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Work funded by the NCN grant based on the decision number DEC-2011/03/B/HS4/03576

**WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT – THE IMAGE OR CSR ACTIVITIES? THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF THE COMPANY'S CSR
ACTIVITIES AND THE COMPANY EVALUATION**

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Image, consumer awareness of CSR,

Abstract

Many studies indicate that corporate social responsibility (CRS) in retail sector influences consumers' attitudes and behavior. Based on a field experiment we argue that consumers awareness of CRS activities depends not only on a level of retailers' CRS activities but also on a prior level of retailers evaluation. Participants who had a good opinion of the retailer also had a better awareness of retailer CRS activities, regardless of objective level of these activities.

Introduction

Numerous research results confirm the fact that CSR has a positive impact on the perception of the retailer. The authors believe that initial perception of the shops may determine the level of awareness of the retailer's social responsibility. With the use of an experiment, the authors decided to verify a thesis that buyers' awareness related to CSR depends not only on the retailer's CSR activity but also on the pre-formed opinion about the retailer. The customers who have a good opinion of the retailer are more aware of their CSR - based strategy, regardless of the retailer's undertakings in the field.

The essence of Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), also called corporate citizenship, means voluntary taking responsibility towards the employees, the society and the natural environment in the economic, legal, social, ethical and philanthropic fields (Carroll 1991, Dahlsrud 2006). The particular areas of enterprises' social responsibility constitute a pyramid

at the basis of which lies economic responsibility, then – legal, ethical, and at the very top – philanthropic responsibility. This definition does not include an area which these days is incorporated in the CSR definition - the natural environment. There is even a separate term CER - Corporate Environmental Responsibility, listed by World Business Council for Sustainable Development, WBSCD. CSR is also understood as minimising or eliminating negative effects of the company's activities on the society, as well as maximising long-term benefits from the activity (Mohr, Webb, Harris 2001). Porter and Kramer have a yet another view on CSR. To them CSR is about the company's commitment to creating a shared value, or social value as they call it. W. Visser introduced terms CSR 1, 2, 3 and 4 to emphasise the evolution of the idea (Visser 2010). Also the European Commission had a say in defining CSR. In 2001 it adopted a self-developed definition of CSR according to which CSR is a concept integrating social and environmental concerns in companies' business operations and their interaction with stakeholders on a voluntary basis (Commission of the European Communities Papers, 2001, (366)). A decade later it was replaced with a new definition in which it was highlighted that CSR refers to companies' business activities that have an effect on the society and the natural environment and go beyond the legal requirements. In the EC's opinion, enterprises should have tools to integrate social, environmental, and ethical concerns, as well as those related to human rights and consumer problems, with their own strategy in order to maximise shared values for its owners/shareholders, other stakeholders and the society as a whole, and also to recognize, prevent and ease their possible negative results. (Commission of the European Communities Papers, 2001, (366)).

CSR in retailing

The idea of CSR is increasingly interesting in the field of retailing (Jones, D. Comfort, Hillier, 2005; 2007), and especially in the retailer – customers relationship (Beckmann 2007).

In the past retailers built their image based on determinants identified by J. Lindquist (1974-1975). CSR was not among them. Meanwhile, presently retailers take advantage of CSR in particular to create or enhance the image and ensure customer loyalty (Yusof, Musa, Rahman 2011). For this purpose retailers offer ethical products e.g. Fair Trade (Bezencon, Billi 2001), educate consumers about consumption (Jones, Comfort, Hillier 2006,) involve customers in social campaigns (Nan, Heo 2007), protect the natural environment (Tesco CSR Report, 2011), support programmes of significance to local communities, etc. These are only some of the activities retailers undertake to provide additional social values for consumers.

Buyers unanimously stress that they expect enterprises to be socially responsible and inform their stakeholders thereof (Pomering, Dolnicar 2009). They want to know how enterprises perform their “civic duty”. This is expected for numerous reasons, e.g. due to crises affecting food industry as a result of epidemics among farm animals (Anselmsson, Johansson 2007). As an example, 86% of Americans indicated that they would wish to know in what way enterprises are socially responsible, and so would people in the UK. Moreover, 74% of the British stated that information about social and ethical behaviour of enterprises would influence their buying decisions (Pomering, Dolnicar 2009; Boulstridge, Carrigan 2000). On the other hand, one needs to bear in mind that the classic determinants of choice, i.e. marketing instruments used by retailers, are still the basis for customers' buying decisions. The more so because consumers make purchases for personal reasons and not out of social motives (Beckmann et al, 2001).

As much as there is much conformity with regard to declared attitudes towards corporate social responsibility, there are visible differences in buying preferences, resulting from many internal and external factors. Research on buyers' behaviours indicates that when the price and quality of products representing different brands are perceived equal, buyers have a more favourable attitude to the products of the socially responsible enterprises. Mohr

et al (Mohr, Webb, Harris 2001) notice, however, that belief in the CSR virtues often does not go hand in hand with buyer behaviours. Devinney et al (2006) think likewise. Brown and Dacin (1997) offered an innovative perspective recognising that in the buyers' eyes, the enterprise's value or image is comprised of the corporate ability (CA) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Corporate ability or competences in their opinion are made up of an ability to deliver goods and services, whereas CSR is related to the retailers' social activity. By contrast, research conducted by Gupta and Pirsch (2008) revealed that CSR is a significant determinant of the shop's image and makes its contribution to developing satisfaction and building loyalty towards the shop. In their opinion, retailers should treat CSR in a holistic way, that is not only be socially responsible but also promote this fact among buyers in order to create a desired image. (...) When activities in the field of marketing tools are evaluated positively, CSR will enhance the image, whereas if marketing tools are evaluated negatively, social responsibility will not bring the desired outcomes (Gupta, Pirsch 2008).

In the so far presented publications CSR activities and their impact on attitudes and behaviours of different subject groups were presented as aggregates. This is related to cases considering the role of CSR in shaping the image of a trade item (e.g. Chiu, Hsu 2010), shaping attitudes and behaviours towards the company (e.g. Murray, Vogel 1997), the impact of CSR on buying behaviours (e.g. Mohr, Webb, Harris 2001) or on buying intentions (e.g. Sen, Bhattacharya 2001). It does not fully reflect the complexity of problems associated with CSR activities, as due to the earlier mentioned diversity of CSR activities they require consideration in a narrower scope. Therefore, in this article two categories of CSR activities are distinguished. The first can be called general CSR (G-CSR) and relates to the basic CSR strategies and activities such as philanthropy, volunteering, natural environment protection or employee-addressed programmes. They are universal and as a matter of fact independent of the sector the subjects operate in. The other category is comprised of CSR activities linked to

the goods offered by the trade item (merchandise CSR or M-CSR). They embrace activities to do with the assortment, like offering ecological products, products whose manufacturing did not involve child labour or violating workers' rights, Fair Trade products or those not tested on animals. The second area of CSR activities is specific of trade activity and does not exist in other industries. For this reason especially it is worth greater attention.

Conceptual Framework

The starting point for the analysis in this article is the interdependence between the level of buyers' familiarity with and awareness about CSR activity of a retail outlet and the attitude towards this retail outlet (Scheme 1).

Insert scheme 1

In the traditional perspective a positive relationship is assumed between these two determinants - it is assumed that the higher the level of familiarity with or awareness about CSR activity of the retail outlet, the higher evaluation of the retail outlet by the buyer (Lee, Shin 2010; Pomeroy, Dolnicar 2009; Sen, Bhattacharya 2001). In this article we attempt to examine the relationship with the opposite causal direction, i.e. between the evaluation of the retail outlet and the level of buyers' awareness about the shop's CSR activity. Studying such a relationship requires confidence in the direction of the examined interdependence. The stream of thought adopted in this article can be illustrated with the following example. Let's take into consideration two retail outlets and mark them as *T* and *P*. They both differ in buyers' evaluation (the image, level of trust, general rating, etc.) and the level of intensity of implemented CSR activities. Having such elements at one's disposal, one can present three situation variants, illustrated in Table 1. The level of CSR should be understood as the scope and intensity of initiatives included in the CSR programme addressed to buyers, employees, suppliers or the natural environment. The evaluation of a retail outlet is in turn its image – it can be ranked as better or worse in relation to the compared shop. For the purpose of the

image evaluation the following measures were adopted: 'better', 'worse' or 'the same', with awareness of their imprecision; yet, the measures do indicate relationships between the objects. The perceived level results from the awareness about the outlet's CSR activities.

Insert table 1

In the first variant, like in the others, the shop *T* has an advantage in the scope of implementing CSR activities and is better evaluated than the *P* shop. In this case, the higher level of awareness about CSR activities in the *T* shop's buyers rather than the *P* shop's is not surprising. However, in this constellation one cannot indicate the cause of the higher level of awareness about CSR. It may be a higher level of CSR activities or a higher evaluation of the retail outlet, or both simultaneously.

In the second variant, the *T* outlet still has an advantage as far as applying CSR activities is concerned. On the other hand, image-wise it is weaker than the *P* outlet. This may stem from the fact of using a reactive and not proactive strategy, that is reacting to earlier crisis situations affecting the image and activating tools to rebuild the image in the disturbed area. Research to date indicates that when CSR activities are introduced as a result of the appearance of major image problems of the organisation, the stakeholders are more careful when evaluating the credibility of the organisation's intentions (Vanhamme, Grobben 2009). In the second variant, the level of awareness about CSR activities is higher for the *T* outlet than for the *P* outlet. In this case there is consistency between the level of the outlet's CSR activity and the level of the buyers' awareness about it. The fact that the *P* outlet is at the same time evaluated higher indicates that the evaluation does not affect the level of awareness about the CSR activities.

In the third variant, the *T* outlet again has an advantage in applying CSR activities over the *P* outlet. It also has a weaker image than the *P* outlet. In this case, if the level of awareness about CSR activities of the *T* outlet is lower than that of the *P* outlet, one can

notice inconsistency between the level of CSR activities and the level of buyers' awareness about them. This means that the level of familiarity with the CSR activities is influenced by the retail outlet's evaluation but not by the objective intensity of the undertaken activities.

The last two variants will be the core of the article's interest.

In the above-presented variants there appears a general term 'evaluation of the retail outlet'. In practice such evaluation may take different forms and be measured in various ways. In the article two variables linked to evaluation have been adopted. The first variable, called “the shop format” is concerned with the position the given outlet takes on a price-quality continuum of retail outlets. Using a simple gradation, one can distinguish, from the lowest level: discount shops, hypermarkets and supermarkets, quality supermarkets, specialist shops. Using retail outlets from different categories ensures diverse perception of these units in the image category; however, as far as CSR is concerned, they can be perceived in the same way.

The following hypotheses have been put forward in the article:

H1a: The persons evaluating the shop relatively higher are characterised by a higher level of general awareness about the CSR activities of this shop.

H1b: A higher quality shop format does not affect the level of awareness about general CSR.

The shop format is largely determined by the shop's assortment. Therefore, the format's influence should be reflected in the merchandise CRS, but does not need to reveal itself in the general CRS. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H2a: A higher quality shop format has a positive effect on the level of awareness about merchandise CSR,

and

H2b: A relative level of the shop's evaluation does not have an impact on the level of awareness about merchandise CSR.

The research on buyers' attitudes and buying preferences in the context of CSR often uses the method of an experiment, which results from the fact that there is no certainty in reference to buyers' level of awareness, awareness or interest in enterprises strongly involved in CSR (Auger et al. 2003). Therefore, one needs to lay the groundwork and equip buyers in awareness which will influence their attitudes and, consequently, their preferences and buying behaviours.

Research

Research group characteristics

The research embraced 230 people. It was conducted in one of the districts of an average-size Polish city. The district was chosen due to the existence of (only) two big retail outlets in proximity. The limitation was advisable as in the questionnaires the questions were related to CSR activities undertaken by specific trading companies. This means there were only two types of questionnaires differing only in the name of the sales network whose CSR activities the questions were about (see the appendix).

The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 76 (the age median equalled $M_{age}=35$). The two studied populations did not differ significantly in terms of age $t(228)=1.515$ $p>0.1$ n.s. The majority (70%) of the respondents were women. There was no difference in the number of women in both studied populations (Chi-square test $p>0.1$). Most respondents ranked their material standing as good 39% or average 46%. The definite majority were in employment – 75%. More than half were persons with a university degree (54%), the share of respondents with secondary education was 37%.

Respondents' level of awareness about CSR. Dependent variables

The level of respondents' awareness about CSR was determined on the basis of a set of 22 statements concerned with social responsibility, preservation of the environment, assortment policy connected with the ethical offer, and activities undertaken for the benefit of

customers and employees (appendix 1). They were prepared based on questions included in questionnaires in similar research projects (Maignan 2001; Sen, Bhattacharya 2001, Herpen, Pennings, Meulenberg 2003). The set of statements used in the research can be found in the appendix. The respondents gave answers on a nominal scale (Yes, No, I don't know). All the statements were divided into two groups. The first embraced those which related to various spheres of CSR in trade (general CSR or G-CSR). The other – the CSR activities related to the offered goods (e.g. Shop X recommends products from local producers), further referred to as merchandise CSR (M-CSR).

Independent variables

Store format

Two shop formats were chosen for the study. One was a traditional supermarket (symbolically marked as **T**), the other – a quality supermarket (symbolically marked as **P**). The quality supermarket was perceived better than the traditional one. The overall evaluation of the quality supermarket on a scale from 1 to 10 was higher $M_P=7.2$ $SD= 1.69$ than of the traditional supermarket $M_T= 6.21$, $SD=2.12$; $t(228)=3.918$, $p<0.001$. The image of the quality supermarket, measured with four items 7-point image scale taken from Herpen, Pennings, Meulenberg (2003), accounted to $M_P= 5.37$, $SD = 0.88$, and the traditional supermarket: $M_T= 4.92$, $SD=1.07$; $t(228)=3.477$, $p<0.01$. This confirms the quality supermarket's advantage in the evaluation over the traditional one. It meets the demands of manipulation required in the research.

Relative evaluation of the store

The relative evaluation of the store was determined on the basis of one question about the general evaluation of the shop. The respondents gave answers on a scale from 1 to 10. The respondents of each shop were divided into two groups, with the median of evaluation being the criterion for the division. It must be mentioned that the division into groups was made

separately for each of the retail outlets in question. As a result, two groups of respondents were created for each shop format. In one group there were persons with relatively more favourable attitude towards the shops $M_{high}=8.35$, $SD=1.48$, and in the other those with a less positive opinion about the shops $M_{low}= 5.39$; $SD= 1.09$; $t(228)=-16.89$, $p<0.001$.

Level of intensity of CSR activities

The level of intensity of CSR activities was defined on the basis of secondary sources of information. The data indicates that the sales network the traditional supermarket was a part of, conducted twice as many CSR activities as the sales network to which the quality supermarket belonged. The CSR activities of the quality supermarket were focussed on four areas, the activities of the traditional supermarket – on seven areas.

Research results

Impact of shop format and shop evaluation on the awareness level of general CSR

The basic assumption the article was based on was concerned with a positive relationship between the shop format and the shop evaluation, and the familiarity with the CSR activities of the trading company. The first group of hypotheses consisted of those indicating that the level of awareness about the general SCR activities is influenced by the shop evaluation but not by the shop format. In order to verify the thesis a ANOVA was carried out for the level of familiarity, with the general CSR activities as the dependent variable and the shop format as well as the rate of shop evaluation as the independent variables. Research results showed that persons holding a better opinion of the shop are characterised by a higher level of awareness related to CSR activities CSR - $F(1, 229)=20.19$ $p>0.001$. Persons with a more negative opinion about the retail outlet knew on average of four CSR activities, whereas those with a more positive opinion stated they knew of five CSR activities CSR $M_{low}=5.01$; $SD=2.45$. It is worth remembering that persons with a relatively better opinion of the shop were selected separately for shop *T* and shop *P*. This signifies that

in the case of shop T, the objective number of activities coincided with the level of awareness of CSR activities. In the case of shop P, on the other hand, the actual number of CSR activities did not coincide with the level of awareness of these activities. Therefore, one cannot rule out that the level of familiarity is dependent on the actual activities and not on opinions about the retail outlet. If, however, the test results were to be affected only and exclusively by the objective number of activities, one would need to expect a statistically significant interaction between the shop format and the shop evaluation. Nevertheless, such a situation did not take place $F(1, 229)=1.96$ $p>0.1$. It shows that the shop evaluation had a greater impact on the level of awareness of CSR activities than the objective number of CSR activities undertaken by the companies.

Impact of shop format and shop evaluation on awareness of merchandise CSR activities

The second group of hypotheses was comprised of those related to merchandise CSR. It was assumed that the level of awareness related to CSR activities would be dependent on the shop format but would not depend on the level of shop evaluation. In order to verify these hypotheses a variance analysis was conducted for the level of awareness of merchandise CSR activities as the dependent variable and the shop format as well as shop evaluation as independent variables. The shop format appeared to have a vital impact on the level of respondents' level of familiarity with CSR activities $F(1,229)=7.8$ $p<0,01$. The respondents of the P retail outlet showed a higher level of awareness about CSR ($M_P=2.7$; $SD=1.81$) than those of the T retail outlet ($M_T=2.03$; $SD=1.76$). Let's remember that the objective level of CSR activities was higher in the T outlet than in the P outlet. Ambiguous results were obtained for the second independent variable marginally reaching the level of significance $F(1,229)=3.48$ $p<0.1$.

Conclusions

The fundamental conclusions from the conducted research may be formulated as follows. First, the perception of CSR activities is influenced not only by the intensity of activities undertaken by the retail outlets but also the buyers' opinion about the retail outlets. The opinion about the retail outlet has an effect on how general CSR activities are perceived. It does not, however, have an impact on the level of awareness about merchandise CSR activities. Second, the used format of the retail outlet does influence the perception of merchandise CSR activities. It does not, however, affect the perception of general CSR activities.

Managerial implications

The above presented research results may prove vital for shaping CSR strategy and marketing communication with buyers. The first suggestion refers to the intensity of CSR activities. One needs to bear in mind that nowadays many units undertake CRS activities. If it were only some retail outlets that applied CSR while others did not, socially-sensitive buyers would have a simple choice to make and shop in units involved in CSR activities. In a situation when a lot of companies simultaneously undertake CSR activities one can only talk of a relative advantage in CSR activities between companies. The difficulty with estimating such a relative advantage is significant, therefore buyers can take advantage of indirect measures such as the shop format or opinion about the shop. This entails a series of consequences. To start with, the company does not need to strive for a maximum level of CSR activities. If the company enjoys a positive image, it is enough if it maintains CSR activities at a visible yet moderate level. If the company has a weaker image, one cannot expect that an increase in the number of CSR activities will translate automatically into enhancing the image. It is better to improve the image with the use of other activities than CSR.

Another practical tip is related to ensuring cohesion between CSR activities and the marketing strategy. When the assortment is a vital element of the competitive advantage of the unit, placing an emphasis on merchandise CSR seems to be fully justified.

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Appendix 1.

Statements used in the questionnaire:

Charitable activity

Shop X supports financially (sponsors) local cultural or sports events

Shop X organises fund-raising events for the benefit of the local community

Assortment

Shop X exposes in a visible place products from the Third World (developing) countries (e.g. spices, sauces, clothes)

Shop X offers some Fair Trade products supporting producers of coffee, tea or bananas from the Third World countries

Shop X recommends products from the local producers (from the Wielkopolska region)

Shop X sells products which were not tested on animals

Ecology – the environment

Shop X takes in second-hand household appliances

Shop X offers customers ecological shopping bags for a fee or for free

Shop X limits its consumption of electricity by using ecological sources of energy

Shop X uses renewable energy sources (e.g. solar panels)

Shop X limits the number of night deliveries for the comfort of the neighbourhood inhabitants

Social responsibility

I know the report of shop X on the subject of their involvement in the idea of corporate social responsibility

Shop X has outlets adapted to the needs of the disabled

Shop X facilitates shopping for the disabled by offering home deliveries

Shop X sells products for sufferers of different diseases/conditions (e.g. diabetes, obesity) clearly informing about it

Customers

Shop X publishes information on the safety of buying own-brand products on the Internet

Shop X organises child care for customers for the time of shopping

Shop X informs customers, in the newsletter or on the website, of its activities for the benefit of customers and the natural environment

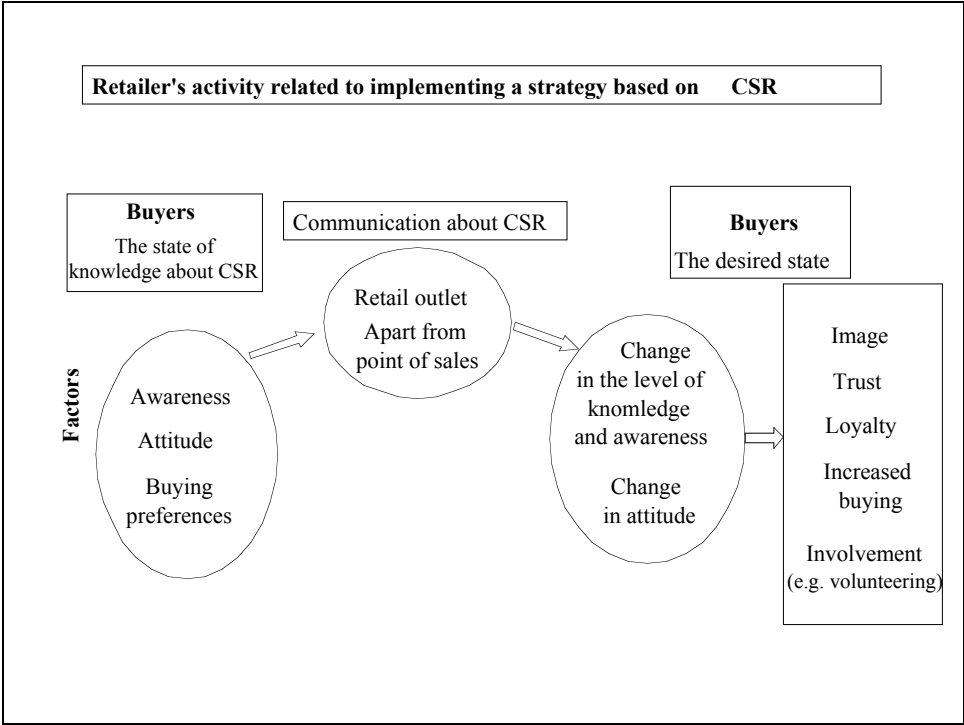
Employees

Shop X ensures safe work equipment for its employees (e.g. slicers, jacks)

Shop X offers products coming mainly from local (Polish) producers

Shop X sells products whose production did not involve child labour

Shop X provides credible information about its activity for the benefit of the community



SCHEME 1.

MODEL OF CSR CONCEPT'S IMPACT ON BUYERS

Source: Own work

Variant	Objective level of CSR activities	Evaluation of the retail outlet	Perceived level of awareness about CSR activities	Interpretation
1	$T_{activities} > P_{activities}$	$T_{evaluation} > P_{evaluation}$	$A_T > A_P$	Consistent with the traditional model
2	$T_{activities} > P_{activities}$	$T_{evaluation} < P_{evaluation}$	$A_T > A_P$	Consistent with the traditional model
3	$T_{activities} > P_{activities}$	$T_{evaluation} < P_{evaluation}$	$A_T < A_P$	Inconsistent with the traditional model

TABLE 1.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OBJECTIVE, PERCEIVED LEVEL OF ACTIVITIES AND THE RETAIL OUTLET'S EVALUATION

Source: Own work

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Projekt został sfinansowany ze środków Narodowego Centrum Nauki przyznanych na podstawie decyzji numer DEC-2011/03/B/HS4/03576

Work funded by the NCN grant based on the decision number DEC-2011/03/B/HS4/03576