

PRO-SOCIAL ACTIVITIES AND THE IMAGE OF A WATER AND SEWAGE COMPANY ON THE EXAMPLE OF PWIK RYBNIK

Introduction

Water and sewage companies are responsible for the collective supply of water and sewage for individual and institutional clients. Responsibility and scope of their activities vary depending on the way of organizing water and sewage services in a given area. The activity of enterprises is subject to many regulations and legal conditions, among others due to the specificity of their functioning under the conditions of monopoly. The literature covering the area of management and quality sciences mainly focuses on the functioning of the economy in industries that determine its competitiveness on the global market [Chudziński, 2018: 17]. The clients of municipal companies are in a completely different situation than the clients of companies operating in conditions of full market competition. Thus, the area of municipal services is less interesting for researchers in management and quality sciences. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the level of municipal services together with their standards and availability directly affects the activities of enterprises and the local community. According to S. Cyfert, if the water and sewage company does not take proactive measures, the pace of its development will be slower than the pace of development of the environment, which in the long run will lead to a gap in the development and decline of the organization [Cyfert, 2018: 135].

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An intelligent enterprise, similarly to an intelligent city, makes a rational use of the scientific and technological advances and manages knowledge in the company on the one hand, on the other, however, it takes care of the social and ecological spheres, which makes it comply with the principles of sustainable development. The concept of CSR appeared in the 1950s in the western developed countries as a result of concerns of investors, companies and participants of social campaigns. Some authors, although not available in detail, from this period underline the important role of CSR in combating poverty in developing countries [Palihawadana et al., 2016: 4965]. Over time, the importance of establishing corporate social responsibility (CSR) is growing worldwide. Corporations are expected to be good sides for fulfilling social roles and solving social problems [Liao et al., 2017: 329]. Currently, corporate social responsibility (CSR) described in the literature as measures through which companies integrate the social and ecological aspects of their day-to-day operations and in their mutual relations with stakeholders on a voluntary basis is an integral part of the sustainable development [Żemigala, 2007: 100]. L. Zbiegień-Maciąg emphasizes, however, that the notion refers to the company's responsibility for accounting with the law and society for its actions. A company is responsible to: owners, employees, shareholders, customers, creditors, environmental movements, suppliers, subcontractors, and public administration [Zbiegień-Maciąg, 1997: 48–49].

As M. Goergen aptly notes, CSR covers issues such as the good of employees, community programs, donations to charity and environmental protection. In other words, it contains both internal and external dimensions. That is why CSR consists in undertaking activities aimed at further social good or other that may be internal or external to the company. The latter concerns the degree to which the company engages in socially responsible behaviors towards the wider community, and the first describes the attitude towards internal stakeholders, primarily employees [Goergen et al., 2017].

The subject literature distinguishes a few types of social responsibility. Economic responsibility is fundamental, the essence of which lies in the production of goods and services demanded by the public, at a price that enables the business not only to exist, but also to develop. It is worth emphasizing that the price is satisfactory for the customers, too, and it makes it possible to regulate the liabilities towards investors [Szaban, 2012: 152]. Another type of responsibility is the legal one, which means complying with the local and national legislation, as well as the European Union law [Szaban, 2012: 153]. The ethical responsibility, in turn, can be defined as obeying the usually unwritten rules and customs generally accepted by the local community, and acting according to its expectations [Szaban, 2012: 153]. What is also worth mentioning is the responsibility by choice, which might be referred to as additional actions, desirable for a given community, and simultaneously valuable in terms of running a business. An example of such measures may include supporting local

initiatives, which might turn out to be useful in the short and long term in supporting the company. It might be, for instance, investing in the development of infrastructure, which will attract new investors or customers thereafter [Szaban, 2012: 153]. Basing on the aforementioned concept, companies have been showing an increased interest in complying with the particular ethical standards, bearing in mind not only their own interests, but also the public good (including environmental protection). Such an approach can be reflected in the more intensive implementation of the so-called social innovation basing on the cooperation with the environment. P. Drucker shared such an understanding of the innovation, claiming that innovation should be accomplished in the real sense of the word, as well as a new wealth creation potential should be built, both technical and social [Drucker, 1995: 65]. The motives for active implementation of corporate social responsibility assumptions are exceedingly diverse. On the one hand, it might be an attempt to win the confidence of the public and strengthen the company's position on the market through a creation of a positive image of the company. On the other hand, the objective of such measures might include the development of knowledge, innovation, new experiences and, above all, concern for the natural environment and improved relationships with the social environment [Kochmańska, 2009: 88].

Currently, companies are facing an increased demand for information on CSR performance. That is why CSR reporting is becoming an important strategic activity. Thanks to CSR reports, companies are trying to present their efforts to reduce the negative impact of their activities on society and the environment. At the beginning, the reports focused only on environmental and ecological issues, and as the demand increased, they were supplemented with other areas. In general, CSR reports have a similar format: they describe social or environmental problems, and then present company spending on a series of actions solving the problems [Vartiak, 2016: 177–178]. However, it should be noted that CSR reporting is not mandatory, and the lack of a report does not necessarily mean that the company does not take pro-ecological measures. Therefore, it is difficult to find a direct correlation between CSR reporting and the implementation of pro-ecological activities [Śmiechowski, Lament, 2017: 993–994].

The most important activities in CSR campaigns may be related or not to the core business of the company. The literature review revealed mixed results regarding which option provides the most beneficial consumer reactions. However, it is clear that companies' engagement in CSR activities, positively increases consumer's attitude towards them and their products [García-Jiménez et al., 2017: 28].

Companies undertake CSR communication because it contributes to creating a positive image of a company among the local community. However, if the idea of corporate social responsibility is understood in its actual meaning, company's actions are not a result of its desire to gain competitive advantage on the market and attract as many customers as possible, but of its moral obligations towards the local

community where it functions. Due to the nature of PWiK's operations, being the only provider of water-sewage services in the city, it does not have to take additional actions in order to gain clients. Conducting large-scale activities that influence environmental awareness of the local community, providing top quality services, implementing intelligent green innovative system solutions to protect the natural environment prove that the social responsibility of the Sewage and Water Supply Ltd. Rybnik results from the moral motives and is based on the institutional responsibility of the company, as well as the individual responsibility of its managers, aware of their social roles [Kuzior, 2013: 18].

1. Materials and methods

Aim of the research

The aim of the research was to get acquainted with the opinions and views of the Rybnik's local community on pro-social activities undertaken by PWiK Rybnik and their impact on the company's image.

The research method, technique and tool

In the literature on the subject, the vast majority of research regarding the opinions of clients and social image of water and sewage companies was carried out on three levels: descriptive studies on the recognition of companies, monitoring the image of companies in the long run and evaluation studies based on the adopted criteria. Most often, research problems included: level of familiarity with the company compared to other municipal companies, level of company's name and logo recognition, knowledge of the company's location, knowledge of the company's owners, level of knowledge of the company's promotional and sponsorship activities, level of familiarity with the company's marketing campaigns and slogans. In this type of research, quantitative research with the use of a standard questionnaire is of fundamental importance [Cichocki, 2018: 22].

In this article, quantitative study has been chosen as the research method, which allows to conduct a survey, and the variables are selected in such a way that a statistical analysis is possible to perform. A questionnaire has been used as the research technique as it enables the high level of standardization of the questions. According to Sztumski, the questionnaire is a technique used in social sciences. This technique is considered a specific written form of the interview and belongs to the categorized research, where the rules and principles for a given study are strictly defined. The survey allows to collect large amount of information about phenomena occurring

in society [Sztumski, 1995: 130–133]. The questionnaire, a research tool designed by the authors of the article, adopted two forms of distribution: 1) the tool was placed on the PWiK Rybnik website and the respondents had the possibility to fill it on their own, 2) some questionnaires were printed and mailed to those respondents who do not use the electronic way of contacting PWiK Rybnik. The research tool consisted mostly of closed and half-open questions, where a respondent could choose “other” as an answer and give their own response if the possible answers were not satisfactory enough. Open questions were also present in the survey, so respondents could share their feelings and suggestions. The questionnaire included conditional questions as well. The respondents could skip the questions they were unable to respond to because of their previous answers.

Study population and the choice of research sample

The research population consisted of the community living in the city of Rybnik, and the sample consisted of the users of the Sewage and Water Supply Ltd. Rybnik services. The city of Rybnik is inhabited by 140,000 people, who live in 27 districts on a total area of 148 km² [Rybnik].

The research sample has been selected in a random-purposeful way so we could take advantage of both kinds of sampling, which radically decreased the level of complexity of analytical procedures as the problem of selecting the most representative unit has been eliminated and the necessity to have a fully systematized register of units belonging to the population has been limited.

We have collected 800 completed survey questionnaires and put them into analysis. Women constituted 46% of the respondents, while 54% were men. The biggest group of respondents was composed of persons aged 35–44, who accounted for nearly 30% of the research sample. The groups of people aged 25–34, 45–54 and over 55 were roughly equal and each constituted 23% of the research sample. The percentage of the respondents aged below 25 was very small. The possible explanation is the fact that people at such age rarely run a household on their own. Such a distribution of the sampling frame in terms of gender and age made it possible to familiarize with the opinions and feelings of both men and women, as well as the representatives of most age groups equally. The majority of the respondents were individuals with tertiary education, who constituted over 55% of the respondents. The second most numerous group (11%) were those with the secondary education, whereas primary education was declared by less than 1.5% of the surveyed. Households run by the respondents mostly consist of three or four people. They constitute 24% of the study population. The smallest group is represented by those running a single person household and those, whose households consist of more than six people. They constituted 5.5% and 2%, respectively.

The residents of the following districts answered most willingly the questions raised in the survey: Niedobczyce (10.5%), Rybnik Północ (8%) and Śródmieście (7.5%). A statistical analysis of the sample data revealed that nearly 94% of the respondents live in owner-occupied houses or flats. The remaining 6% of the respondents live in tenant or cooperative flats (3%) or they rent apartments (almost 3%). Those who rent flats constitute 0.25% of the respondents. Over 86% of the polls concede that they possess a backyard or an allotment garden.

2. The company image and the evaluation of pro-social activities

The Sewage and Water Supply Ltd. Rybnik is engaged in large-scale environmental education activities manifesting themselves in a number of green initiatives. For instance, in the years 2014–2015 the company organized two events: an art competition on World Water Day in 2014 for primary school pupils; an eco-weekend in PLAZA shopping center in Rybnik in June 2014, a photo contest for secondary school students entitled “Water? Best straight from the tap, naturally!” in March 2015; installing water-machines – devices to prepare and serve tap water drinks made of water coming from the city’s first established water intake in Tęczowa-Street in Rybnik; World Hand Washing Day in October 2015, when PWiK laboratory employees conducted educational classes in kindergartens; annually organized school trips to the Water Treatment Plant at Rybnik-Orzepowice, giving the young generation a chance to become familiar with the technological process of purifying waste water and to prove that every resident of the city, wisely using the benefits of civilization, influences his or her environment.

The respondents were asked questions concerning their familiarity with the aforementioned initiatives. Analyzing the results, 87% of them do not know the initiative of “Painted on water” art contest on World Water Day, whereas 7% confirm that they do, and find the initiative significant.

The statistical data in Table 1 show the relationship between the familiarity of the art contest on World Water Day and the respondents’ age. 56 people (including 1 person below 24, 11 people between 25–34, 6 respondents between 35–44, 16 people between 45–54, and 22 respondents over 55) not only know the initiative, but also find it important. Considering the fact that the action was directed at a particular target group of primary school pupils, the result seems to be optimistic.

In terms of the respondents’ education, 35 people with tertiary education, 12 people with secondary education, 8 people with basic vocational education, and 1 person with primary education, not only know the initiative, but also find it significant.

Table 1. The familiarity with the “Painted on water” art contest on World Water day for primary school pupils and its evaluation according to age category

	Age					Total
	Below 24	25–34	35–44	45–54	Over 55	
I don't know it	7 0.9%	156 19.5%	214 26.8%	157 19.7%	161 20.2%	695 87.1%
I know it, it's an important initiative	1 0.1%	11 1.4%	6 0.8%	16 2.0%	22 2.8%	56 7.0%
I know it, but it's hard to say	0 0.0%	11 1.4%	15 1.9%	8 1.0%	10 1.3%	44 5.5%
I know it, I find it unimportant	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	2 0.3%	1 0.1%	0 0.0%	3 0.4%
Total	8 1.0%	178 22.3%	237 29.7%	182 22.8%	193 24.2%	798 100.0%

Source: own study based on the research.

Another initiative examined in the research was the Eco-weekend in PLAZA shopping center in Rybnik, which focused on waste water purification. As many as 88.6% of the respondents do not know the initiative, whereas 6.76% do and find it significant in terms of raising environmental awareness.

Considering gender of the respondents, it can be observed that men and women are aware of the initiative almost equally (as 28 and 26 of them, respectively, not only are familiar with the initiative, but also find it significant), while 19 people at the age of 45–54, 15 people over 55, 13 respondents between 35–44, and 7 people between 25 and 34 both know the initiative and find it positive.

Another initiative analyzed were the educational classes organized in preschools in Rybnik, which 75.6% of the respondents did not hear of, whereas 21.5% of them not only knew the initiative, but also evaluated it positively. The result is significantly better than in the case of the two previous examples. The initiative is recognized and evaluated positively among those, most probably, who have children at preschool age (41 respondents at the age of 25–34 and 38 of them between 35 and 44 indicated such an answer). The answer was also chosen by 54 people over 55 (who, presumably, have grandchildren at that age).

As it was mentioned before, PWiK Rybnik organizes photo contests for secondary school students, whose main theme is water. However, 85.48% of the respondents claim not to be familiar with the initiative, while nearly 10% admit not only to know it, but also they evaluate it positively. 77 people both know the contest and find the initiative positive (including 19 respondents at the age of 45–54, whose children might be potentially secondary school students).

In order to increase students’ environmental awareness, schools organize trips to the water treatment plant in Rybnik-Orzepowice. 75.6% of the respondents do not know the initiative, whereas 20.28% are not only familiar with it, but also find it significant. The statistical analysis presented in Table 2 indicates that 162 people are aware of the fact that school trips to the water treatment plant in Rybnik-Orzepowice are organized, moreover, they find the initiative significant. What is worth mentioning at this point is the fact that such an answer was indicated by 45, 44, 20 and 16 respondents whose households consist of three, four, five and six people, respectively. They are, inter alia, large families and therefore a conclusion can be drawn that their children might have taken part in such educational trips.

Table 2. The familiarity with the school trips to the water treatment plant in Rybnik-Orzepowice and their evaluation according to the number of people in a household (living together)

	The number of people in a household (living together)									Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
I don't know it	39 4.9%	115 14.4%	146 18.3%	138 17.3%	90 11.3%	55 6.9%	15 1.9%	2 0.3%	2 0.3%	602 75.5%
I know it, it's an important initiative	2 0.3%	31 3.9%	45 5.6%	44 5.5%	20 2.5%	16 2.0%	1 0.1%	2 0.3%	1 0.1%	162 20.3%
I know it, but it's hard to say	3 0.4%	6 0.8%	3 0.4%	12 1.5%	6 0.8%	1 0.1%	1 0.1%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	32 4.0%
I know it, I find it unimportant	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 0.1%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 0.1%
Total	44 5.5%	152 19.1%	195 24.5%	194 24.3%	116 14.6%	72 9.0%	17 2.1%	4 0.5%	3 0.4%	797 100.0%

Source: own study based on the research.

Another aspect dealt with while conducting the research applied to the respondents’ knowledge of the elements that identify a company. A logo constitutes one of them, referred to as the most important part of the visual identification of a company. The respondents were asked whether they recognize the PWiK’s logo and nearly all of them were unanimous in this case, as almost 95% of them replied positively.

A tagline constitutes another element that characterizes a company and should immediately associate with the company’s profile and activities. Unfortunately, only as few as 5% of the respondents turned out to be familiar with the company slogans. Then, they were additionally requested to enumerate PWiK’s taglines that they could remember. The following were mentioned: “Tap water won’t bite you,” “Good water,” “Water? Best straight from the tap”, “Don’t waste water”.

As a result of its business profile, the company is obliged to take numerous environmental measures (the so-called eco-innovations), which might include the following: the use of biogas produced by the water treatment plant to generate electricity and heat (renewable energy sources); reducing water losses through a modern water-sewage monitoring and management system as a result of a research project; decreasing the level of biogenic substances (nitrogen and phosphorus) through launching a system of reducing nutrients resulting from a research project; remote water meter read-out systems using radio transmitters (decreasing labor consumption and fuel costs).

Therefore, the respondents were asked about their awareness of the aforementioned activities. Unfortunately, 93.6% of the survey participants are not familiar with them. Only 6.4% replied in the affirmative. Table 3 presents the familiarity with the ecological initiatives, taking into account the age criterion. It shows that 17 people at the age of 45–54, 12 people over 55 and between 25 and 34, as well as 10 respondents at the age of 35–44 are familiar with the initiatives. As far as education is concerned, the green initiatives are recognized by 39 people with tertiary education, 6 respondents with secondary education, 5 people with basic vocational education, and one person with primary education.

Table 3. The familiarity with the measures to enhance the natural environment taken by the company according to age category

	Age					Total
	Below 24	25–34	35–44	45–54	Over 55	
Yes	0	12	10	17	12	51
	0.0%	1.5%	1.3%	2.1%	1.5%	6.4%
No	8	165	227	164	179	743
	1.0%	20.8%	28.6%	20.7%	22.5%	93.6%
Total	8	177	237	181	191	794
	1.0%	22.3%	29.8%	22.8%	24.1%	100.0%

Source: own study based on the research.

Moreover, those who gave positive answers were requested to provide examples of such measures. The following were enumerated: replacing some elements of the water-sewage system; building a modern water treatment plant; refuse collection and waste water treatment; building the sanitary sewage system; using the biogas to generate electricity; environmental campaigns.

Also, the respondents were asked about their own ideas concerning further ecological innovative actions that could be taken by the company. The following measures were suggested: eliminating the troublesome odor and noise; extending the water-sewage

system; improving the taste of water and encouraging the residents to drink tap water; running educational campaigns at schools; building the environmental awareness; upgrading the water treatment plant; “Tap water good for drinking – some research results, information, advertising”; drinking water points free of charge; building the sanitary sewage system in places where it was too expensive or too complicated.

Conclusion

The research concerning the company image and the evaluation of pro-social actions was divided into several categories. The first one constituted the knowledge of the initiatives whose objective was to build the environmental awareness of the local community and the evaluation of the measures. Considering the fact that the majority of them was targeted at preschool and school children, the results of the research concerning this area provide some scope for optimism (especially when it comes to the familiarity with World Hand Washing Day, recognized by 21.5% of respondents and evaluated positively, as well as the school trips to the water treatment plant in Rybnik-Orzepowice, in case of which 20.28% of the respondents not only know the initiative but also find it significant). However, in order to promote such measures, it is suggested that advertising campaigns should be carried out (e.g., advertising Eco-weekend) in the mass media (local newspapers, radio and television). Such actions will enable the company to reach a larger group of potential customers and it will result in increased environmental awareness of the residents. Furthermore, it is recommended that more such campaigns should be directed at the elderly. Also, the participants of the aforementioned initiatives should be asked to fill in an evaluation survey, which will allow to assess the actions in an objective way and learn about the expectations of the local community in that regard.

Another category of the research concerned the elements that identify a company. Although almost all the respondents are familiar with PWiK's logo (nearly 94.47%), they have problems with indicating the company taglines (such answer was chosen by almost 95% of the respondents). In order to change that situation one might organize a contest for the best slogan, advertised on the company's website or, as in the previous case, in the mass media. After the announcement of the results of the contest it is worth conducting a promoting campaign, which will increase the visual identification of the company, as it will reflect best the scope of actions taken by the organization while emphasizing its concern for the social environment.

As it was mentioned above, the company is obliged to take numerous environmental measures as a result of its business profile (the so-called eco-innovations), which provide many benefits for the surroundings and protect the natural environment, simultaneously. Unfortunately, the local community's awareness of the actions is

low (93.58% do not know them). A solution of the problem might be to organize regular meetings with the residents in order to familiarize them with the initiatives, as well as to learn about the other side's opinions and suggestions concerning such actions. It will provide mutual benefits, as the company will improve its image and strengthen the relationships with its environment at the same time. The city residents, in turn, being aware of the influence they have on such a crucial aspect of life as the environmental protection, and even participating in some of the actions, will increase their confidence in the company, which will be perceived in an even more positive way.

Summing up the theoretical and practical considerations it can be said that corporate social responsibility is a very wide and complex activity. When talking about CSR in the context of water supply and sewage companies, it is worth noting that municipal companies still have to make up much for corporate social responsibility. Companies should use modern technologies, renewable energy sources, work to reduce electricity consumption, CO₂ emissions, dust, reduce waste and properly segregate and utilize it. One cannot forget about two-way communication with the recipients of the services and recognition of their needs. In addition to the PWiK Rybnik's case, the practical implementation of such a philosophy may be the Poznań-based company Aquanet, which organizes, for example: free classical music concerts, jazz music festivals and supports the activities of numerous environmental organizations, associations of the sick and needy people [Wiśniewska, 2018: 45]. Therefore, the overall development strategy of a water and sewage company should cover the economic, ecological and social dimensions equally, with a simultaneous dialogue with stakeholders. The effect of this dialogue is the emergence of an increasingly common belief that soon only the sustainability and socially sustainable development will be well perceived [Rok, 2013: 27].

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to examine how the pro-social actions taken by the Sewage and Water Supply Ltd. Rybnik (PWiK Rybnik) influence the image of this company in the opinion of the local community in Rybnik. In order to answer the questions, a quantitative research has been conducted in order to enable statistical analysis. A survey questionnaire, designed by the authors, was used as a research tool. The survey questions concerned the perception of PWiK's company image and were designed to assess the effectiveness and adequacy of pro-social activities undertaken by PWiK Rybnik in the context of the possible improvement of the services provided by the company. The conducted research allowed to formulate conclusions and suggestions on how to better create a positive, pro-social image of a water and sewage company, which will allow to implement the pro-social innovation strategy of PWiK Rybnik.

KEYWORDS: COMPANY IMAGE, PUBLIC RELATIONS, CSR, WATER-SEWAGE SECTOR

JEL CLASSIFICATION CODES: A13, O35, L14

DZIAŁANIA PROSPOŁECZNE I WIZERUNEK FIRMY WODNO-KANALIZACYJNEJ NA PRZYKŁADZIE PWiK RYBNIK

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zdiagnozowanie, w jaki sposób działania prospołeczne Przedsiębiorstwa Wodociągów i Kanalizacji Sp. z o.o. wpływają na wizerunek tej firmy w opinii społeczności lokalnej w Rybniku. Aby odpowiedzieć na to pytanie, przeprowadzono badanie. Metodą badawczą były badania ilościowe, umożliwiające analizę statystyczną, natomiast narzędziem badawczym – zaprojektowany przez autorów kwestionariusz w formie ankiety. Pytania dotyczyły postrzegania wizerunku PWiK i miały za zadanie ocenić skuteczność i adekwatność działań prospołecznych podejmowanych przez PWiK Rybnik, w kontekście możliwości poprawy świadczonych przez przedsiębiorstwo usług. Przeprowadzone badanie pozwoliło na sformułowanie wniosków i opracowanie propozycji usprawnień kreowania pozytywnego,

prospołecznego wizerunku przedsiębiorstwa wodno-kanalizacyjnego, które pozytywnie wpłyną na realizację prospołecznej strategii innowacyjności firmy PWiK Rybnik Sp. z o.o.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: WIZERUNEK FIRMY, PUBLIC RELATIONS, CSR, BRANŻA WODNO-KANALIZACYJNA

KODY KLASYFIKACJI JEL: A13, O35, L14