

CSR or another label: Who cares?

By Wayne Visser

Some people get very excited about what label you use to describe the role of business in society. Should it be corporate *social* responsibility, or just corporate responsibility, or maybe *business* (social) responsibility? What about corporate citizenship or corporate accountability? Maybe sustainable development or corporate sustainability or just sustainability? Social enterprise or sustainable business? On and on the debate rages ... or rather, whimpers.

As someone who is about to launch a new variation - corporate sustainability & responsibility or CSR 2.0 - of an old label - corporate social responsibility or just plain CSR - I feel I should make my position clear on the battle of the labels. To borrow from *Gone With the Wind*, "Quite frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn!" Which is not to say that labels don't tell us something. They can be quite instructive.

For example, corporate *social* responsibility indicates the strong philanthropic roots of CSR, going back to the late 1800s, with benefactors like Rockefeller and Cadbury giving business responsibility a distinctly social flavour. On the other hand, corporate sustainability, which grew out of the Rio Earth Summit, still struggles to shake off its environmental tinge, despite John Elkington's best efforts at rebranding it as a "triple bottom line".

Likewise, my concept of CSR 2.0 is trying to say something - notably that the old CSR as philanthropy, public relations, voluntary action and incremental improvement is no longer adequate (if ever it was) to the challenges the world faces, be they persistent poverty, climate change or rampant corruption. The old version - 1.0 - is obsolete, and the new version - 2.0 - is still in the "beta testing phase", to use Web 2.0 jargon.

Another thing I'm trying to signal by rebranding CSR as Corporate Sustainability & Responsibility is that we should concede that there are only really two label-games in town - corporate responsibility and corporate sustainability. You only need to look at companies' non-financial reports to see this. So rather than keep up the ding-dong battle for who's best, why not simply combine the two, and keep the acronym CSR, which slips easily off the tongue.

That's the kind of transformative and integrated CSR we're aiming for at CSR International. But far more important than the label are the principles behind the name. Is business's response simply more tinkering at the edges, or does it create scalable solutions to our global challenges? Is business really listening to its stakeholders, or do they get short shrift when the economic going gets tough?

So pick whatever label you most fancy, or none at all if you like. But promise me that whatever your choice, you will not let companies hide behind the label and pretend that a few well-meaning donations, or marginal improvements in energy efficiency, or

meeting minimum labour conditions makes them a serious part of the solution. As Muhammad Yunus said to me in an interview last year, that doesn't give them "the right to be remembered".

He went on to say that it is only when we change the world - when we change people's lives for the better - that we have a right to put our signature on this planet. These are the sort of values, principles and results by which any CSR or alternative label should be judged. I only hope that in 10 years time, CSR 2.0 will have lived up to this challenge and give us all the right to speak with confidence about the contribution of CSR, rather than have to apologise for its continued failure.

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