

Why having an authentic approach to your CSI initiatives is key to sustainable growth

By  Sindy Peters

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It's a bad idea, as part of your CSR strategy, to pose with a big cheque to show that you are 'doing good', says Chris Bischoff, research and sustainability specialist at Reputation Matters. We interviewed Bischoff to get his take on authenticity and transparency in the CSI space, the benefits of aligning your CSR strategy with your brand, and how businesses can retain their reputation capital during the current economic recession in South Africa.

■ ***Now and into the future, consumers have growing expectations from the businesses they patronise in terms of CSR. Why do you think this trend has developed and do you believe it's here to stay?***



Chris Bischoff, research and sustainability specialist, Reputation Matters

Chris Bischoff: There are a number of factors that led to the trend of 'green consumerism'. Firstly, I think that the average person is so much more aware of the consequences of what they are consuming or using. More information is available nowadays thanks to the internet and its easy accessibility. New research is also being shared on issues surrounding production and consumption, especially unsustainable production and consumption. For the active consumer, the knowledge of what processes and impacts are behind a product definitely factors into the final choice when making a purchase.

The trend of 'green consumerism' is here to stay. As the human population increases, so do consumption rates which, in turn, puts increasing pressure on natural resources and availability of land. This is going to put increased pressure on businesses to produce a product that does not add to the burden of overly stressed resources, but rather offers a renewable option. This is a growing consumer expectation that will continue as long as we are faced with these unsustainable production and consumption issues. How socially and environmentally responsible an organisation is in terms of its CSR strategy will influence consumer attitude towards the brand.

■ ***Authenticity and transparency have become key in the CSI space. How does a business convey its CSI goals and achievements to its various stakeholders without making it sound like a marketing exercise?***

Bischoff: An interesting trend that our research has frequently shown is that CSR is at the top of the list when we ask stakeholder groups about communication preferences. People want to hear about what you are doing to be socially and environmentally responsible. It is also about the message behind your CSR strategy and CSI initiatives. We always say that it is a bad idea to pose with a big cheque showing that you are 'doing good' by donating money. There is not much of a message behind this and feels rather much like a marketing attempt. The best CSR strategy is one that is aligned to the business's values and vision, which is ongoing and involves your stakeholders in some way.

Transparency is incredibly important when it comes to sustainability and a company's environmental performance. Information spreads so rapidly on social media nowadays. It is also really important to be transparent even when there has been a lack of environmental performance. It is better to say 'this is where we under-performed, and this is what we are going to do about it' instead of saying nothing at all. A lot of businesses nowadays are getting called out for not 'walking their environmental talk'. This is known as 'greenwashing' – when certain business decisions and actions do not reflect what

your CSR strategy says.

▣ ***How important is it to align your CSR strategy with your brand and what are the benefits of doing so?***

Bischoff: Aligning your CSR strategy with your brand's values is a lot more credible. Your employees will also understand why specific CSI initiatives have been chosen, and therefore are more likely to support the cause. At Reputation Matters, one of our CSI initiatives involves a partnership with [Greenpop](#); we have started gifting trees using this organisation in celebration of client and employee birthdays and we link this to our value of 'growth'.

▣ ***In terms of linking CSI strategy to reputation and business imperatives, highlight a South African company that you think is getting it right.***

Bischoff: [dot]GOOD is an interesting example of a company that has a unique marketing approach that treats sustainability and marketing as a single strategy. Often this is not the case in many business models today. They have adopted sustainability as a core value, and therefore it resonates really well throughout the entire organisation. When it comes to communicating about your CSR, it is really important to get the internal building blocks right first, and then identify the best channels to communicate externally. Developing this type of marketing strategy for their clients is also their service offering, which really shows that they live what they believe.

▣ ***The recession in South Africa will in all likelihood impact negatively on CSI spend. How do businesses ride out the recession while maintaining their CSI efforts and, in turn, their reputation capital with stakeholders?***

Bischoff: A CSI initiative does not have to be a big financial investment. An organisation can be socially and environmentally responsible just by having a strong set of core values established that defines the organisation and the team. For example, one of our values at Reputation Matters is 'respect' - respect for ourselves, our clients, and the environment. When we are faced with a decision we will always ask; "are we respecting ourselves", "are we respecting our client", and "does this show respect towards the natural environment". If we have any doubt when asking those questions, we won't engage in any arrangement which goes against this value. Just by sticking to this value we can be environmentally responsible when making certain decisions. That is one aspect of being socially and environmentally responsible.



Reputation Matters team

A CSI initiative also does not necessarily have to be a financial investment. Next time you have a team-building event, go plant some fruit trees in an under-resourced community. There are many ways in which you can invest your time instead of making a financial contribution. Bottom line, when it comes to CSR, it is more about a strong lasting message rather than a big financial investment. This is also a key message to communicate with all of your stakeholders.

▣ ***Reputation Matters launched its Sustainability Check tool late last year - could you tell us how it works, and explain the difference it could help make to a business's reputation?***

Bischoff: CSR and sustainability are significant contributors to overall reputation. The Sustainability Check is a research tool designed to provide insight into your stakeholders' perceptions of your CSR strategy and sustainability initiatives. In a basic sense, the research will tell you how sustainable the organisation is perceived to be. From these results, we can identify gaps in communication to your stakeholder groups and improve the perception that they might have. This, in turn, contributes to a healthy reputation.



Reputation Matters launches research tool, Sustainability Check

30 Dec 2016



🚩 ***What is Reputation Matters doing for Mandela Day this year, and what do you think is the significance of Mandela Day in 2017?***

Bischoff: We are going to be getting our hands dirty in a community organic vegetable garden. As mentioned, this year we have started gifting trees to be planted in honour of a client or employee on their birthday. I want us to get involved in planting and in this way get a better idea of the reason why we gift trees. The intention is also for the team to interact with community members to get a better idea of the positive impact that gardens and urban greening has in society, especially under-resourced communities.

The message for Mandela Day is that everyone has the ability and responsibility to change the world for the better; no matter how small of a contribution it is, let it be a positive one. It is also a good message to make businesses, which are also a part of society, realise that they are in a position to make a significant contribution towards positive change that addresses social and environmental issues, not just on Mandela Day.

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