

# CSR, SMEs and food retailing: The advantages of being a lesser god

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## **Key Words**

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## **Abstract**

*Large supermarket chains can offer lower prices through economies of scale but their size can be a disadvantage when CSR issues become important because smaller retailers may be more connected to their local community. In an era when disillusionment with globalisation is rife and many consumers are aware of the importance of ethics in trading, Tesco and even the Co-op may be at a disadvantage compared to retailers such as Waitrose and Booths. In the UK, areas of poverty and of high ethnicity exist where people may eat unhealthily; this situation may call for CSR initiatives to improve diet, and so alleviate future dietary-related health costs. As the barriers to a healthy diet are often local in character, smaller food retailers are in the best position to implement meaningful initiatives here. Larger grocery retailers need to adopt a more localised company structure, and to co-operate with smaller companies in the food chain to adopt best CSR practices.*

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## **Globalisation: a tarnished God?**

Food is a basic commodity; one that we need on a daily basis. However food is far more than that, it is deeply culturally significant, it speaks volumes both to us and about us, food is eloquent about its origin and geography, about our class, ethnicity, and culture. Food has been described as 'noisy' (Smith J et al, 2007:397). In an increasingly connected and environmentally-aware world, consumers are becoming more aware of the social-responsibility implications of their food, and the CSR values of companies within the food chain. CSR has become a major feature of the business world over the last decade, as companies strive to demonstrate their good corporate citizenship. Increasingly, retail giants such as Tesco, which have relied on the lower prices facilitated by the globalisation of supply chains and the massive buying power that comes with sheer size, are finding that these low prices alone cannot guarantee customer loyalty. If the consumer priority is low prices alone, she can always patronise one of the hard discounters. If the shopper is willing to pay more than the minimum price, the relational marketers may well infer from this that this consumer is probably looking for

other, intangible, quality attributes to the food they purchase, including environmentally sustainable production and socially responsible conduct by the retailer.

Globalisation has arguably assumed the mantle of a religion over the past two decades, with bankers as High Priests, imposing temples such as Canary Wharf, and a mysterious economic mantra of derivatives and futures that the common laity cannot understand. The God of Globalisation offers, not some future heavenly bliss but the present Earthly satisfaction of lower grocery bills now. Tesco has been one of the most successful 'churches' of globalisation, rising to a market share of 32% in the UK in 2007, operating in over a dozen countries with a combined population of some three billion, and posting profits for 2010/11 of nearly £4 billion. But when your God totters, so do you; the appeal of globalisation, with its vast corporations encircling the world in order to provide lower prices, has looked decidedly tarnished over the past few years. The 2011 anti-Tesco riots in a Bohemian part of Bristol are a sign that, at least for some, the 'God We Trust' on US Dollar Bills, Our Father who art in Wall Street, has begun to lose credibility. A central location of the Bristol rioters has been the so-called 'Telepathic Heights', supporting the assertion of G K Chesterton that "When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything".

Bristol is by no means the only place where Tesco has faced problems. In Hampshire, where Tesco had upgraded former One-Stop stores, the retail giant was accused of precipitating the closure of smaller independent stores in market towns such as Four Marks (Wrigley N et al, 2007). In Whitchurch, Hampshire, Tesco's larger delivery lorries as compared to the vehicles One Stop had used, were alleged to be blocking the road, creating traffic hazards, and even interfering with Methodist funeral corteges. Protests against Tesco in Hampshire focussed on small neighbourhood issues; the removal of an olde-worlde 'Hovis' sign in one village, the eviction of the post office in another. On the other side of the country, Tesco finally won a protracted battle to open a store in Sheringham, Norfolk, where many would have preferred a Waitrose; rather a Pyrrhic victory, given the negative publicity associated with the saga. Tesco's habit of grinding down any council opposition by repeatedly submitting planning applications, when Tesco's profits exceed the GDP of many small countries, never mind a rural council, has not improved its corporate image. Meanwhile, nationally, its market share has fallen to below 31% as it is squeezed on both sides, by the discounters and by the upmarket retailers.

In recent years a number of British towns, including Saxmundham and Sheringham, have been celebrated in the media as the smaller combatants in a sort of 'David versus Goliath' battle against the supermarkets (Shaw H, 2008). Saxmundham, a small Suffolk town, is another example where local communities have worked together to help the small retailer. Tesco finally opened its Saxmundham store in 2010, after a 13-year battle to keep it out. Although Tesco uses the clawback of trade principle to argue that a large supermarket can actually boost the footfall to local shops, the clawback factor seems to work only if the supermarket is close to the other small shops, bringing

people past their front doors; also the local economy needs to be prosperous, already supporting a diverse array of shops, and if those small retailers can diversify and complement, rather than compete, with the supermarket by offering specialist foods that Tesco doesn't sell. Three factors were evident in Saxmundham which appear to have contributed to the success of the town in preserving a small-shop economy. Firstly, the efforts of the main campaigner Lady Cranbrook, in galvanising residents and local SMEs to face Tesco together as a community. Secondly, the co-operation of all stakeholders, including non-grocery shops, wholesalers and local farmers. Thirdly, a supportive approach by Suffolk Coastal District Council. Saxmundham SMEs have continued to make a real effort to attract business and maintain a good rapport with the local community, especially with the spectre of Beccles down the road to spur them on; in Beccles, the local market 'died the same week Tesco opened'. Neighbourhood stores often source food locally, pride themselves on the freshness of their produce, and give local services to those unable to access them easily, such as the elderly and disabled. SMEs are better able, therefore, to be aware of local community issues and respond in a way which benefits their customers, the wider community as well as their profit margins (Shaw J J A et al, 2010).

### **SMEs and CSR in the community: the good and the bad**

Every organisation has a goal or set of ideas which originate within the organisation itself, much like other 'living organisms', "each [entity]... contains the reason for its existence within itself, all the parts react on one another" (Goethe, W, 1988:121). Each small business therefore has a distinctive social identity and SMEs active within the community are able to define themselves in terms of their beliefs, values, norms and peculiar characteristics. Not only are these values explicit in the workplace environment but also in terms of their CSR strategies, their vision and mission statements which will indicate a preference for a particular cause. Booths and Waitrose are two examples of supermarkets that emphasise their local connections and responsibility to the communities within which they operate, and both enjoy customer loyalty and sustained growth even in the current Credit Crunch. Waitrose has maintained its status as a worker-owned co-operative, and has an innovative way of involving the consumer as part of its CSR initiatives; every Waitrose shopper is given a token at the till which they can put in one of several clear plastic boxes at the store exit, each box being labelled with a different local charity. Regular customers can see which charity is being favoured by popular referendum, and a new set of charities appears each week. Booths is a regional supermarket in the north west of England, and makes much of its family-owned status; it supports 'Slow Food' as well as Comic Relief (Booths, 2011). Booths is careful where it locates new stores, and what facilities (e.g. cafes) it provides in these stores, so as not to undermine existing businesses in the market towns it operates in (Shaw H, 2003).

The Co-operative may be used as a counter-example to show how community relations may suffer if a store chain grows too large. When the Co-operative bought the Somerfield chain in 2008 it almost doubled its market share to over 8%, although it has

since fallen back somewhat. Nevertheless, the Co-op is still Britain's fifth largest supermarket chain, and in some suburbs and rural areas of Britain it has a virtual monopoly over supermarket retailing (fooddeserts.org, 2011). The phrase 'Co-op towns' has yet to become popularised, as 'Tesco-towns' has been, but this may not be far off when "the Co-op... has more outlets in Brighton and Hove than Sainsbury's and Tesco all together" (Trimingham A, 2009), and it is selling similar premium products to the upmarket independent bakers and butchers in its vicinity. Sometimes in its quest for scale the Co-op abandons an area entirely; in west Shrewsbury the Co-op relocated from the centre of Bicton Heath to larger premises on the Welshpool Road, leaving parts of the area over one kilometre from any food store for nearly a year, until a Nisa shop took over the old store. For a while, the former retail centre of Bicton Heath looked very run down, attracted vandalism, and the lack of footfall imperilled smaller shops in this centre. This neighbourhood abandonment, the flip side of opening new stores in a town and out competing the independents, has been an accusation levelled at the larger supermarkets, but more ethical stores such as the Co-op may be guilty here too.

### **SMEs overcoming obstacles to meeting community dietary and health requirements**

Diet and health are areas in which SMEs have an important role to play, especially as obesity and weight-related diseases are on the increase in the UK. For consumers having trouble accessing a healthy diet, the access problems and coping strategies are often very local in character; having effects over distances of no more than a kilometre or two. Difficulties experienced by consumers in the Yorkshire area (Shaw H, 2003) included main roads with numerous pedestrian crossings or steep hills, arduous for pensioners to carry food up or mothers with children to cross in safety when weighed down with shopping bags. These are areas where small local retailers may be better able to respond to local needs. In deprived suburbs such as Longley in Sheffield local community shops and cafes selling healthy food and snacks have opened with good results. In Longley, which has traditionally suffered disproportionately high unemployment, small grocery shops have been set up by local people; employment was generated out of the shop's profits, and the shop enabled people to access reasonably-priced fresh fruit and vegetables without necessitating an £1.20 bus fare each way; a considerable sum to somebody on only approximately £60 a week in State Benefits (fooddeserts.org, 2011). Farmers markets are also a popular way of reconnecting local consumers with local producers, and because of their relatively small turnover, farmers markets can risk selling lesser known fruit and wider vegetable varieties and thereby introduce a greater variety of healthy foods into the local diet, in contrast to the standardised choice in many superstores. For example, the most common supermarket strawberry is the tasteless and hard *Elsanta*, most plums are of the similarly unappetising *Angelino* variety (mass produced for their durability on long journeys), and the range of apple types in large supermarkets represents but a small sample of the range once grown in British orchards (Guardian, 2005). However farmers markets can prosper or decline on purely local factors; for example the farmers market in Barton

failed because it was 100 metres away from the main pedestrian flows of this small Lincolnshire town.

## **Responding to the needs and collective conscience of the diverse local environment**

Rural SMEs in more affluent areas can often specialise in an upmarket range of goods; for example, stocking unusual cheese, organic wines and other locally-made goods. This non-food merchandise then cross-subsidises the grocery side of the business. Small grocery shops have the advantage of flexibility of stock range and can offer unusual and exotic foods such as tri-coloured pasta or squid ink pasta. They may even stock a different foodstuff each week to maintain interest, following the WIGIG strategies of the discount supermarkets in non-food. In this way, the local shop attracts tourist trade and also draws custom from a large radius of neighbouring villages and towns; generating profits and enabling the shop to maintain a range of general groceries. Of course, not every village can have such a specialist shop and it depends on the general demographic composition as to whether such an enterprise is necessary or even desirable. A town in Memphis, Tennessee had a large number of film buffs and so the town opened a shop which stocked a wider range of films than the local *Blockbuster*, and staff were chosen on the basis of their love of movies as they were expected to spend several hours a day watching the films so they could help customers with their choices. This endeavour produced both happy employees, satisfied customers and a thriving business. A local independent building supplies shop, again in the USA, stocked not only power tools but carried the spare parts for them, unlike the major chains, as a response to the needs of the community. Specialisation also works well in less affluent areas, for example North Lincolnshire has many canals, rivers and dykes, and is a key centre for recreational fishing. Recognising the need for a supplies shop and the owner being a keen fisherman himself, the fishing tackle shop was opened in a deprived area in Scunthorpe which now draws in custom from a wide area of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. The shop also brings trade to other shops in the area, and a local pub, enabling them to stay open and offer grocery items and has invigorated what was a depressed community.

The customer has also become more aware of wider societal issues which have implications beyond their local community, for example the environment and less-developed-country issues often inform their shopping choices. An ICM poll commissioned to mark the launch of *AsdaWatch* found that 83% of shoppers wanted tougher rules on ethical trading for supermarkets, with 75% of those polled believing that supermarkets should pay their staff and suppliers in less-developed countries, a fair wage (Shaw H, 2009). The size of corporations has made them less sensitive to consumer democracy, whereas in the case of SMEs, transferring custom from one shop to another on ethical grounds could make a real difference to the small factory owner or shopkeeper's profits. This gives customers a real say in many aspects of the business, from its prices and range of stock to the service provided and even where it sources its goods and raw materials. In a world of small wholesalers, manufacturers, and primary

producers, customers might even exert influence further up the supply chain; for example, they may be concerned that the copper in a particular radio has been sourced from mining companies with a reputation for acting in a socially responsible way, minimising pollution and helping the economic development of the local community living near the copper mine. Being aware of the possible significance of sourcing to his market, a small retailer may make the effort to know the identity of the wholesaler, who in turn knows the manufacturer, who in turn can verify its primary sources. In a world of many small companies, an ethically-aware customer might choose to buy the radio from such a shop whose supply chain lead back to a sustainable copper mine, albeit at a probably higher price.

As well as responding to ethically enlightened customers, SMEs can do much to promote relevant local ethical issues and help educate their customers even in areas where there are a significant number of poorer, excluded and less articulate individuals; the 'subalterns', who anticipate failure in getting their views heard above those of central government and the powerful corporate lobby because they 'self-censor' themselves ensuring their opinions are never heard or acted upon (Atkinson R, 1999:62). Small shopkeepers have been central to facilitating community groups and related agencies towards alleviating this problem of 'organisational desertification', targeting and subsequently mobilising resources to improve the local environment (Wacquant L, 1996). Getting the wrong agencies involved in a local CSR endeavour can create problems, for example, misdirected aid can arouse resentment towards the donor and those involved in eliciting the help. CSR initiatives need to be directed purposefully and practically, not just applied with passion and with liberal amounts of funding but in an unfocussed manner.

What is necessary for effective CSR policies is accurately aiming these where they will be most effective. This entails, rather than making assumptions based on a set of random and unreliable indicators, the SME actively engaging with its customers as to what their priorities and actual concerns are, also how they might get involved with a local socially responsible project. When customer groups give an explicit indication as to what they would like to support, that company then has a much clearer idea as to how to maintain and develop its customer loyalty base. This is important because after the initial burst of enthusiasm and once the CSR measure is implemented, then questions are asked about the real impact on the local environment, social value creation, and socio-environmental progress. Pendleton remarked that, as a symptom of increased [but possibly undirected] investment in CSR, assets in socially responsible mutual funds grew 40% faster than other comparable assets between 1995 and 2003, yet questions were still being raised about the real and tangible benefits to local people (Pendleton A, 2004). Christian Aid, for example, has observed that increased financial backing for CSR initiatives has not always produced a corresponding improvement in the everyday quality of life for recipient communities. It is likely however that SMEs are able to more effectively direct their efforts at the appropriate targets than their larger

counterparts and ensure the better deployment of CSR funds and endeavours with good results, because of operating at the ground level.

### **SMEs, CSR, and catering for the diet of ethnic minorities**

One area which illustrates how SMEs are able to use their limited resources to implement successful CSR initiatives is in catering for the preferences of an ethnic diet in areas of mixed ethnicity. Since EU enlargement in 2004, for example, many communities have witnessed an altered and enhanced demographic representation of migrant groups. This has often demanded a rapid response to transformation in the local community as many ethnic minorities have their own set of food preferences which may not be adequately met due to, for example, economic and cultural factors. The consequences of the absence of culturally familiar or favoured foods can result in a poor diet, with attendant health issues and this has a detrimental knock-on effect within these communities. Instructively, small businesses in these areas have been particularly successful at responding quickly to the changing needs of their local neighbourhood environment whereas “the mainstream supermarkets have been too slow to cater for Asian and African customers and mainly aim specialist foods at the non-ethnic minority consumer” (Nazir M, 2007:6).

In localities with a number of ethnic minorities, there are usually a large number of independently-owned grocery shops, catering for their local dietary preferences, as well as the more general ‘continental’ stores offering a range of world foods. These small grocery shops have often changed their offerings in relatively little time in order to successfully cater for the ethnic palate where it has been evidenced that a local market has development for this endeavour. The mainstream supermarkets have already entered many ethnic-food markets, predominantly Indian, Chinese, Italian, and to a lesser extent, Thai and East European; although mostly in relation to selling ready-meals influenced by well-known ethnic recipes. This means it is still very difficult to find, in a large supermarket, the dedicated spices and other essential ingredients for home cooking of authentic ethnic dishes in these large supermarkets. There are also smaller ethnic-food markets such as Greek, Jewish and Vietnamese, which are catered for by the small retail operation but not by the supermarkets, because of a lack of economies of scale.

Nutritional information is another area in which the SME can have an important role, as many ethnic minority groups are in need of better nutritional advice, especially when they are incorporating some national staples in their diets. Camden Primary Care Trust recently successfully used the Bengali Channel to promote its anti-smoking message, which inspired the Smethwick Bangladeshi Centre to use this channel in order to alert members of the community to which foods are high in salt. They combined this initiative with printing dietary advice booklets and posters and deposited these at Asian-owned grocery stores and small supermarkets. This is an area where SMEs need further guidance in that Asian grocery stores are often cramped and filled to capacity which may mean less room for displaying diet and nutrition-related posters, also

booklets might be ignored by many consumers especially if not available in a particular language. A multiplicity of languages is necessary for this sort of initiative as India alone has 24 languages with a million speakers each and an estimated 415 extant tongues. A small independent Asian retailer might not be able to bear the cost of producing such literature, although medium-sized Asian chain stores might fund this as part of a corporate social responsibility initiative. Asian food wholesalers might also promote healthier food consumption at ethnic minority community centres, perhaps paying for this advertising by sponsoring use of these facilities where such financial arrangements were appropriate (Shaw H, 2007:21). The larger ethnic minority charities might contribute to the production and dissemination of dietary information, for example Islamic Relief (Islamic Relief, 2008)); also a community centre in Smethwick successfully held 'taste tester' sessions, promoting healthier foods from a range of different cultures. On a wider scale the Local Public Service Agreement team in Liverpool set up a scheme in 2000 whereby local doctors gave their patients vouchers redeemable for fruit and vegetables from local Co-op stores (Baines C, 2006). Although the fruit and vegetable consumption in many households returned to pre-scheme levels once the voucher scheme had ended, it was noted that there were improvements in the diet of others, especially schoolchildren. This is a good example of collaboration between local suppliers of goods and services in promoting healthy lifestyle options. Schools with high numbers of ethnic-minority pupils could also be the venue for educational initiatives, either by local retailers and wholesalers or by other agencies such as health or government bodies. There are a number of ways in which SMEs can enhance their contribution to the local community although in respect of the relationship between food and health, further research is needed to determine which form of initiative produces the most effective and enduring improvements in diet.

### **Mutual benefits of choosing appropriate initiatives in a multi-ethnic community**

For the small and medium-sized food retailers concerned about financing CSR initiatives, the ethnic food market also presents health-based marketing opportunities. As ethnic minority members become more affluent and as concerns about fitness, nutrition and obesity are on the rise, demand for health-oriented ethnic minority foods is likely to grow. Lifeway Foods is one example of developing both a socially responsible and profitable initiative, namely the promotion of two yoghurt/milk based drinks (Kefir from the Caucasus region of Russia and Lassi from northern India) as probiotic health drinks for Western consumers with fast lifestyles (Lifeway, 2007). Sales are to be targeted first at the Indian community, then at White consumers; Lifeway hopes to emulate the success of Activia, whose yoghurt brand was launched as a dietary supplement in January 2006 and a year later had sold US\$ 100 million of their product.

The supply of Halal-based foods represents another significant marketing opportunity. Manchester University main campus canteen serves Halal menu options, supplied locally, which are taken up by some 400 of the 2,500 daily customers and growing. Overall there are around 90,000 Muslim students in the UK, and the absence



of Halal menu options meant many students had to go off-campus to get hot lunches meaning some missed the beginning of afternoon lectures. It has been suggested that some Muslim students based their university choices on whether or not Halal food was available on-campus; a crucial financial consideration for British universities in the era of student fees. On a wider scale, *The Grocer* retail trade journal reported on the expansion of the medium-sized Birmingham-based *Pak* supermarket chain, which in 2007 opened the UK's largest ethnic food supermarket. (Lyons T, 2007:10). As well as catering for the considerable south Asian Muslim community, this store will cater for the culinary tastes of Somalis, Afro-Caribbeans and other ethnic minorities such as east Europeans. A great deal of the meat being sold to the Muslim population a short while ago was not only sub-standard but some of it was not even Halal, and it came to light that poor quality animals were used that had been treated inhumanely. As the Muslim community becomes wealthier, suppliers such as Abraham Natural Produce are supplying organic Halal meats which have been slaughtered correctly and above all from animals that have been treated with compassion (The Grocer, 2007:63). Robust religious ties combined with a higher than average birth rate and increasing affluence render this specialised food sector highly attractive in terms of combining appropriate CSR initiatives with retail expansion in a generally saturated UK food market.

The local clawback of trade effect and a gradual rise in the per capita income of migrant groups relative to the UK average presents a significant opportunity for small independent ethnic shops, as spending power in local ethnic minority neighbourhoods continues to grow. Independent specialist stores are in the best position to compete against and, therefore co-exist with, local supermarkets such as Tesco Express. It is the generalist SMEs, selling little in the way of fresh fruit and vegetables, and often located in poor White areas, that may have most to lose from supermarket expansion. However stores such as The Polish Deli are not confident about the likes of Asda and Tesco stocking more Polish products; the manager of the Deli opined, "I have mixed feelings towards the competition we are facing". Whether the outcome is positive or negative for small independent ethnic food stores will depend on various individual factors such as its location, local demographic make-up of its customers and not least of all, the manager's business acumen.

Just as intangibles such as brand value form an increasingly important part of the balance sheet of large corporations, similarly companies of all sizes particularly SMEs need the intangible assets of customer and local community goodwill in order to trade successfully. Company spending on CSR initiatives may be regarded as 'investments in a goodwill bank' (Vaughn S, 1999). This 'bank' may not yield returns immediately, but then neither do many capital construction or corporate investment projects. If the possible short-termism or scepticism of financial investors and other stakeholders can be overcome, such a bank can eventually produce handsome returns, even giving the company a survival edge over its competitors in the long run.

## Conclusion

The first stage in adopting appropriate and effective CSR measures is to identify the key stakeholder group with which to engage. The examples above demonstrate that this may incorporate not only those within the supply chain and customers, but also 'neighbours' and other localised clusters which may be interested in or affected by the business' output and/or operations. Not always as obvious for SMEs as their corporate counterparts, for example, large corporations in third world locations are presented with a clear CSR agenda, perhaps clean water, poverty eradication, schooling and so forth. Where SMEs are concerned, the process of connecting with the full range of possible stakeholders is limited by financial restraints as well as competing interests, within which there may be difficulties in deciding the merit of each ones. However SMEs often have an advantage over larger corporations in that the business manager is closer to, and has more knowledge of, the local needs of the community. By contrast the individual store managers of large chains such as Tesco may be rather 'emasculated' in that they have little or no discretion over initiatives such as local CSR, whilst the head office managers who do determine such matters are in distant, remote Cheshunt.

CSR remains a loosely defined and often misunderstood idea, yet a useful definition is provided by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, "the commitment of business to sustainable development, working with their employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life" (Dunning J, 2003). While profit maximisation is a legitimate goal for SMEs, engaging in proactive socially responsible behaviour whilst making money ensures that everybody connected with or affected by the business' activities is able to benefit. Also not all CSR initiatives need vast sums of financial backing because, generally operating at a local level in response to local needs or concerns, the small trader is likely to find a ready-at-hand group of willing supporters; as evidenced in the above-mentioned examples. Although larger companies are better able to adopt the full range of CSR policies (and being incentivised by the desire to enhance their already pervasive brand reputations), a great number of SMEs are already contributing to local socio-environmental concerns and looking for ways to improve employee relationships, for example where funds are available for skills and training, SMEs are keen to apply. So although large companies have the ability and resources to achieve 'big things' they are constrained by the need for economies of scale, buying power, and efficiency. They may be less able to innovate; for this we must look to the nimbler SME. Large corporations can help themselves therefore by incorporating SMEs in their value chains. In turn, SMEs can benefit from the extra investment by being in a superior position to adopt perhaps a range of policies which address local community concerns and help to alleviate poverty, assimilating social responsibility into all core business activities.

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