereas public affairs are a central lever for the influence on legal regulations by addressing public institutions/politicians, trade association and lobbying (Post et al. 1983, Windsor 2002), the PR policy also has to focus on the relevance of journalists and press relations of the company. Because of the above mentioned changes it will become increasingly necessary for the companies not to ignore public opinion and relevant NGOs, but to integrate them into PR. All in all, it is assumed that the extent and intensity of the parameters of the PR policy have a significant influence on the legitimacy of corporate action and support the realization of economic objectives (Handelman/Arnold 1999; Avenarius 2000).

The **corporation-wide** use of information is another important variable in the behavior construct. Knowledge of the social environment and latent issues under public discussion have to be spread within the corporation in order to develop concepts to solve the emerging problems. The more the collected information from single sections is merged and then spread within the whole company, the larger the influence of the firm on constraints and the image. With the intention of continuously enhancing the PR activities and diffusing the PR knowledge, the PR has to be analyzed with a special focus on the corporate public orientation. This can be conducted either by quantitative or qualitative media analysis or by applying a PR scorecard (Fleisher/Mahaffy 1997, Zerfaß 2004). By a regular **evaluation of the PR** the level of public orientation can be improved.

The above-mentioned variables are applied in order to measure the status quo of corporate public orientation. They are the basis for the model underlying our online questionnaire. Subsequently, data collection, the research sample and measurements of this paper will be presented.

## **Data Collection and Measurements**

The analysis reported in this paper was conducted on data obtained from a sample of 106 companies which belong to the German agribusiness sector. In October 2004, about 850 firms were questioned via an online survey. 200 questionnaires were returned. Of these, 106 were found to be usable representing an effective response rate of about 12.5 %. In order to gain a broad picture of public orientation in the agribusiness, companies of the whole supply chain are included in the sample – starting with the production of intermediate inputs for the

agricultural sector (e. g., feed and agro-chemicals) up to the processing industry and food retailing (see Table 1). The choice of the companies was carried out based on availability (existing data banks of the branch, identifiable contact persons). However, it can be guaranteed that the Top 100 companies of the German food processing industry and the 10 leading firms of other levels of the supply chain were addressed. The target groups of the survey were the respective marketing or PR managers. Overall, the sample is a “convenience sample” and does not fulfill all criteria of representativeness. Thus, the study has to be characterized as a preliminary study.

Table 1: Industry classification of the responding companies

<b>Agribusiness sectors</b>	<b>Number</b>
Food industry	70
Food wholesaling	13
Feed	12
Food retailing	11
Gastronomy	9
Agro-chemicals (incl. animal medicine)	6
Seeds	6
Alimentation craft	5
Agricultural technology	4
Agricultural trade	2
Miscellaneous (supplement assortment, luxury foodstuffs, wine production etc.)	4

Source: Authors' calculation

Answering the questionnaire lasted normally between 10 and 15 minutes. The majority of respondents were marketing executives (37.3 %), followed by managers of the corporate communication/PR and business management (each 26.5 %). More than half of the participating companies have a business volume larger than 50 million euros. Hence, large-scale enterprises are represented disproportionately high in the research sample

To capture the latent variables, different measurement scales - predominantly 7 point Likert scales - were used. All indicators were examined using factor analyses. The measures demonstrated acceptable levels of fit and reliability.

In the following chapters we will first introduce the conceptual framework of public orientation, then present the results of the empirical analysis, and finally draw a conclusion and indicate future directions of research.

### **The Level of Public Orientation in German Agribusiness Companies**

In a first step, the data were analyzed with regard to the dimensions of public orientation which were deduced from the literature. The components presented in Figure 2 are

operationalized by various variables. An extract of these is listed in Table 2. The questions in Table 2 refer to the corporate culture (the model function of the management level (MFM), legitimation of critical stakeholders (Leg) and the threat potential (Thr)) on the one hand and to the corporate behavior (PR resources (Res), PR policy (Pol), corporation-wide use of information (UI) and the evaluation of the PR (Eva)) on the other hand. The variables PR resources (Res) and evaluation of the PR (Eva) are gathered by rating scales and open questions and are presented in Table 3.

Table 2: Constructs, statements and univariate statistics with regard to public orientation

Construct	Statement	M	SD	
Corporate culture	<i>Scale from totally agree (7) to totally disagree (1)</i>			
	MFM	In our company we discuss social claims.	4.91	1.24
	MFM	Our executives regularly take a stand on political issues.	4.00	1.49
	Leg	It is legitimate that the public wants to influence corporate actions.	4.12	1.42
	Thr	NGOs pose a threat for companies.	3.68	1.37
	Thr	The criticism of NGOs helps us to reveal weak points.	4.23	1.34
	Leg	NGOs fight with unfair means.	4.32	1.5
	Leg	Journalists distort reality in their reports.	4.73	1.27
Corporate behavior	Pol I	Our company is responsible in balancing social demands and corporate interests.	4.92	1.33
	Pol I	Demands from public groups have to be averted as early as possible.	3.44	1.3
	Pol I	Our company often calls on stakeholders for a dialogue.	3.78	1.43
	Pol I	A confrontational course is chosen to solve problems on behalf of the company.	2.45	1.35
	Pol I	Our company influences discussions as early as possible.	4.11	1.51
	UI	Information concerned with public arguments is systematically forwarded.	4.50	1.71
	UI	The sections jointly deliberate on problem-solving.	4.92	1.45
	<i>Scale from very important (7) to very unimportant (1)</i>			
	Pol II	Journalists	5.33	1.57
	Pol II	Local public	4.84	1.49
	Pol II	Trade associations	4.56	1.28
	Pol II	Public institutions/politicians	4.26	1.58
	Pol II	Critical groups	3.58	1.39
	Pol III	Fostering relations to strategic important public parties	4.70	1.40
	Pol III	Cooperation with opinion makers (experts)	4.60	1.49
	Pol III	Lobbying	4.15	1.47
	Pol III	Campaigning	3.41	1.56
Pol III	Integration of critical stakeholders	3.00	1.20	

Source: Authors' calculation; (M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation)

The descriptive results for the exogenous variables provide first insights into the public orientation of companies in the agribusiness. More than 80 % of the respondent firms already have had experience with critical stakeholders. On average, these contacts proceed negatively. This may be the reason for the more skeptical evaluation of the legitimation of social claims. However, the standard deviation for this question is very high. NGOs are rated as rather less critical to corporate success. In addition, journalists are perceived as the largest threat. This

attitude also becomes noticeable in the ranking of target groups of the PR where journalists are ranked first and critical groups assigned the least relevance.

With regard to the PR policy, large parts of the respective companies state that they see their responsibility to balance social and economical interests. Contradictory results occur concerning the question of whether they follow a rather conversational or confrontative style with regard to stakeholders. A purely confrontative course is broadly disapproved. However, a conversational style is likewise not highly estimated by the majority. The PR is particularly marked by press relations. Furthermore, fostering relations to strategic important public parties (e. g., representatives of media and science) is significantly valued. Political lobbying takes up a middle position, whereas actions towards critical stakeholders play a minor role. Issue campaigns which are increasingly claimed in PR theory (Wartick/Rude 1986, Behrent/Mentner 2001, Zühlsdorf 2002) also attract less attention. The results highlight the fact that companies who utilize the available possibilities to a lesser extent, attach less importance to public stakeholders, but more to customer communication.

The crisis PR is an indispensable element of a strategic PR when dealing with public concerns. However, 10 % of the respondents do not have a concept for PR in the event of a crisis and only one third has implemented such a system. In a self-rating, only 28.3 % stated that their system is good and 2.8 % that it is very good. The quality of the crisis PR concept positively corresponds to the relevance of critical groups (.30\*\*). Hence, such a system can be assessed as a protective mechanism towards social stakeholders or other groups.

An inconsistent picture can be drawn with respect to the internal behavior concerning PR issues. The corporation-wide diffusion of information shows a conspicuously high standard deviation ( $SD=1.71$ ). In addition, more companies agree with the statement that problems are solved through conjoint consultancy. Information management is largely pronounced in companies which consider critical groups as important for their PR and strive for a conversational PR strategy.

The equipment of the PR department with the respective resources hints at distinctive weaknesses (see Table 3). It becomes evident that an institutional classification of PR regarding the corporate hierarchy is lacking. Only one third of the respondent agribusiness firms implemented a PR section which for 71.8 % of these operates as a staff function. For half of these cases, it has only a consulting or recommendation function. The fragile institutional anchorage of PR is also reflected in the PR budget. 52.5 % of the companies

think that their own budget is lower than that the PR budget of comparable companies. 17.5 % assume their budget to be equally high and 20 % rank it higher. These results tend to indicate that the relevance of PR is generally underestimated in the agri-food business.

Table 3: Constructs, statements and univariate statistics (Res, Eva)

Construct	Statement	M	SD	
Corporate behavior	<i>Scale from very high (7) to very low (1)</i>			
	Res	PR budget compared to companies with a similar size.	3.39	1.68
	<i>Open question</i>			
	Res	How many of the staff work in the range of PR?	3.98	5.5
	Res	How many people does your company employ in total?	1,994	3,302
	% (answer)			
	Res	Section for PR or corporate communication	21.7	
	Res	PR agency	5.7	
	Res	PR section and PR agency	12.3	
	Res	The tasks are carried out by executives.	33.0	
	Res	The tasks are carried out by the marketing section.	24.5	
	Res	Miscellaneous	2.8	
	Res	Staff function	71.8	
	Res	Line function	12.8	
	Res	Matrix function/ integration in a project team	15.4	
	% (case)			
	Res	Management level	77.5	
	Res	Corporate communication	12.5	
	Res	Marketing	20.0	
	Eva	Clipping or equivalence analysis	55.3	
Eva	Media response analysis, e. g., input-output analysis	36.5		
Eva	Image analysis	45.9		
Eva	PR scorecard	10.6		
Eva	Miscellaneous (press documents, press review, sales analysis, direct dialogue, customer satisfaction analysis)	10.6		

Source: Authors' calculation; (M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation)

The last determinant of our model is the control of the PR. Companies which systematically evaluate their PR are more successful regarding their influence on media reports than corporations without such a monitoring. The same applies for the image with regard to journalists. Furthermore, the companies' influence on public opinion and actions of NGOs is largest for companies which apply instruments which go beyond clipping (media response analysis/PR scorecard). However, the media response analysis is only implemented in 36.5 % of the firms and the PR scorecard in only 10.6 %.

Supplementary to the determinants of public orientation also the dependent variables are considered. The agribusiness companies were asked to what extent their own company can influence managerial constraints as well as policy and the image among various stakeholders. Table 4 presents the self-evaluation on the basis of this question.



Table 4: Results of the dependent variables

Construct	Statement	M	SD
<i>Scale from very high influence (7) to very little influence (1)</i>			
Influence on constraints	Media reports on the company	4.70	1.38
	Public opinion	3.05	1.39
	Actions of NGOs or critical groups	3.04	1.34
	Legal regulations	2.50	1.51
<i>Scale from very good image (7) to very poor image (1)</i>			
Image among stakeholders	Customers	6.23	0.81
	State/politicians	5.46	1.17
	Journalists	5.45	1.12
	General public	5.37	1.09
	NGOs	4.45	1.33

Source: Authors' calculation; (M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation)

With regard to constraints, the respondent companies think that they have the least influence on legal regulations although they are politically active. A rather low influence is also assumed on actions of critical groups and on public opinion. This contrasts with the very positive estimation of the effectiveness of PR concerning the influence on media reports. The results once again prove the lack of consideration of critical stakeholders in the corporate PR. This is likewise reflected in the corporate image. While the reputation of the companies among public stakeholders is generally positive, the firms suppose that the agribusiness possesses a noticeably poor image among NGOs.

The presented results are largely influenced by the managerial structure. The higher the total revenue of a company, the higher the importance of journalists, critical groups and public institutions/politicians for the corporate PR. Apparently branded companies have made better experiences with critical groups and adopt a positive attitude towards them. The proportion of private brands shows a highly positive relation to the defense of public interests (.44\*\*\*). In addition, also the position of the company within the supply chain has an influence on the public orientation. By a mean comparison test it becomes evident that the input agribusiness industries have more frequently suffered from negative experiences with critical stakeholders ( $\Delta$  -.76\*) than the downstream industries.

### Factors influencing PR Success

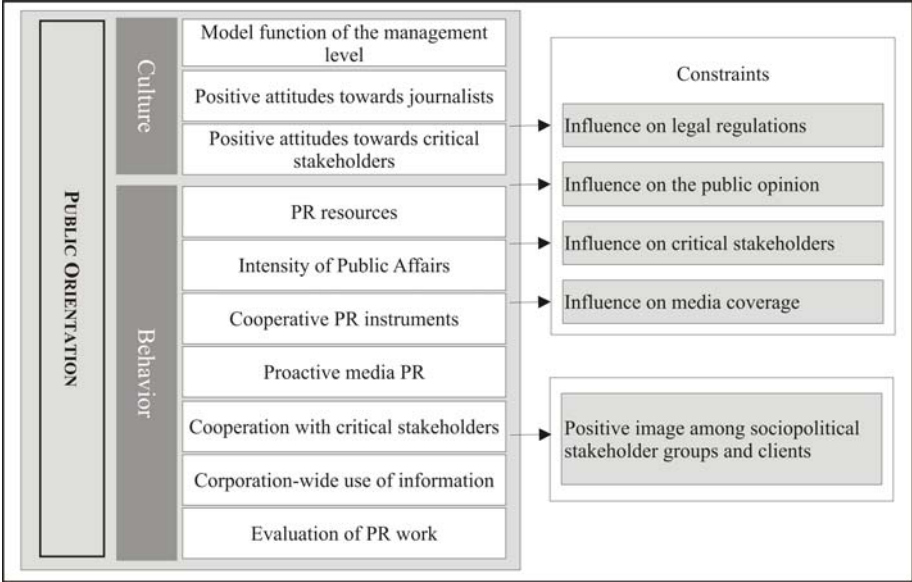
From multivariate methods, the data set was analyzed by factor and regression analyses. The factor analysis revealed that, in contrast to the variable “influence on constraints”, the output variable “image among stakeholders” is merging into one common factor including all stakeholders. This finding is explained by the very marginal difference between the image among customers in contrast to the image among non-market groups. The parameter

“influence on constraints” can be split according to the different stakeholders into the variables “influence on legal regulations”, “influence on the public opinion”, “influence on critical stakeholders” and “influence on media coverage”.

Furthermore, some specifications of the independent variables had to be made in addition to the basic model. Thus, it became evident that the “legitimation of critical stakeholders” does not display an independent component of the construct “corporate culture”. In addition, the “positive attitude towards critical stakeholders” and the “positive attitude towards journalists” are identified as new variables of this construct. However, the importance of the “model function of the top management” could be proved.

With respect to the corporate behavior, the importance of resources for the PR section is shown. Sufficient resources are needed in order to guarantee the monetary and authoritative capacity to act. In addition, the determinant “PR policy” had to be split into several variables. “Public Affairs”, a “proactive media PR”, “cooperative PR instruments” and, especially, the “integration of critical stakeholders” within PR have a high importance for successful corporate action. Furthermore, a perfected information management and a systematic control of procedures are of great value. Figure 3 displays only the significant factors of the following regression analyses.

Figure 3: Modified model of public orientation



Source: Authors’ figure

Table 5 shows the results of the multiple regression analyses. The regression analysis clarifies the influence of the above-mentioned determinants on the output variables. All significant determinants on the success of PR are listed.

Table 5: Results of the linear regression analysis

<b>Determinants of the influencing potential on legal regulations (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.292; F-value = 15.42***)</b>	<b>beta value</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>significance</b>
Public Affairs	.373	4.112	.000
Positive attitudes towards critical stakeholders	.213	2.374	.019
Model function of the management level	.162	1.909	.059
<b>Determinants of the influencing potential on public opinion (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.254; F-value = 12.6***)</b>	<b>beta value</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>significance</b>
Integration of critical stakeholders	.385	4.448	.000
Corporation-wide use of information	.241	2.787	.006
Journalists distort reality.	-.180	-2.097	.039
<b>Determinants of the influencing potential on critical stakeholders (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.18; F-value = 12.34***)</b>	<b>beta value</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>significance</b>
Integration of critical stakeholders	.388	4.291	.000
Corporation-wide use of information	.171	1.894	.061
<b>Determinants of the influencing potential on media coverage (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.443; F-value = 14.94***)</b>	<b>beta value</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>significance</b>
Proactive media PR	.522	3.816	.001
PR resources	.292	2.135	.040
<b>Determinants of the influencing potential on the positive image (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.419 %; F-value = 19.47***)</b>	<b>beta value</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>significance</b>
Positive attitudes towards critical stakeholders	-.378	-4.212	.000
Proactive media PR	.285	2.635	.010
Cooperative PR instruments	.282	2.671	.009

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 5 reveals that companies which specify (in a self-assessment) that they can successfully influence legal regulations possess a mature public affairs management. This is shown in the intensity of internal communication and the behavior of the executives. The integration of critical stakeholders is a central success factor for the influence on public opinion and the actions of critical stakeholders. Furthermore, in both cases the factor “use of information” has to be added. This parameter contains questions regarding the corporation-wide information transfer as well as the joint evaluation. In addition, it is shown that the negative behavior towards journalists has no effect on the public opinion. The proactive media PR and a broad PR budget prove to be positive for media reports.

With regard to the determinants of the corporate image, a high influence of the cultural components and once again of the open and proactive media PR can be revealed. It can be stated that media reports have a strong effect on the image. This can be seen as proof of the high relevance of mass media for the influence on public opinion.

In total, the regression model demonstrates the great relevance of critical stakeholders – not only for the image among NGOs, but also for all areas of the public discussion. At the latest, with the peace and environmental movements of the nineties and eighties, the social movement has been established as an important political power in all western democracies (Krebs 2001; Zühlendorf 2002). According to the results of this analysis, its negligence will clearly lead to a low influence on the different areas of social discourse.

The results of the regression analysis are particularly surprising, since most companies ranked the relevance of NGOs for their corporate policy very low compared to other groups. In this connection, Table 6 delivers a special insight into the relevance of different stakeholders.

Table 6: Overview of statements addressing the relevance of stakeholders

Statement	M	SD
<i>Scale from totally agree (7) to totally disagree (1)</i>		
NGOs pose a threat to companies.	3.68	1.37
The criticism of NGOs helps us to reveal weak points.	4.23	1.34
NGOs fight with unfair means.	4.32	1.5
<i>Scale from very important (7) to very unimportant (1)</i>		
Integration of critical stakeholders	3.00	1.20
<i>Ranking of target groups of PR from very important (7) to very unimportant (1)</i>		
Journalists	5.33	1.57
Local public	4.84	1.49
Trade associations	4.56	1.28
Public institutions/politicians	4.26	1.58
Critical groups	3.58	1.39
<i>Scale from very good image (7) to very poor image (1)</i>		
General public	5.37	1.09
NGOs	4.45	1.33

Source: Authors' calculation; (M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation)

The results highlight the fact that critical stakeholders are underestimated. They are placed last in a ranking of the target groups of corporate public relations. An integration of these stakeholders into PR is only common practice in a few companies. However, the regression analysis revealed that, generally, corporations which – distinct from the majority of PR executives – actively look for a dialogue with NGOs are much more successful in their public relations.

The results can be interpreted as an insufficient opening of most companies to the public. In particular, parts of the supply chain which are situated far away from the consumer show higher skepticism towards NGOs. This could possibly hint at cultural differences between the urban-intellectual society and the rural-conservative agribusiness.

## Conclusions

The contribution reveals general weaknesses of the agribusiness with regard to their responsiveness towards critical stakeholders. So far, most companies ascribe to this group only a minor relevance. Consequently, they are considered too late and for the majority of corporations a structural approach to the handling of these public critics with respect to corporate policy and PR is lacking. Consequently, in contrast to other stakeholders, NGOs are ranked less important. However, it becomes obvious, that companies which show a more active and open behavior and desire a dialogue with NGOs are more successful in their relationship towards media and critical social groups than others.

Another important finding is that this is different for journalists. The corporate attitude towards journalists is mostly negative. Hence, companies ascribe to journalists a high potential threat and, thus, focus their PR towards media and its representatives. On a behavior level, a professionalization of the competence in media relations becomes apparent, whereas the underlying attitudes point at a rather confrontational than cooperative approach.

The described problems even increase in the face of the interaction between media and public groups. In this respect, the mass media represents a central promoter for critical concerns. Conflicts are constitutive for NGOs and politics (Liebl 2002, Zürn 2004, Watenphul 2006). Hence, only a high authenticity of corporate concerns as well as a professional PR adaptation which takes into account the attention mechanisms of the media, will enable the companies to exercise significant influence. In contrast, the PR of companies within the agribusiness is still exceedingly affected by a unilateral communication orientated towards announcement.

All in all, public orientation is more distinctive in companies which are closer to the consumer than in firms operating in the input sector. In particular, branded companies in the food industry take on a pioneering task with respect to social responsiveness, while large parts of the agribusiness are marked by distinctive cultural differences between companies and a critical public. This topic was also discussed in the political debate after the BSE crisis (Gerlach 2006).

In the face of a food and agricultural policy which increasingly highlights the positive (e. g., bioenergy, multifunctionality) and negative (e. g., obesity, food safety) external effects of the agribusiness, the relevance of a professional management of public issues will further increase. The concept of public orientation identifies important variables and can be applied

for further research. However, the contribution is limited due to the constriction of only one sector as well as the response bias of the applied online survey. The study could only focus on a few selective constructs, because of time constraints in online management surveys. These limitations, however, disclose the need for further research. From a methodical point of view, it has to be emphasized that there are rather weak  $R^2$ -values.

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