



Neil Walker meets Bart Brüggewirth of b-open



A 'sexy' socially responsible reputation accounts for 10% of BT's customers' satisfaction.

An interview with Bart Brüggewirth, by Neil Walker - Walk Your talk B.V*

How did you first get involved with Corporate Social Responsibility?

About five years ago I began to realize that my advisory work had taken on a new dimension. For years I had been working with a variety of companies helping them to increase their share of the shampoo market, improve their chances of competing with other cheeses or sharpen up the image of their insurance product. I was increasingly able to make contributions other than merely improving the bottom line. The more a social or environmental aspect formed part of a project the more energy I seemed to have available for it. So I decided to combine my experience of marketing with my passion for Social Responsibility, for sustainable business. I set up b-open.



But are marketing and sustainability really good 'bed-fellows'?

Absolutely. Sustainability isn't a marketing technique or trick but a business concept and one you should not apply in your marketing activities in an opportunistic manner.

If you have been able to anchor it deeply in the fabric and procedures of your company, and if you can prove the truth of what you claim, Corporate Social Responsibility can make a valuable contribution to achieving your company's marketing objectives.



CSR even strengthens individual brands. Fombrun and van Riel, in their book *Fame and Fortune*, point out that improving your corporate reputation, particularly in a 'saturated' market, can be better achieved by investing in Social Responsibility than in product development. Social Responsibility is, itself, a source of inspiration for new products and concepts. By identifying the specific needs of the of the various parties in the marketing chain, by analysing the wishes of the different stakeholders and by total operating transparency, the marketing director can increase the scope of his operations and generate new ideas. In the 21st century Corporate Social Responsibility has become one of the essential ingredients of the SWOT analysis.

Can you give us some examples?

Yes. Take for instance British Telecom. They estimate that the company's Social Responsibility programme accounts for about a quarter of the value of their Corporate reputation and is responsible for some 10% of their customers' satisfaction. An improvement in the public's perception of BT of 1% leads to a corresponding increase in the client's satisfaction index of 0.1%. And these are their own, real, figures.



The Dutch Rabobank also uses its Social Responsibility activities as part of its branding operations - implicitly in their TV spots. It's not that they position themselves in the market as an institution that's busy with CSR, but evidence of it helps to strengthen their overall corporate reputation. Furthermore there are innumerable examples of products that claim to harm less or even improve the environment, sometimes combined with financial savings. For example the Netherlands has an automobile insurance company that uses second hand parts. Thus results in a reduction in premiums of between 5% and 10%. And in 2004 the Visa Greencard was introduced (see elsewhere in this GVN - editor) whereby with each purchase a calculation is made as to how the CO2 emission resulting from this purchase can be compensated. The user pays nothing extra and the costs of the card are comparable with other credit cards.

But can you actively use CSR in your marketing programme?

Yes. BP has, for example, recently introduced its BP Ultimate fuel with the claim "more power, less pollution". Communicating one's Corporate Social Responsibility activities is, however, more than just a corporate event. It can be an essential element in 'loading' individual brands with value too. The Rabobank TV campaign illustrates how.



Companies and brands have to win (back) the confidence of the public and communicating CSR activities provides opportunities to do this. As IKEA does in its most important communications medium, its catalogue, where it describes its Social and Environmental Responsibility activities.

And what about the effects of CSR on recruitment?

They can be amazing. Take TNT : its partnership with the World Food Program resulted in just one year in it climbing onto the Fortune top 10 list of best employers in Europe!

In a period of recession it is perhaps less important for job applicants, but now our economic prospects seem to be improving, CSR will play an increasingly important role in determining choice. I recently read a report of a very interesting research study carried out among 1300 of the world's most highly qualified manager applicants. It is clear from this that the new generation of managers are much more concerned about social issues such as poverty and climate change than about economic problems.



If you had to chose one over the other, which would come first People, Planet or Profit?

A difficult choice but Profit has to come first since only it can guarantee continuity - as long as you abide by the laws.

What else would you like to say to our 'readers'?

Please don't be too modest. You'll be missing valuable opportunities if you hide your social responsibility programme 'under a bushel'. Many consumers are wide open for such stories, but you do need to position your brand clearly by communicating the right balance of CSR characteristics and relevant product benefits.



* Bart Brüggewirth of b-open



Bart Brüggewirth has 18 years of extensive experience in marketing, branding and communications. He has a degree in marketing and has worked as a senior consultant for SCAN Management Consultants and Grey Advertising in Amsterdam. In September 2003 he founded b-open, a consultancy specializing in corporate sustainability and branding. It helps companies that have integrated corporate sustainability into their business practice, to improve their market position and to create stronger brands. It is Bart's conviction that corporate sustainability not only means doing well for society, but is also an essential ingredient in creating a better company. Corporate sustainability is about responsibilities and business opportunities.

b-open advises clients how to integrate and implement sustainability in their business strategy, marketing and branding. Working areas are positioning, branding, product development, community involvement, corporate and marketing communications (both strategy development and implementation). In its short history b-open has, among others, worked for Baxter Nederland, Fortis, Interpolis, The Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Rabobank and the Dutch ecolabel.

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