

A Review of Corporate Social Responsibility: SingTel Touches Lives

Patrick Sim MM*

Capital Advisors Partners Asia Pte Ltd, Singapore

Abstract

The essay addresses the corporate social responsibility programme of SingTel (Singapore Telecommunications), a "Touching Lives Fund" initiative, which will serve as the chosen CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) programme to describe, explain, justify and assess ethical decision making and behavior within the programme. It will also highlight the author's interests, body of knowledge and reflective ability to discuss these ethical issues. SingTel is the largest telecommunications network in Singapore and in Southeast Asia. It has a combined mobile subscriber base of 185.3 million customers from its own operations and regional associates. SingTel has expanded aggressively outside and holds shares in many operators, such as Australian Optus and Cable and Wireless. Literally, almost everyone in Singapore would have a service account with SingTel some time or another.

The SingTel "Touching Lives Fund" programme is a fund-raising instrument under SingTel. It was initiated in 2002 for the purpose of raising donations for 30,000 less privileged children and youths aged 2 to 25 by funding programmes such as training and special education, school social work and counseling of youth from families facing problems and other socially-related issues. Till now, the programme has received S\$12.8 million from all kinds of donors and given to charities. These donations are driven from various activities held in tandem to its objectives of raising millions-for each year. According to SingTel, the activities entail the following: SingTel matching dollar for dollar on Flag Day involving all of SingTel employees and their family members; Charity golf events and walks supported by business associates; Customers that use SingTel's allocated services raise funds; SingTel giving a dollar for every kilogram of old phone directories that were recycled.

Keywords: Social responsibility; SingTel; Stake holding

Introduction

Moral principles

In explaining and justifying ethical decision making and behaviour, a code of moral principles should be adopted to guide each corporate social responsibility programme [1-3]. According to Kitchener, he has identified five moral principles of autonomy, justice, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and fidelity. If such principles were taken into account, the "Touching Lives Fund" programme would not have supplied the necessary moral beliefs and conduct appropriate for a CSR programme. In one event, the gala event of Lee Hom Wang to raise funds is commendable, but reeks of commercialisation and is exacerbated when black market tickets appear in exorbitant prices. Even a SingTel advertisement was seen quoted on an audacious tagline: "Purchase any of the advertised Sony Ericsson mobile phones and you get to buy a pair of tickets to watch Leehom perform LIVE at \$256 [4]. Should a premium price/rate be put on the young and impressionable, purging hundreds of dollars of their pocket money? Whereof the code of beneficence is concerned, where is the corporate welfare and responsibility that goes with the children or their guardians? Are children encouraged to waste more money chatting on mobile phones and taking meaningless pictures? Furthermore, although commercialization should be permitted, it must be done in a tasteful way to ensure that many are not at a disadvantaged to attend the concert, or at a disadvantaged from donating to the cause. There is hardly justice to an individual that is different from the mass. Aren't there any other ways of attending the event other than purchasing the phones? It is known that with these purchased phones as an attached condition, SingTel would automatically derive more revenue and profits out of other related accessories and services even way after the event.

Other events include the Golf Charity and championships mentioned earlier. The company with the highest bid has the privilege to

play golf with the incumbent Prime Minister [5]. Although admirable, such activities do not resonate with the ground level people, whereby the notions of loyalty, faithfulness, and honoring commitment to the locals just do not ring. It is in ethics to ensure that the master takes care not to threaten a therapeutic relationship with the mass. Such an activity does not reflect well on respect and human dignity. If taken on another similar perspective, then according to the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy [6], the lack of values of respect and human dignity would apply in an example in which only the rich are accorded access to the best and not adequate treatment just like the others. What sense of meaning is the Prime Minister fostering playing golf with some other rich person that he might or might not know? Is that to say that at least during the golf-playing time, the donor is a faux amis of the Prime Minister? Then what is the significance? It is likely distasteful when someone has to promote non-charitable elements under the guise of charity.

The other major "Touching Lives" projects include combining arts and sports in Singapore. For example, SingTel Optimist open Championships are regularly held to promote sailing among local youths, which some of the author's friends are involved. This fund raised is used to contribute to the Music Scholarship Fund for arts and sports purposes. However, this leads to transparency issues. Because SingTel lacks expertise in organizing and implementing the appropriate programs that will benefit Singapore, it generally channels funds through the National Council of Social Service (NCSS). Thus,

*Corresponding author: Patrick Sim MM, Capital Advisors Partners Asia Pte Ltd, Singapore, Tel: 65-6632-0480; E-mail: edulearner.sg@gmail.com

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there is separation of roles and responsibilities where conflicts between the fundraiser and recipient may arise, even though realistically, both entities belong under the government umbrella. There might be little freedom for NCSS to independently make decisions without the external intervention. Kelley [7] holds that “organisational factors” are likely to be paramount in the behavioral part of the process (moral intention and moral behavior). The moral perception is that there may always be ethical problems with organisations working together. The autonomy required for independence and oversight may well had been in place, but it is not open to reasons that would lead to other moral scrutiny.

Furthermore, such procedures are clouded by attached conditions made by the government. The conditions according to Contreras [8] involve the Singapore government imposing a condition where fundraising expenses must not exceed 30% of total funds raised, which applies to charities as well. In contrast, charities must also spend 80% of their raised funds on their charitable objectives. Such considerations are perplexing since each assessment on the expenditure is made with conflicting perspectives. Expenditure is expenditure, and should be treated equally in proportion, regardless of political purposes. This moral intent enacted by the government may have satisfied teleological considerations, including satisfying those of the shareholders (donors/clients) from time to time etc. But it does not translate to the behaviour as desired by the stakeholding members or the public, nor does it illicit truth from the facts. What should be of concern is the social safety and identity of the unfortunate people rather than perplexing figures to restrict alternatives. Additionally, when scholarships are transferred not to the recruitment of local talents, the moral obligation towards the locals tend not to be in harmony with foreign takers constituting too much to the final nail on an already disintegrated society with no common goals, vernacular and whatnots. Although it is not openly expressed, the silent guilt on the authorities’ faces is imminent where money matters and social identities are concerned.

Judgment Time

The standards of SingTel’s CSR programmes can be evaluated or measured against the Triple bottom Line (TBL) as first coined by Contreras [9]. The triple bottom line of “People, Planet, Profit” captures a range of values and criteria for measuring organisational, economic, environmental and social success.

According to Elkington, people pertain to fair and beneficial business practices towards labour and the community and region in which a corporation conducts its business. SingTel had all along used advertising to promote its particular characteristics or brand values. As a telecommunications company, it sets out to reach domestic households and the business sectors. However, it has not been perceived as a true and caring provider of CSR programmes apart from donating during a calamity and within its domestic boundaries. Calamity Social Responsibility is more appropriate since what better time to advertise during a calamity. That said, the main thrust of SingTel’s CSR funding directs to the action and speed taken by the public and their perception in a small nation like Singapore, and thus would make more sense to consolidate such fundraising activities that are reasonably and easily more accountable. This would likely conceive a kind of structure that would interlink the shareholders, workers and public interests, which brings about an impact of trusted relations with one another with the community. One nagging issue persists with SingTel’s fundraising activities and its CSR as mentioned, is the awareness impact of its programmes on Singaporeans. Not many of them know the attributes of the programmes or have even heard of “Touching Lives Fund”. If

any, would the contributions from the public be of any significance, since SingTel earns enough from the public and should not be raising funds to cover costs of activities? Would not that be morally unjust to claim credit not deservedly owned by SingTel’s? Where is SingTel’s leadership by moral example then?

Planet refers to sustainable environmental practices. A company that endeavors with the TBL concept must benefit the nature and do no harm to the environment. This moral obligation is expected of in Singapore’s context. The superstar events that generate people excitement did not deliver common sense environmental practices, such as the moral expectation to not litter. Such phones that are sold with such events should be highly scrutinized to ensure no leakage or explosion problems. This issue has had little attention. Although not a producer of telecommunication products, SingTel through its activities, will induce more buyers to purchase its services, and in the process should not underestimate its moral impacts to the society, even if it holds no legal obligations. Sources of opinionated citizenship journalism, copyright infringements and moral delinquency cases originate from SingTel’s host of services could deflate the social fabric. More CSR work should also be done at SingTel’s overseas establishments in other countries, such as Indonesia’s PK-Telecom/Indosat, which have yet to report anything substantial.

Profit, the cash capital of all institutions and organisations are naturally conscious of balancing their accounting and CSR responsibilities. A profit needs to be seen as the economic benefit enjoyed by Singaporeans and not just the organisation itself. Where possible, if intended recipients were to received certain gifts, then appropriate products or services should be meted out [8]. Points out that during the SARS outbreak that hit Singapore in 2003, SingTel provided \$20,000 worth of mobile phones and mobile phone services to the Communicable Disease Center (CDC) for use by SARS patients. In a moral view, this gesture would not have aligned with the profit concept and would tantamount to absolutism; a disregard of others views and a waste of resource. It would imply that CDC had no proper ways of communicating with the victims’ stakeholders and incur that if one is quarantined at CDC, one would be given a mobile phone with free mobile services. In many cases, the high revenue generated from many of the fundraising activities have benefited the forsaken recipients and their trustees, but the year-end performance bonuses awarded to SingTel’s executive for managing such wonderful activities tend to be just as high. It is a cause for moral dilemma with a lasting impact on the organization and its economic environment. This is often confused to be appropriate where foreign talents are employed to justify a particular situation at the detriment to local ones, and such reasons and behavior must be discouraged.

Conclusion

While it is important for SingTel to hold many events to commemorate the unfortunate victims and display the range of CSR programmes, a moral question that must be relayed is whether such programmes and their resources were necessary in light of the occasion and needs. Or if these programmes actually did solve more imminent problems at stake and address higher moral issues, rather than generate obscure moral behaviour.

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