Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the adoption and evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Thailand and to scrutinize the mechanisms that drove the direction of CSR activities to their current forms.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with executives of 14 companies, and open-ended questionnaires filled out by three organizations, all of which the public perceives as highly socially responsible. Additional data were collected from two CSR seminars, official company web sites, and a database provided by the Stock Exchange of Thailand’s library.

Findings – The study reveals two key findings. One is the pattern of CSR development in Thailand that emphasizes social and environmental issues, which are less relevant to the business’ core activities. The other is that Thai social and religious values are important antecedents of CSR strategy and implementation. Corporations communicate CSR implicitly and execute a two-stage public relations strategy indirectly.

Originality/value – This paper reveals a unique interpretation of CSR in developing economies where agrarian social values and informal networks still dominate. Most extant literature assumes that CSR in developing countries mimics western patterns. This paper asserts that it is instead an adaptation of western concepts to local culture in the case of Thailand, which affected the whole CSR process – idea generation, implementation, and communication.

Keywords Social values, CSR pattern, Implicit CSR, Public relations strategy, Public relations, Social responsibility, Thailand

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Although the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not new, it was not until recently that CSR became an important concept in many organisations. The concept has been promoted to wider audiences by governments and international organisations such as Hong Kong Special Administration Region, International Finance Corporation (IFC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), CSR Europe, and World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). Key players that helped introduce the concept in emerging countries were multinational enterprises (MNEs), whose missions include being good corporate citizens in host countries (Jamali and Mirshak, 2007; Perrini, 2006). MNEs relate local CSR activities to corporate CSR policies in home countries (Jamali and Mirshak, 2007; Perrini, 2006). MNEs relate local CSR activities to corporate CSR policies in home countries (Husted and Allen, 2006).

Empirical studies on CSR activities suggest that different patterns and factors influence appropriate CSR activities in each country, both developed and less developed. Factors influenced by CSR activities and communications include national business systems, levels of economic development, economic freedoms, and levels of corruption (Chapple and Moon, 2005; Baughn et al., 2007). Matten and Moon (2008) found that business systems in Europe make communication of CSR less explicit in comparison to American companies.