



Corporate Social Activism : the new business strategy ?

Corporate Social Responsibility is not generally purported to be a political movement. In general, business is not designed to be political. Influential, maybe, but not political. But when we live in a world where over half of the top 100 economic forces in the world are corporations and not governments, and the Fortune 1000 are investing ever more energy in the field of corporate social responsibility, and the world's most influential businessmen are creating foundations and donating millions to address the needs of society and environment, it is clear that businesses are influencing lives and society. There is criticism that businesses are carrying out the role of governments. Just where do we draw the line between politics and corporate social responsibility. Is there a line? Should there be a line?

If we define politics as pertaining to government, then strictly, speaking, corporations play in a different field. However, the influence of corporations on government is clearly felt, and some corporations have extended their influence into more direct forms of lobbying and attempts to influence policy. A couple of cases spring to mind:

The growing CEO lobby for climate change : In January 2007 the CEO's of 10 major corporations urged President Bush to create mandatory ceilings for greenhouse gas emissions¹. This follows the November 2005 Corporate Leaders on Climate Change initiative, and their letter to the UK Prime Minister RH Tony Blair, offering a business-government partnership to address climate change issues², succeeded by another letter in 2006 offering a more detailed 7-point program. Such initiatives are clearly political, in the sense that they are designed to drive governments to take action, leading to new legislation, for the public good.

The use of political influence by Merck to obtain mandatory testing for cervical cancer, based on the use of their drug Gardasil³. Merck used a wide range of political campaigning methods in order to influence legislators to make vaccinations against cervical cancer mandatory. The revelation of Merck's activities created a negative response, fuelling the suspicion that Companies promote political change to serve their profit interest.

The actions of corporations can be overtly political, in a positive (public good) way or a less positive (private interest) way. However, there are many businesses today who promote political agendas under the umbrella of Corporate Social Responsibility, and operate within the boundaries of corporate social activism, rather than overt political behavior.

One of the most well-known examples of Corporate Activism is Body Shop. Anita Roddick's own brand of social activism is as widely known as the Body Shop brand itself. Not surprising, given the leveraging of a force such as the Body Shop as a platform for Roddick's social

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/22/AR2007012201237.html?sub=AR>

² http://www.cpi.cam.ac.uk/bep/clgcc/letter_2005.htm

³ <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=14401>



activism. Campaigns for the empowerment of women, human rights, ethical trading etc. have brought raised awareness for many social issues into the open and influenced political agendas. The Body Shop has become synonymous with social activism in a way which conforms with Christine Arena's High Purpose⁴ – to the extent that if social activism were to be removed from the Body Shop agenda, the Body Shop *raison d'être* would be quite different.

Ben and Jerry's have continued their own brand of social activism with the notorious 900lb Baked Alaska, a response to oil drilling in the Arctic, and their Lick Global Warming Campaign to address climate change issues. Ben and Jerry's ice cream without the social activist agenda would taste just like any other ice cream.

The adoption of the Equator Principles⁵ by the world's leading banks is the financial world's answer to social activism.

In Israel, the most prominent example of corporate social activism is the fashion business, *comme il faut*⁶, headed up by Sybil Goldfiner, a self-pronounced feminist and outspoken women's rights and fair trade activist, nominated as one of Israel's most influential women by Lady Globes in 2004. Through a series of deliberately thought-provoking fashion collections, *comme il faut* has attempted to break down negative female stereotypes whilst advancing female empowerment. In a bold campaign in 2004, where the fashion shoot was at the site of the barrier wall erected between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, a political hot-spot of the day, *comme il faut* was making a statement to contrast beauty, femininity and fashion with a concrete wall of insult, ugliness and humiliation, under the campaign slogan "women crossing boundaries". Other campaigns have celebrated "real women" – the natural beauty of women, including the over 50's, as an opposition to the stereotypical models of high-fashion, and the value of the women's work in the home as a productive element of our economy.

Sybil Goldfiner, the Israeli answer to Anita Roddick, has developed *comme il faut* to the point that the high-purpose is part of the business identity. Few businesses in Israel have reached this level of social activist integration. And it is important to remember that such activity is driven by a personal and authentic conviction of how the world should be. But make no mistake, as Anita, Ben, Jerry and Sybil have found, that social activism is great for business.

Dov Lautman, founder and Chairman of Delta Galil Industries, 2007 winner of the Israel prize for lifetime achievement, has also developed a quiet brand of social activism in the form of promotion of diversity and the advancement of minority groups. His business, Delta Galil Industries, is a model for the equal opportunity employment of Jews, Arabs, Druze and other minorities in a supportive and accepting environment. In 2007, Dov Lautman launched a business – academia coalition for the advancement of Arab academics in business. This activity

⁴ The High Purpose Company, Christine Arena, Collins, 2006

⁵ <http://www.equator-principles.com/>

⁶ www.comme-il-faut.com



is edging towards Corporate Social Activism, though it tends to be presented more as a personal campaign rather than the identity of the business.

Why does social activism have such an impact ? Social activism, as opposed to deliberate political intervention, is seen as advancing positive social change. Political intervention is seen as advancing private interest. Social activism is emotional, and whilst it risks alienating those who are socially opposed to the cause, in general, social causes tend to engage a wide spectrum of public support.

In Israel, we will see more social activism as more entrepreneurs become engaged in social issues and understand both their role – responsibility - in influencing society and perhaps, more importantly, as they realize that the power of business to change society, when driven by an authentic desire for positive change, represents not only a higher purpose, it also represents higher revenues.

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