

Why the good guys, or girls, will always win

 By [Francois van Dyk](#), issued by [Ornico](#)

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Socially responsible brands will always outsmart the competition...

"If I had learned more about business ahead of time, I would have been shaped into believing that it was only about finances and quality management." Anita Roddick, the late founder of the cosmetics brand The Body Shop, despite not having studied business, turned out to be a very astute business woman. Having always been involved in social activism and campaigning for environmental and social issues, Roddick started The Body Shop in 1976, purely to generate a small income for her and her children while her husband was away in South America.

Deciding to rather concentrate on marketing the truth rather than hype her products, Roddick inadvertently became a pioneer of ethical consumerism, banning the use of cosmetic ingredients tested on animals and the brand also became one of the first to promote fair trade with third world countries.

Insisting on her cornerstone values paid off handsomely. By 2004, barely 28 years after she opened her first little outlet next to some undertakers in Brighton, The Body Shop was serving over 77 million customers globally and rated 28th top brand in the world. Two years later the brand was sold to cosmetics giant L'Oréal for £652 million.

Pioneering ethics

It is sad to realise that this great recent example could be considered "pioneering" in doing ethical, socially and environmentally friendly business. One would have hoped that it had always been the case. Luckily the past two decades have seen a major change in the manner that organisations and brands behave and conduct business. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a major buzzword for all stakeholders, not least of which are consumers who have further been tremendously empowered by being given a voice to communicate to each other, and directly to brands, by the advent of social networks like Twitter and Facebook.

Corporate Social Initiatives (CSI), for example donating food to a worthy charity, are but a subset of the far greater CSR. Doing responsible business encompasses a far broader sense of ideals that affect both internal and external communities.

The recent financial crisis has done much to shine the spotlight on the ethical aspects of doing business and the massive impact unethical behaviour does have on all walks of life. It is literally a matter of life and death, as shown by the recent clothing factory building collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which killed more than 1100 workers. Brands that had apparel produced at this factory are now under massive pressure to not only provide support to the deceased's families but to also invest in improving safety conditions.

Though it could be considered to be the duty of the Bangladeshi government to improve and legislate safety conditions, such is the modern world of business that consumers have now become very aware of the impact their purchasing decisions are making on the planet. Hence the concept of The Triple Bottom Line, also known as "people, planet, profit", can now only be ignored at a brand's peril.

Integrating social responsibility

The City Council of Nairobi has previously been cited as an entity that has ignored long term sustainability by polluting the environment through the Dandora dump site and also severely damaging the Nairobi River which affected many Kenyans negatively. The short-sightedness of such action results in billions of shillings eventually being spent to rehabilitate the environment.

So the reality is that ignoring social responsibility could end up costing brands and organisations massive amounts of hard cash while embracing good practices and sustainability could reward responsible brands handsomely.

Socially responsible practices should be an integral part of an organisation's business model, it needs to do good for the sake of doing good - not as an afterthought to try and score some cheap consumer or marketing points. Consumers can easily see through such attempts and it does leave a bad taste in the mouth. However, doing truly remarkable things in communities does make people talk which eventually filters through to the media, making the brand's public relations value so much easier to achieve.

It also needs to be considered that there are no quick marketing wins and that social responsibility is a long term strategy but with much bigger results eventually. Good practices naturally do not only affect external stakeholders like consumers but also have a major internal impact on an organisation's staff. The importance of internal marketing is easily forgotten but the truth is that staff could either be the greatest brand ambassadors or the worst! Being associated with an organisation that is doing great things in communities is a massive motivational booster.

Brands and their communities

Brands have the responsibility to be socially aware and address issues that affect their specific communities. Though there is a place for traditional above-the-line campaigns to promote socially responsible practices, these should be utilised cleverly so as not to be seen to be bragging about the good they're doing. Advertising can be a great tool to engage in discourse on social issues, drive positive change, and this in itself becomes a socially responsible initiative.

A great campaign by Anita Roddick was the creation of Ruby, a plus-size doll based on Barbie, which was the figurehead of The Body Shop's self-esteem campaign, "Love Your Body." With the caption "There are 3billion women who don't look like supermodels and only 8 who do" the campaign was not just to promote The Body Shop but was also a rejection of the unrealistic portrayal of what beauty should be. This resonated greatly with The Body Shop's customers who could very much relate to the doll. Barbie's owner Mattel was obviously annoyed by this attack on their iconic brand and eventually had the Ruby commercials banned - which in turn generated great public relations value for The Body Shop and highlighted the issue even further.

We Africans in particular have always loved stories, so brands should not underestimate the power of word-of-mouth. The new digital ubuntu which mobile and social media have given us, has been adopted with great fervour and can be utilised with great effect by brands to let their customers tell the great stories about the brand.

But it is not just the responsibility of the big brands and corporates to improve the quality of the communities in which they operate. All businesses and organisations need to get involved. I will leave you with another classic Anita Roddick quote: "If you think you're too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito."

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