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AutoBell Car Wash in Charlotte

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Introduction

Swiss dramatist, novelist, and essayist Friedrich Durrenmatt once wrote: “Whoever is content with the world, and who profits from its lack of justice, does not want to change it.” This phrase resonates so truthfully inside my head in many ways. During the past few weeks we have been considering the need for a mind shift approach to help the environment while becoming more socially responsible, not only individually or globally, but at a corporate level. We have exhausted the debate over whether corporations should be responsible for taking the lead in this needed change. The biggest obstacle to CSR has been long argued by Milton Friedman, who believes corporations are created to be profitable (1970). Taking on social and moral issues is not profitable; on the contrary, it could reduce earnings for stakeholders.

However, it’s about time we become conscious of the choices we make, after all, “We are borrowing the future from our children; we have to pay it back” (Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur & Schley, 2008, p. 39). So, how can we foster innovation and encourage change when we see that everything mankind has done has hurt or damaged our precious planet? Is it too late to reach out and learn from our mistakes? Have we reached the tipping point? Are we ready to acknowledge this predicament, and most importantly, are we ready to create a bias to action? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions will require a more exhaustive collaborative research effort. This future research should explore if corporations

are making proactive efforts, globally and locally, to take care of the issues that plague our environment.

Rationale

Jill McMillan contends that “corporations are ill-suited to enact the role of social responsibility bestowed upon them since their main concern is to make a profit.” (May, Cheney, & Roper, 2007, p. 16). She goes on to say that as individuals “we have seriously neglected the role of caring for one another, and corporations have assumed this role, a role they are ill-suited for, because they lack both credibility and the voice of moral authority” (p. 26). Personally, I have to agree with her. However, because of the role corporations play in the environment, they need to be aware of their social responsibility to shift the meaning of sustainability to a more authentic and genuine message.

The role of communication should not be underestimated. We ought to be constantly challenging the status quo. Let’s remember that much of our reality is socially constructed, thus the importance of understanding how powerful organizational communication discourse and practices are to shape current ideologies, behavior, and practices when it comes to be socially responsible.

Before I dive deeper into the subject of corporate social responsibility, I need a good definition of what it means. The notion of CSR means different things to different people. For purpose of this paper I used the definition proposed by Carroll and Buchholtz. They define CSR as the “economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given time” (2003, p. 36). In other words, society’s expectations of corporations are quite broad when it comes to CSR.

Corporations are accountable not only to their owners or stockholders, but, also to those affected, at any given time, by their business activities, individually and/or collectively.

When I talk to others about CSR, I can't help but wonder what corporations are doing locally to show their commitment to the environment, and the community in which they operate in. With this in mind, this reflection paper will examine the CSR communication practices of AutoBell Car Wash, a locally owned company from the Carolinas. This paper seeks to assess if AutoBell Car Wash has been successful in creating and disseminating integrated messages that sustain their image as an authentic and effective socially responsible organization.

AutoBell Car Wash

Company Background - To get deep into AutoBell Car Wash CSR efforts, I interviewed Nathan Edwards, store manager for the AutoBell Car Wash located at 1521 East Third Street in Charlotte. I also visited their website www.AutoBell.com, and I skimmed Terri Bennett's website "Do-Your Part," since she has done a couple of video segments on AutoBell Car Wash as a sponsor of her own website.

AutoBell Car Wash Inc.® was founded in 1969 by the late Charles Howard Sr. as a way to showcase the latest in car wash equipment technology. What started as an exterior only conveyerized car wash has grown into a chain of 57 full service facilities. Their corporate offices are located in Charlotte. AutoBell is now America's third largest full-service car wash company with over 50 locations in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Georgia.

Company Audit - AutoBell Car Wash is a firm believer in giving back to the communities that have helped make the company so successful. Activities in these communities include youth athletic team sponsorships, adopt-a-stream clean-up efforts, employee scholarship programs, charity car washes, and neighborhood storm drain identification projects that alert residents to act responsibly by helping prevent pollutants from entering storm drains that divert rain water into our streams, creeks and rivers.

AutoBell Car Wash seems to have taken ownership of their responsibility as a corporation and their commitment to the community. In the words of Deetz, it is the corporation's "responsibility" (from the Latin *respondeo*, "I answer") to assume the role of "caretaker" of this critical social space, both local and beyond (as cited in May, Cheney, & Roper, 2007, p. 23). AutoBell has heard the call and they have promptly answered it by getting involved and living up to the community's expectation.

AutoBell Car Wash sees the relationship between the environment and society and is involved in protecting and conserving water. Their efforts include water recycling, water management and using only biodegradable chemicals. AutoBell Car Wash utilizes state-of-the-art car wash technology that allows its facilities to treat 100% and recycle up to 100% of wash water, disposing of treated wash water only into approved water treatment facilities. AutoBell Car Wash routinely performs preventive maintenance on equipment to avoid spills and leaks and trains employees to conserve water at the store level on a daily basis.

AutoBell Car Wash employees participate annually in creek and Lake Island clean-ups in conjunction with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities Department Adopt-A-Stream program and the North Carolina Wildlife Federation. Volunteers walk creek beds and banks and collect trash and debris. Notably, AutoBell Car Wash employees volunteer but are “on the clock” while participating in the creek walk, so they actually get paid for participating in this clean-up effort.

The demand for environmental stewardship has placed AutoBell as the leader in water conservation and efforts to keep chemicals out of our local water supply. The majority of their locations recycle over 80% of their water. However, new state of the art facilities have been open within the past six month that are able to recycle 100% of their water. I was impressed by the way the water is recycled. The process goes like this: dirty water from the car wash is filtered and ultimately ends up in a 8500 gallon tanks where enzymes devour the dirt and pollutants, a bag of nutrients is periodically added to the tank to keep the enzymes working efficiently. The system works so efficient that most of the water in this tank is the same water they originally opened the store with. Once the water is clean, 100% of it is recycled brought back into the car wash to clean a car. Their soaps are biodegradable and they keep the polluted car wash run off out of the environment.

When it comes to sustainability effort, AutoBell strives to make the best use of water resources, and to educate their customers and the general public of the value of recycling and proper wastewater disposal. They believe that this type of involvement and education will directly improve the quality of water in our community now and the years to come. Since 2000, AutoBell has won nine awards

from municipal, utility, media and conservation organizations for its environmental stance and efforts making them an example for their community.

During my visit to AutoBell Car Wash I was able to see their CSR efforts which are shown through their community engagement, their narrative, and their integrated messages. They disseminate an image that is authentic, effective and successful, not only internally but also externally. The way AutoBell Car Wash conducts business elicits strong positive reaction from the community.

As a company, AutoBell Car Wash is environmentally conscious of their responsibility to the environment. However, affordability of their services seems to be an issue for the community they serve. Even though people may be aware of the advantages of having their cars cleaned by a professional car wash, people need to prioritize expenses in order to meet end needs. To address this issue, I was thinking that maybe AutoBell should offer special discounts to senior citizens a couple of days a week, or offer college students a flat fee for their basic service.

CSR has evolved during the past decades, and it has undergone a powerful transformation, and corporations want to be part of this transformation. As shown with AutoBell Car Wash, people are finally beginning to acknowledge the interconnectivity of the environment, and how the mounting sustainability crisis puts our planet out of balance (Senge et al., 2008). We can no longer think that it is OK to just fix part of a problem; instead, we realize that we need to step back, and see the bigger picture which includes the patterns that present themselves in a very spontaneous way. It is undeniable that corporations are growing more and more

aware of their ethical, moral, and legal responsibility to the triple bottom line of profit, people and planet.

Conclusion

In exploring the different perspectives socially attributed to CSR, the question still remains: Is it possible to sustain a triple bottom line focus while driving organizations to engage in CSR? The growing attention given to CSR initiatives indicates that “collective action is needed to solve environmental problems” (Lyon & Maxwell, 2008, p. 6). A shift in thinking sometimes happens, something so profound and powerful that causes a “collective awakening to new possibilities that changes everything over time” (Senge, 2007, p. 5). I believe the joint efforts of many corporations are creating an altruistic membership available to profit and non-profit organizations.

The biggest argument against CSR is related to economics. As previously discussed, many argue that the primary responsibility of business is to make profit. Others argue that it is the government’s responsibility to step up to the plate, and address the many environmental issues that plague the earth today. While a few argue that this responsibility should be extended to corporations, since they are profiting from the environment.

It is not surprising that these arguments haven been going around for decades. There are advantages and disadvantages to CSR. After taking a look at AutoBell Car Wash I am convinced that it is possible for a corporation to be profitable while helping the environment. I am sure many argue that this is not always possible. Either way, we can’t overlook the fact that corporations are trained

in the ways of finance, managements, communications, marketing, and that they have the knowledge and expertise required to make a difference. To me, businesses have directly or indirectly caused many of the social issues and problems due to their operations. They are the ones that have created the majority of the environmental problems we face today; the least they can do is to get involve, and try to solve them.

Inevitably, we need to hold corporations accountable, and we need to encourage authenticity. Corporations play a unique role in society, and they have the power, and the opportunity to make a difference by walking the talk. The best way would be by using their discourse and challenge values and assumptions socially constructed. As discussed during class, since nature doesn't have a voice, corporations have the opportunity to voice nature's concerns. They have a double role in society due to their power, and their relationship with their stakeholders. It is certain that their discourse can shape meaning, ideology and behaviors to construct, co-construct, and de-construct the meaning of sustainability that has been socially created.

I hope this paper has conveyed the intrinsic nature of CSR. After all, it has been said that "If the environment is something we know partly through language and other symbols, then different linguistic and symbolic choices are possible, and these choices construct diverse meanings for the worlds we know" (Cox, 2010, p. 58). From a communication perspective, corporate social responsibility is a complex subject to address. Nonetheless, now is the time for corporations to support the triple bottom line of profit, people and planet. Without a doubt, we are

so painfully aware of the need to answer a higher calling, a calling that calls for action and repair the consequences of our former actions.

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