

Doing well by doing good in Thailand

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper seeks to explore whether strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR), the latest stage of conceptual development in CR, is evident in real business practices.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Using Thailand as a context, the paper responds to the call for study beyond the developed economic regions. With a limited number of proactive companies in CSR in the country, this qualitative study employs in-depth interviews supplemented with reviews of sustainability reports and other available corporate documents to explore the frontier of CSR practices in Thailand. The informants include key executives directly in charge of CSR and corporate direction in the organizations.*

Findings – *The assessment finds that a small group of recognized CSR leaders have started integrating CSR into their corporate strategy to gain competitive advantages, suggesting a gradual emergence of strategic CSR with various benefits. However, a mixed response from the market implies conditions for management consideration.*

Practical implications – *CSR can be viable in competitive strategy particularly in gaining a social license to operate and for corporate reputation. Nevertheless, balancing stakeholder interests should be managed with extra care. Positive stakeholder reaction in one issue may alleviate but cannot offset deeply rooted problems in another.*

Originality/value – *Based on the synthesis of several CSR models, this paper proposes a new stratification scheme to identify the stage of CSR development. The empirical results also indicate the development of strategic CSR in the context of emerging economy.*

Keywords *Corporate social responsibility, Competitive strategy, Thailand*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has exponentially become a major attraction to academics and practitioners in business since the beginning of the new millennium. In fact, the dominant themes in theoretical trends began in the 1950s focusing on ethics and social obligation of business, followed by enlightened self-interest in the 1970s, and the corporate social performance model in the 1980s. The latest trend attempts to employ strategic CSR management to increase the competitive advantages of the company (Lee, 2008). Consistently in practice, recent findings from a worldwide executive survey reveal significant increase in perceiving CSR as a very high corporate priority (*The Economist*, 2008). More than half of the executives recognize that CSR is a necessary cost, but delivers a distinctive position in the market. This trend is based on data mostly from Europe and North America. To respond to the call for empirical studies in other geographic regions for further comparative research of CSR (Lee, 2008), this study explores if the latest trend of strategic CSR is considered by CSR leaders in a developing economy like Thailand.

Stages of CSR

Even relatively contemporary, a theory of CSR can be divided into four eras based on several conceptual shifts (Lee, 2008). The first dominant theme emerged during 1950s and 1960s