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Corporate Social Responsibility begins with consumers

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a top priority for many companies, but it is still unclear what it does for brands and how they should approach the issue. InSites Consulting performed a worldwide survey and is now sharing the results.

When it comes to CSR, consumers put themselves in first place. They look for their own advantage, for themselves and for their immediate environment. In fact, few consumers associate CSR spontaneously with companies or sectors. They consider education and healthcare as the most socially responsible sectors. CSR only becomes added value for consumers when it is relevant and integrated to the company's product and brand policies. In these times of economic recession, it is interesting to note that consumers strongly value profitable companies. These are some of the conclusions from the 'Corporate Social Responsibility' survey performed by InSites Consulting via online group discussions all around the world.

In March 2009, InSites Consulting organized the 'Longest Day – Responsible brands around the world' event in Living Tomorrow, Brussels. For 24 hours, the qualitative survey team from InSites conducted 12 online group discussions worldwide. These 12 groups represented the world's 12 time zones. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was the central topic of this longest group discussion ever. More than 80 consumers in 63 countries took part in this project. All consumers were recruited via TalkToChange.com, InSites Consulting's international survey panel.

Consumers want a personal advantage

Consumers define CSR according to the same values as the corporate world. 'Respect', 'Care' and 'Sustainability' are cited for both. When it comes to the question of who must benefit from CSR programs, consumers mention themselves in first place, followed by "society". In third place comes the "environment", followed by "the employees". Finally, they place government and shareholders at the bottom of the stakeholder list.

Consumers have a tendency to consider that CSR actions from companies are not very credible. Most of them (independently from the time zone in which they live) have the feeling that CSR is a question of marketing and sales. This negative opinion is reinforced by the CSR activities that are perceived as irrelevant and far from their concerns. Beyond this lack of credibility and relevance, few consumers are aware of the companies' CSR activities, which means that their impact remains limited.

Education and healthcare most often associated with CSR

There are very few sectors that are spontaneously associated with CSR by consumers. Education and healthcare emerge with a positive perception. Sectors that are least frequently associated with CSR are the media, advertising, government and bank sectors. This InSites Consulting survey focused more specifically on three sectors: food, telecom and banks.

"When you encourage people to reflect on specific sectors, then interesting nuances and opportunities come forward," says Frank Geers, Research Director from InSites Consulting. "Consumers perceive, for instance, a logical connection between food and CSR. Food makes them think about health, environment-friendly packaging, transport and world-improving innovations. Banks can also score well in this context. Despite the negative climate around banks, consumers suggested a series of interesting CSR opportunities for this sector. Through their direct link with money, they can take a strong stand as investors in the future. In this study, Telecom proved to be the least inspirational sector of the three sectors; people were unable to suggest concrete CSR examples. They perceive few explicit signals of responsibility from this sector."

'Care' and 'Respect' as universal CSR themes

Globally, CSR revolves around a few very universal themes like “Care” and en “Respect”. In all time zones, consumers consider environmental care, childcare and educational projects as very important. On a more local scale, the focus varies according to the theme. The country’s wealth, its development level, the current job scene and the future perspectives of the region are determining factors. When essential needs are met (for example housing, education...), people are more likely to focus on more ecological and less basic topics.

Consumers appreciate profitable companies

In all countries, participants agree that a company must be profitable to be able to play a relevant role in CSR. Profit is the essential condition to work on innovation and to invest in the future. “While values as environmental care and recycling were important before to make CSR program succeed, the current economic downturn have put more social values like sustainability, respect and care higher on the consumers’ wish list.” says Frank Geers, Research Director InSites Consulting.

4 tips to add value to CSR

The relevance and value of a CSR project is increased when companies follow the four tips below.

1. Everything starts with **consumers**. Consumers must play an active role in the CSR script, because they see themselves as the main stakeholders. Listen to them, find out about their personal hobbies, concerns and needs. Look for these dimensions in which companies and consumers can meet. But remain true to the corporate values.
2. Use and maximize own **sector** knowledge and expertise.
3. Take **cultural** differences into account and talk the talk of the target group.
4. Make sure that the CSR mission is also recognizable through the **brand**. Anchor the CSR objective in the company’s product and brand policy.

In September 2009, the methodological aspect of this survey will be presented at the ESOMAR Congress in Montreux. Niels Schillewaert, Managing Partner InSites Consulting will present the paper “The Longest day – Cultural differences in CSR”.



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InSites Consulting

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