COMUNICAR EN PANDEMIA: DE LAS FAKE NEWS A LA SOSTENIBILIDAD

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Coordinadores: Joaquín Sotelo González y Natalia Abuín Vences

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ETHICAL COMMUNICATION IN SANITARY CRISES: GARCIDEN'S CASE

Patricia Martín Matas Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, España

RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza cómo de ético fue el proceso comunicativo de Garciden durante la crisis sanitaria que tuvo lugar en España entre abril y mayo de 2017, cuando algunos de sus lotes de atún presentaron altos niveles de histamina que provocaron numerosas intoxicaciones en España.

Puesto que la cultura es uno de los factores que puede influir en la toma de decisiones éticas, se aplicarán las dimensiones culturales de Hofstede para analizar la cobertura mediática de esta crisis sanitaria en España, así como las estrategias comunicativas de Garciden.

Se usará la Teoría de la Comunicación de Crisis Situacional de Coombs (SCCT) (2007, 2015) para identificar a qué tipo de crisis se enfrentó Garciden y qué estrategias comunicativas siguió durante y post-crisis. Se realizará un análisis de contenido de artículos de prensa seleccionados para comprobar si la empresa habría pasado el test TTR de Kim (20115), empleado como parte de un modelo ético para una comunicación de crisis efectiva, y que incluye analizar la transparencia, la comunicación bidireccional y el momento adecuado. Este test se empleará tanto en el análisis como en la sección final de recomendaciones, donde se propondrán estrategias comunicativas para una respuesta comunicativa ética a esta crisis.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze how ethical Garciden's communication process was during the sanitary crisis that took place in Spain between April and May, 2017, when some of Garciden's tuna batches were infected with histamine, which produced several cases of food poisoning in different areas of the country.

Taking into account that culture is a factor that can influence ethical decisions, Hofstede's cultural dimensions is applied to analyze Spanish's media's coverage of the crisis and Garciden's communication strategies. Coombs (2007, 2015) Situational Crisis Communication Theory is used to identify what kind of crisis Garciden faced and its communication strategies during and post-crisis. To identify if the company followed an ethical communication strategy selected newspaper articles will be used to conduct a content analysis to find out if the organization could have passed Kim's (2015) TTR Test, which includes "Transparency (What)", "Two-Way Symmetrical Communication (How)", and "Right Time (When)", as this test is part of the ethical model for an effective crisis communication. This test will be used both in the analisis and in the final recommendations section, where communication strategies will be proposed as part of an ethical crisis communication response.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Teoría de la comunicación de crisis situacional; Test TTR; comunicación ética; Garciden; crisis sanitaria.

KEYWORDS

Situational Crisis Communication Theory; TTR Test; ethical communication; Garciden; sanitary crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

From April 25th, 2017, there were 63 instances of food poisoning in Andalusia, and several other cases were reported in Madrid, Murcia, Catalonia and the Bask Country, because the presence of histamine in tuna in Spain. Garciden, the company that distributed the tuna, initiated a voluntary product recall. Garciden is a freight transport company that distributes goods in a national and international level, as well as distributing fresh fish and seafood. It is a small family company based in Almeria (Andalusia), Spain, which according to their webpage "Thanks to the rigor in the processing and handling and processes, we guarantee optimum conditions to offer quality products" (Garciden, 2010). The food poisoning was caused by the presence of histamine in the fish, which causes throat itching, nausea, vomiting and

sweating, amongst other symptoms, and can be caused by poor fish preservation, which would contravene Garciden's webpage statement. Garciden has no ethics code available in their webpage, which has been remodeled after the crisis.

Garciden distributed tuna in eight autonomous communities: the Region of Murcia, the Valencian Community, Aragon, Andalusia, Castile and León, the Basque country, Madrid and Catalonia, as well as in European countries like Germany, Italy and Portugal. Histamine poisonings were reported in several of these autonomous communities, and no international poisonings were reported in the Spanish media.

The Spanish Agency of the Ministry of Health closed the company's factory for a while (it has reopened) and the FACUA (a Consumer's association) is asking for a severe sanction for the company. Since May 15th, 2017, there has been no more coverage of the situation on the news and no more information is available to consumers. The last article (Europa Press, 2017) was published on May 15th in the newspaper La Vanguardia, where a counsellor from the Health Department stated that research would be thoroughly carried out to understand what had happened, without mentioning Garciden's communications.

This crisis presents an excellent opportunity to analyze Garciden's communications during the crisis to see if they were ethical by following media coverage of the situation and the development of the crisis. We suspected that after an initial interest the subject might be "forgotten", as it seems to be a trend in the country to pay attention to issues in the media for a week and then rapidly pass on to another crisis without offering information about the resolution of the former one. This might have to do with Spain's specific cultural characteristics, so deeper understanding of Spain's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, n.d.) will be necessary for the analysis.

1.1. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

As Wright reminds us, "it is important to realize that public relations as practiced in one country frequently differs from how it is practiced in another" (2006, p. 172). Garciden's case has taken place in a Spanish context, so even though we will apply research conducted mainly in America (including ethics) we will complement it with further understanding of the Spanish cultural dimensions as identified by Hofstede.

Several studies focus on different crisis communication strategies and the importance of identifying the type of crisis in order to select the most adequate communication response, Coombs (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework will be used to identify what kind of crisis Garciden faced and if the crisis response strategies were ethical. According to Coombs crises present reputational threats, as a "crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and reputational threat" (2007, p. 164). Crises allows people to rethink their ideas about the organization,

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and "the news media and the internet play a crucial role" (2007, p. 164). Coombs identifies different crisis types grouping them by crisis clusters: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster and the preventable cluster (2007, p. 168). Depending on the range in attribution of responsibility there will be a different reputational threat, so a weaker attribution of responsibility usually is associated with a mild reputational threat, and vice versa.

Coombs state that when assessing reputational threat, the first step would be to identify the "initial crisis responsibility attached to a crisis" (2007, p. 168). Coombs (2015) defines crisis responsibility as "the amount of responsibility for a crisis that stakeholders attribute to the organization" (p. 143). As such, media framing of the crisis will allow me to identify in which crisis cluster Garciden's tuna crisis fits in, the initial crisis responsibility attributed to Garciden and the response type selected for their communications. We also have to take into account that long-term threats are perceived by the publics as stronger than short-term threats (Coombs, 2015, p. 144). Crisis response strategies are the way the organization answers to the crisis by being accountable. SCCT crisis response strategies include deny strategies (attack the accuser, denial, scapegoat, excuse, justification, compensation and apology) and bolstering strategies (reminder, ingratiation and victimage) (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). Coombs offers a guidance for crisis response depending in the crisis situation and the perceived attribution of responsibility (see figure 1), which will be used to analyze Garciden's responses.

Figure 1. Coombs overview of crisis response strategy guidance.

Crisis Situation	Crisis Response Strategies	Outcomes
No Crisis Responsibility	Denial	Protect reputations and purchase intention Reduce anger and tikelihood of negative word of mouth
Minimal Crisis Responsibility	Instructing and Adjusting Information	Protect reputations and purchase intention Reduce anger, anxiety, likelihood of negative word of mouth
Strong Crisis Responsibility	Instructing and Adjusting Information apology, compensation, or both	Protect reputations and purchase intention Reduce anger, anxiety, likelihood of negative word of mouth
Integrity-based Crisis	Instructing and Adjusting Information apology, compensation, or both	Protect reputations and purchase intention Reduce anger, anxiety, likelihood of negative word of mouth
Competence-based Crisis	Instructing and Adjusting information apology	Protect reputations and purchase intention Reduce anger and tikelihood of negative word of mouth
Long-term Threat	Instructing and Adjusting Information apology, compensation, or both	Protect reputations and purchase intention Reduce anger and tikelihood of negative word of mouth
Firming	Instructing and Adjusting Information	Protect reputations and purchase intention Reduce anger and likelihood of negative word of mouth

Source: Coombs, 2015, p. 145.

Even though research on crisis communication has focused mainly in the production of information or restoration of reputation after the crisis is handled, few research focuses on ethical crisis communication management. Even though Coombs model is not developed as a communication model based on ethics, it is one of the most used when evaluating crises as it also addresses ethical issues, including the fact that "The first priority in any crisis is to protect stakeholders from harm, not to protect the reputation" (Coombs, 2007, p. 165). Kim (2015) refers to the ethical aspects of SCCT theory including that communication managers have ethical responsibilities when developing a crisis response, so SCCT "begins with ethical responsibilities" (p. 63).

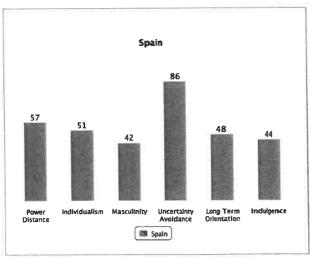
Kim (2015) identifies three common variables when managing an effective crisis communication -what, how and when. Kim proposes a TTR Test as part of an ethical model of effective crisis communication, which includes "Transparency (What)", "Two-Way Symmetrical Communication (How)", and "Right Time (When)". Transparency is an ongoing process, as there is always information that the organization can offer to its stakeholders. Kim states that "Transparency should be combined with truth and truthfulness" (2015, p. 69). The "how" involves two-way symmetrical communication, which many scholars have advocated is the basis for an ethical public relations communication (Bowen, 2004). Grunig also states that by engaging in two-way symmetrical communications organizations follow an excellent public relations practice, as they "'stay close' to their customers, employees and other strategic constituencies" (1992, p. 16). The last part of the test, the Right Time (when), usually is applied to the initial response to the crisis, when information has to be made available fast. As Kim remarks, studies usually address communication during the crisis, but ethical communication should be used in all the stages of the crisis, including post-crisis communication. Timely and consistent communication has been found to be a very effective communication strategy, so the right time in Kims TTR Test is used to refer to "communication timing throughout the life cycle of the crisis and timely response to the crisis" (2015, p. 72). This TTR Test, which addresses ethical considerations, will be used in the analysis of Garciden's communications throughout the crisis to analyze if Garciden managed this crisis in an ethical way.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

As we have previously stated Garciden is a Spanish company and the crisis took place in Spain, so the possible cultural factors that might have influenced Garciden's communications, media coverage and the publics perception of the crisis have to be taken into account. As Wright states "cultural factors often have a major influence on ethical decision making" (2006, p. 174). Hofstede identified four main cultural dimensions that differentiate cultures: power distance, individualism, masculinity

and uncertainty avoidance. He added a fifth and sixth dimensions, long-term orientation and indulgence. According to Hofstede (see figure 2) Spain's score in the power distance dimension (57) is a high one, which means that Spaintends to have a hierarchical social relationship. Spain ranks 51 in the individualism dimension, which "in comparison with the rest of the European countries (except for Portugal) is Collectivist" (Hofstede, n.d.). If we compare this score with other countries of the world, however, Spain can be considered as individualist. In the masculinity dimension Spain scores 42, and as as result "the key word is consensus", and "There is a concern for weak or needy people that generate a natural current of sympathy" (Hofstede, n.d.). The uncertainty avoidance dimension seems to be the one that most clearly defines Spain, as there is a high score of 86. Then eed for clear rules can cause stress, and situations that are undefined or ambiguous cause great concern. This is especially relevant when dealing with crises, as scoring so high in this dimension means that the population needs explanations quickly to prevent this uncertainty. Regarding the long-term orientation dimension Spain scores 48, which is an intermediate score, even though there seems to be a preference for short-term orientation looking for quick results. This dimension is also relevant to analyze how the Spanish media follows crises, as there is a quick need for information to address this short-term orientation. Finally, the last dimension of indulgence portrays Spain as not being an indulgent society with a low score of 44. This means that there is a tendency "to cynicism and pessimism" (Hofstede, n.d.).





Source: Hofstede (n.d.).

Understanding Spanish cultural dimensions is fundamental to understand how crises are portrayed in the media in this country and to understand what communication

decisions are taken by organizations and if they can be considered ethical, as "ethics are based on the values and the norms of individual societies" (Wright, 2006, p. 178).

We monitored online the coverage of the tuna poisonings and the references to Garciden's communications to stablish a timeline of the crisis and to see how Garciden's communications appeared in the media, as well as how the media was framing the situation. The tuna poisonings and posterior product recall began on April 25th 2017. The first article appeared on May 7th, by EuropaPress Agency. It appeared *in Diario de Almería*, a local newspaper from where Garciden has its headquarters. From May 10th to May 11th it was front page news, and only then references to Garciden's press release appeared. The last article appeared on the news on May 15th, since then there has been no more coverage of the situation.

2.1. MEDIA ARTIFACTS

The artifacts selected for the analysis are 4 articles and one video interview. The dates range from May 10th – May 11th, when the tuna poisonings got all the media attention. The articles were selected from different newspapers, including both national and local from places where intoxications had taken place. An article from FACUA (a NGO consumer association) was also selected as it specifically mentioned the affected batches and information on what steps Garciden was taking to notify its clients. Only 2 articles included quotes from Garciden's press release, all from EFE Agency. The only personal communication from Garciden appears in an interview for the tv program *Espejo Público*, and only lasts 28 seconds. Even though media was covering the situation since May 5th, no more articles were included in my analysis as all the other articles avoid mentioning Garciden's communications and focus on how to identify the symptoms of histamine poisoning and on what to do if there is suspected poisoning. Media covered the news, but it was almost impossible to find clear information on Garciden's actual communications.

We also wanted to obtain the original press release to be able to conduct a textual analysis on its content, to see how Garciden communicated with the press and if they were being ethical by protecting their stakeholders over their reputation. We initially pursued obtaining Garciden's original press release by asking media contacts through a colleague¹. We got in contact with the ex-director of EFE Agency, who after asking in EFE Agency was not able to recover the press release. Thanks to professor Priego we got in touch with José Aguilar, from Grupo Joly, where the newspaper *Diario de Almería* is part of, to ask if he could provide me with a contact from this newspaper (as Garciden is in Almería). Mr. Aguilar provided me with the

We have to thank our colleague, professor Alberto Priego, from Universidad Pontificia Comillas, who facilitated getting in touch with former director of EFE Agency and with José Aguilar, former international columnist from Grupo Joly, who in turn gracefully gave us the contact of the director of the newspaper Diario de Almería.

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newspaper director's contact information, but we were unsuccessful in reaching him and finally we were not able to obtain the press release through the media.

Finally, we decided to reach the source directly, trying to get in contact with the company Garciden. At the time, Garciden's webpage offered no ethics code, no information on their communication processes nor offered information about their press releases. After the updating of Garciden's webpage a phone number was available in the contact section, which had been updated and included more ways to get in touch with the company than before the crisis (which before just included a generic contact form to fill in through their webpage without including any email or telephone number). Our initial calls on the afternoon of June 12th were unsuccessful. First, we were told that the person in charge of communications was busy and we were asked to call back in half an hour. Then, a different person told us that there was nobody from that section available because they had already left for the afternoon, and to call back the following day. The information we received in the span of half an hour was contradictory, but this information was useful to analyze its ethical implications in our analysis.

On June 13th we tried calling Garciden again to see if we could get the press releases and some more information on how the company managed the communication process during and after the crisis. After stating who we were and why we needed the information, we were kept on hold and we were finally told that they couldn't give us the press release. They confirmed they had a department of communications but they did not pass us to talk to someone from that department, and insisted that they would not give me the press releases or any more information. This clearly shows a lack of interest in engaging in a two-way communication process, nor being truthful or providing information to stakeholders.

All the artifacts' content was analyzed to see how media framed the situation, the attribution of blame, how Garciden's communications appeared and what specific information was selected to be included as direct quotes. The content analysis of the selected media was used to identify Coombs' attribution of responsibility, crisis type and response strategies. Garciden's communications as appeared in the articles, in the tv interview and in the information we got when we talked on the telephone was used to apply Kim's TTR Test to analyze how ethical Garciden's communication was. Finally, the timing and content of the news was interpreted by focusing on Hofstede's description of Spanish cultural dimensions, to better understand why and how the information and Garciden's communications were framed.

3. RESULTS

Following Coombs SCCT the first step was to identify what kind of crisis Garciden was facing depending on the attribution of responsibility. Media framed Garciden as being responsible for the tuna poisonings, as all news remark that histamine poisoning is caused by a bad conservation of fish, which puts the blame on Garciden as both producer and distributor. FACUA went a step further to advise consumers "to avoid consuming all tuna distributed by Garciden and not only the suspected batches" (FACUA, 2017). Even though according to Coombs long-term threats are perceived by publics as stronger than short-term threats, which is the analyzed case, the urgency of identifying the poisoned batches and advising the publics on what to do turned this crisis into a strong one, as Garciden's reputation was severely damaged. We found no differences in media framing depending on the characteristics of the newspapers where the articles came from. All newspapers, national and local, economic of nationalist, framed the news the same way.

By blaming Garciden as responsible for the poisonings because bad handling of the products, this strong attribution of responsibility means a greater reputational threat, as the crisis fits into the preventable cluster. This strong crisis responsibility would have required, according to Coombs (2015), instructing and adjusting information, including following the response strategies: apology, compensation or both. These strategies would have shown that Garciden was following an ethical communication as they would have protected their stakeholders over their reputation. In all the articles analyzed about Garciden's communications no mention of compensation or apology are made, and no mention of consumers or stakeholders.

The communication strategy followed by Garciden was instructing information, but only about the steps they were taking to find out where the problem came from (as stated in *Espejo Público*). Regarding the press release, the only information we get is through the direct quotes from newspaper articles, where they state that "the product has been retired from the markets", "We are investigating with the veterinary services from the Junta de Andalucía the origin of the problem", "initial signs indicate that a product batch has lost the cold chain in some pieces in the distributing and marketing chain", that they are interested in "investigating and solving this sanitary problem" to be able to offer their clients "food safety". Only general information is provided, and no compensation or apology.

In order to analyze if Garciden's communications were ethical during the crisis, we applied Kim's (2015) TTR test to Garciden's communications, including the press release (through the information quoted in the media) and the telephone conversations when we tried to obtain the press release. Taking into account that Kim's TTR Test refers to "communication timing throughout the life cycle of the crisis and timely response to the crisis" (2015, p. 72), this analysis is consistent with the application of the test as we analyzed information during the crisis and post-crisis.

Regarding Transparency (what), Kim focuses on information being made available to stakeholders at all moments, combined with truth and truthfulness. Garciden only offered information through a press release and a short tv interview, and refused to offer information when we called. Garciden fails the test, as the information they provide is vague and does not adhere to the truth in all occasions, taking into account the different excuses they gave me during our phone calls.

Garciden did not engage in Two-Way Communication (how) both during the crisis or post-crisis. During the crisis they only released one press release and appeared shortly on *Espejo Público*. All communications were one-way to explain the steps they were taking to find the source of the problem. Post-crisis, their communication department refused to attend my call and to provide the press release, so on the whole they did not listen to their stakeholders' concerns.

Garciden also failed the third part of the TTR test, Right Time (when). They did not have timely and consistent communication. They reacted late when the poisonings made front page news, the references to the press release are from May 10th and the tv interview is from May 11th, over 10 days after the initial poisonings took place. Regarding the information they provided me during our telephone calls, it was also not consistent as the first day during the span of half an hour they gave me contradicting information about why we could not talk to the communications department.

Culture influences how ethical decisions are taken, so we applied Hofstede's cultural dimensions to the crisis to better understand the evolution of the news, media framing and Garciden's response strategies. The dimensions that most help analyze the situation are uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and long-term orientation. As previously stated the *uncertainty avoidance* dimension is the one that most characterizes Spain, as it has a high score. This means that Spanish population needs clear rules and has clear health policies, so they need information quickly on the measures being taken and on how to proceed if poisoning is suspected to avoid uncertainty. This explains why the majority of articles focus on offering information about what histamine poisoning is and how to detect it, and on how to proceed. Ambiguous situations cause concern, so clarification of the situation and information on the recall to calm the publics was how media framed the news. This also might explain why Garciden focused on their communications on the measures being taken to find the problem, instead of apologizing or offering compensation.

Spain scores 42 in the *masculinity* dimension, which means that there is concern for weak people, for example. In this case people affected by tuna poisoning appeared in most of the articles, including information of their names, where they got sick and how they were evolving. This might explain why media focused on people and not on the company or their communications, but also makes Garciden's communications more unethical as they showed no concern for the poisoned people nor apologized.

Finally, Spain scores 48 in the long-term dimension, which means there is a preference for *short-term orientation*. Combined with the uncertainty avoidance dimension, both help us understand why media framed the news identifying Garciden as responsible and focusing on offering plenty of information on what was histamine poisoning and how to proceed, instead of offering information on Garciden's communications, as the short-term needs of the population are receiving information about what is being done at the moment and how to face the situation

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Palenchar and Heath makes us question up to what extent organizations should behave ethically: "Does ethical communication end with and become defined by public policy –that which is legally required— or is there a higher standard to be borne by the good company/industry behaving and communicating well?" (2006, p. 133). AS a suggestion, it would have been our priority to go beyond normative rules (only the product recall and an audit to find the problem) to focus on stakeholder's concerns regarding all my products, as well as their health safety, all through the crisis time. We have identified the crisis as one with a strong attribution of responsibility and with the possibility of causing great reputational damage, as people were getting sick because they were eating my company's products. As such, combined with the following recommendations, we would have followed Coombs strategies of adjusting information from the beginning, as well as apologizing and offering compensation from the first moment. This would have shown we were behaving ethically as we were placing our stakeholder's safety first over our reputation.

The moment we learnt about the histamine poisonings being caused by batches of my company's tuna we would have started an immediate product recall without waiting for the authorities to ask me to voluntarily retire the product, informing not only my direct clients (smaller distributors) but also the general public. As Gower states "True transparency occurs when a corporation respects the integrity of all its stakeholders and does not seek to manipulate them by controlling access to information" (2006, p. 92). We would have developed a plan to inform not only about the number of the poisoned batches, but also in what places they were distributed to. This report would have been available to the general public not only through a press release, but also directly in our webpage. This would have allowed our company to pass the first step of Kim's TTR Test.

Truth and transparency are basic for an effective ethical communication strategy, and as such we would have opened a "hot line" to answer doubts and to listen to concerned stakeholders, engaging in this way in two-way communication (focusing also on the "how"). Bowen, amongst other scholars, has argued that two-way symmetrical communication is the basis for an ethical communication, so including

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stakeholders in the process by listening to their concerns and acting accordingly would have allowed me to adjust the information offered to the press in subsequent communications, both during the crisis and post-crisis, to finally reassure our stakeholders that our company was behaving in the best way possible.

By behaving in those ways we would have also addressed the "when", Kim's Right Time part of the test, as we would have offered information before it made front page news (immediacy is fundamental), during the crisis and after the crisis. All the ethical considerations included in the test would have been addressed and our stakeholders would have felt listened to and well informed to act accordingly.

Wright states that "public relations effectiveness is impacted by cultural norms" (2006, p. 175). These recommendations, besides showing our company was following an ethical communication strategy, would have been consistent and natural in the Spanish cultural context. The need to avoid uncertainty could have been fulfilled from the very beginning, our company would have shown that we cared for weaker people (in this case people getting poisoned) and we would have offered information about how we were dealing with the problem in the short term. Even though Spain is a different culture from the one where the TTR test was designed, it is perfectly applicable to the Spanish context to provide this framework for ethical communication.

Another recommendation is to work on their overall communications, their social media and their webpage. We would suggest developing an ethics code which would also be made available through their webpage. Also, two-way communication should be pursued. Including a "press room" in their webpage where they can keep their publics informed of the developments of the investigations would be beneficial for communicating in a transparent way. After the crisis, this same press room can be used to communicate with stakeholders and to inform of their news.

Our final recommendation would be to start a corporate social responsibility program with local authorities. The program could be focused on raising awareness on correct food handling and cooking, as well as on focusing on healthy eating habits in schools. This would show that our company also wants to give back to society and that it cares for all its stakeholders.

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