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CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND ITS IMPACT ON THE COMPANY'S MARKET POSITION IN TERMS OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract

For many years in developing countries, including Poland, there was an argument that the economy is not mature enough to take the social and environmental issues into account, and companies must first of all fight for survival. However, economic situation stabilizing after the crisis (started in 2007) suggests that companies that want to gain a high position in the market should invest in innovative solutions and rethink the economic model to a more socially responsible one. In this situation, more common criticism of unethical behaviour, in particular criticism of destructive greed and short-sightedness of entrepreneurs should be considered as a positive phenomenon. An example of how far social norms lost their significance can be observed in the cases of Enron, Lehman Brothers, WorldCom and Arthur Andersen, and, in Poland, Amber Gold. These events led to a broad public discussion about moral issues, in particular about the qualifications of market actors' behaviour and consequences of these behaviours for consumers. Many entrepreneurs have recognized these principles, especially those embedded in consumer behaviour. This metamorphosis involves consumers considering other attributes of a product than just hedonistic ones. All benefits associated with the use of goods are no longer the main value for many consumers. Quite a few consumers are willing to pay more for goods, which are, for example, produced with respect for the environment. They pay more

attention to production which is harmless to the environment than to the one which creates a threat to human society. These avant-garde requirements combine the care for the environment with social sensitivity, and the lack of their respect may result in ostracism from consumers. These expectations caused that, over recent years, there has been an increased interest in the concept of socially responsible business. Therefore, effective communication is the key to overcoming a gap between openness of consumers to information on corporate social responsibility on the one hand, and their actual purchasing behaviour, on the other. The aim of this paper is to show that the future of any business depends on its customers who are increasingly interested in finding out how it behaves. This is a clear signal for conducting business activities that only socially responsible companies inspire consumer confidence. Therefore, it is vital to develop appropriate relations between consumers and business and to share the common values and norms which favour the formation of trust between them.

Key words: *corporate social responsibility, consumer, consumer behaviour*

1. INTRODUCTION

Consumption satisfies people's needs as well as serves important social functions. Its significance is emphasised by economics in particular. Defining consumption in terms of satisfying human needs, however, raises ethical and moral questions referring mainly to the evaluation of companies' behaviours and effects of the behaviours on consumers. The need for the analysis of these issues results from many reasons. One of the most important ones is modern environment which is characterized by large heterogeneity of social life patterns. At the same time, it should be assumed that all systems of values have the same right to exist provided that they do not have a harmful effect on other people. As a result, there is the necessity of searching for common domains and negotiating a collective position on such an important issue as the relationship between an enterprise and a consumer.

A consumer has not always been considered and treated by entrepreneurs as an equal business partner despite the fact that substantial potential and significance of consumers were already described by Adam Smith who claimed that "consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer" [Smith, 1956, p. 68]. While, against the Adam Smith's statement, a consumer in the 20th century was mainly perceived as a passive market participant playing the predetermined part of a recipient of goods and services [Maciejewski, 2012]. Coimbatore K. Prahaland

and Venkatram Ramaswamy even compared the 20th century consumer to an audience in a traditional theatre - an audience who buys a ticket for a show, sits on a particular seat at the auditorium and passively watches precisely defined roles played on stage by enterprises (suppliers, distributors, producers and sellers) [Prahaland, Ramaswamy, 2000, p. 79]. Not until the 1990s, did enterprises begin to perceive a consumer as an individual with whom mutual relations can be or even should be developed. The transformation of a consumer and their role are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Evolution and transformation of a customer and a character of their interaction with an enterprise

	Customers as a passive audience			Customers as a active players
Time frame	1970s, early 1980s	Late 1980s and early 1990	1990s	Beyond 2000
Role of customer and nature of business exchange	Persuading predetermined groups of buyers.	Transacting with individual buyers.	Lifetime bonds with individual customers.	Customers as cocreators of value.
	Customers as seen as a passive buyers with a predetermined role of consumption.			Customers are part of the enhanced network; they cocreate and extract business value. They are collaborators, codevelopers and competitors.
Managerial mind-set	The customer is an average statistic; groups of buyers are predetermined by the company.	The customer is an individual statistic in a transaction.	The customer is a person; cultivate trust and relationships.	The customer is not only an individual but also part of an emergent social and cultural fabric.
Company's interaction with customers	Traditional market research and inquiries; products and services are created without much feedback.	Shift from selling to helping customers via help desks, call centers, and customers service programs; indentify	Providing for customers through observation of users; identify solutions from lead users, and reconfigure products and services based	Customers are codevelopers of personalized experiences. Companies and lead customers have joint rules in education, shaping expectation,

		problems from customers, then redesign products and services based on that feedback.	on deep understanding of customers.	and cocreating market acceptance for products and services.
Purpose and flow of communications	Gain access to and target predetermined groups of buyers. One-way communication.	Database marketing; two-way communication.	Relationship marketing; two-way communication and access.	Active dialogue with customers to shape expectations and create buzz. Multilevel access and communication.

Source: own work on the basis of C.K. Prahalad, V. Ramaswamy, Co-opting customer competence, Harvard Business Review, January-February 2000, p. 80.

The analysis of Table 1 shows that since the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, a consumer began to be considered as an individual co-creating value, that is an individual who co-works, cooperates as well as - as Michael E. Porter [2006] observed - competes with an enterprise and demands a higher value, lower price or a wider range of service. A sign of this redefinition was that an enterprise started to perceive a customer as an important link in the management strategy included in CSR¹. The increased need for paying special attention to a consumer by entrepreneurs was also caused by increasing competition between business entities and broad access to information and communication thanks to which consumers have great possibilities of purchasing products practically all around the world. Therefore, bargaining power and awareness of a modern consumer increased. The awareness, on the other hand, caused consumers to demand an individual approach, flexibility, special treatment and a feeling of being the centre of attention. Access to education also had quite a large influence, what made consumers start to take ethical and moral issues related to running a business into account. It forced enterprises to engage considerably more in social issues. As it was emphasized, from consumers' point of view, these issues have become more essential and in many cases, they have a significant influence on customer buying decisions and loyalty.

In the article authors discuss consumers' role in the continued development of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Poland. To this, Polish consumers' attitudes about the various aspects of CSR are analyzed using both secondary sources of data and primary research with a representative random

¹ Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

sample of Polish adults (from Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship and Wielkopolskie Voivodeship), which was conducted in March and April 2015.

2. RELATIONS BETWEEN ENTERPRISES AND CONSUMERS. EVALUATION FROM THE CSR POINT OF VIEW

Extensive transformations in enterprises' environment, which were signalled earlier, make them search for their own organizational structure and ethical management of relations with customers. The most important abilities are identifying changes in customer needs and responding to them quickly. The knowledge acquired this way gives an enterprise greater bargaining power and, above all, it is its important asset. This asset is mainly made up of useful information which others do not have.

Undoubtedly, a modern consumer is an individual who consciously and voluntarily participates in an act of trade. There is, however, some kind of paradox. On the one hand, a consumer has real power on the market and because of that they can dictate conditions. On the other hand, they are targets of business manipulation. The result of that is that despite an increasing significance of a consumer on the market, the relation between a consumer and business is still asymmetrical. The main reason for such a system is consumer dispersion which translates into the lack of informational, financial and organizational balance (between the sides). Not all consumers are also as competent as to understand technical details or legal aspects of transactions they make. It makes consumers economically weaker and usually less knowledgeable than enterprises. The issue has been addressed by the Polish Confederation Lewiatan which indicates that in order to prevent the lack of balance in relations between a consumer and an enterprise, good practices based on honest and transparent relations between these entities should be implemented [Lewiatan, 2010]. Enterprises, which, in particular, want to ensure that they achieve consumer loyalty and be seen as socially responsible, should focus on honest practices in product and service marketing, fair terms and conditions in agreements and objective and reliable information provided for consumers. Within the scope of these activities, it is also important to take up market education, engage in consumer health and safety, take care of service quality and deal with complaints fairly. Figure 1 presents the map of modern corporate responsibility towards consumers.

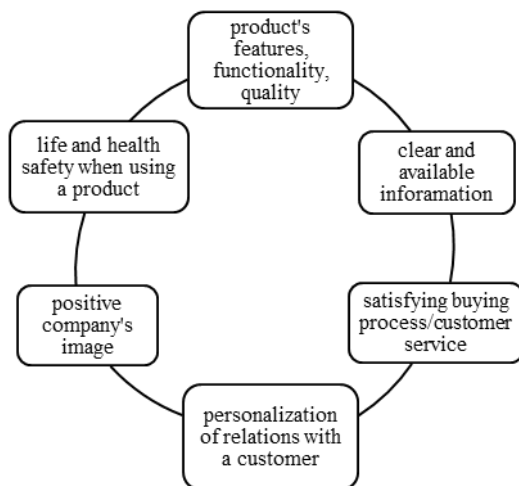


Figure 1 The map of corporate responsibility towards consumers in CSR.

Source: own work

Enterprises which follow corporate social responsibility and meet objectives specified in Figure 1 will, above all, increase trust, satisfaction and an extent to which consumers identify with them. The confirmation of this thesis is a statement by Stephen Young that the final success in business is, first of all, customer satisfaction [Young, 2005, p. 90]. The truth of the opinion is reflected in many research findings. For example, Xueming Luo and C.B. Bhattacharya measured an influence of socially responsible initiatives undertaken by enterprises on consumer reactions. After having analysed a large number of enterprises, the authors proved that corporate social and environmental responsibility together with innovation and quality make customers feel connected with an enterprise, their satisfaction increases and this, on the other hand, translates into an increase in market value of an enterprise (measured by Tobin's q ratio) and a profit margin [Luo, Bhattacharya, 2006, pp. 1-18]. However, when it comes to enterprises which are not innovative, the opposite relation was proved - CSR initiatives decrease customer satisfaction which in turn contributes to a decrease in market value of an enterprise. Thus, consumers expect enterprises to maintain high standards and introduce innovations which will contribute to an increase in attractiveness of an offer. Satisfying these expectations by an enterprise can then translate into achieving better financial results and maintaining competitive advantage on the market.

However, the research showing a positive consumer attitude towards the CSR idea and significance quite often refers mainly to attitudes, opinions and beliefs declared by customers and not to their actual behaviours [Karaszewski, Karwacka, Paluszek. (eds), 2011, p. 196]. Due to that, more and more often in their analyses, many researchers of the issue emphasize the difference between an

interest in enterprise activities in the sphere of CSR declared by consumers and their actual behaviour while shopping [Auger, Devinney, 2007, p. 361-383; Fliess, Hyung-Jong, Dubreuil, Agatiello, 2007, p. 55; D'Astous, Legendre, 2009, pp. 255-268]. The main reasons for a gap between consumer declarations and actual buying behaviour is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Reasons determining low customer engagement in socially responsible consumption

Rational economically-based arguments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - consumers are not willing to or do not have financial means to pay more for 'socially responsible' products, - in their opinion, costs are higher than gained benefits, - moral and ethical aspirations are less important than economic development of their countries (e.g. since our textile industry also needs help, why should we help employees in China?);
No belief in effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - some consumers feel that there is no chance that their individual buying decisions may influence policies of enterprises and their business practices, - some of them believe that it is mainly governments, enterprises and media that should play a leading part in promoting socially responsible behaviours, thus they do not behave according to declared preferences expecting that someone else should handle and will handle this problem;
No information - no trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - consumers have doubts about the quality of socially responsible products, evaluating them as worse, weaker and less cost-efficient than conventional products, - consumers do not have information necessary to make a buying decision based on the CSR criteria;
Other moral priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - some consumers are not interested in ethical problems, e.g. conditions in which goods they buy are produced, but, at the same time, they do not want to admit such indifference when taking part in research, - while shopping, other motives are important (quality/brand/price);
Low availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - since socially responsible products are not yet widely available, consumers do not often have enough enthusiasm to buy them in specialized shops.

Source: own work on the basis of Karaszewski, Karwacka, Paluszek (eds), 2011, p. 196 – 197 and Fliess, Hyung-Jong, Dubreuil, Agatiello, 2007.

Analysing the motives for the consumer behaviour presented in Table 2, it can be observed that apart from these strictly economic ones, one of important reasons for the lack of relation between the declared and actual demand for goods and services of socially responsible enterprises is the lack of effective communication. Information about products and services is either insufficient or is not provided effectively enough as to enable consumers to take conscious

buying decisions, taking such criteria as socially responsible production into account.

To sum up, relations between enterprises and consumers and communication between these entities within CSR in particular, can be only effective when the following conditions are met:

- information will be adjusted to consumer needs,
- consumers will trust a source of information,
- consumers will not be confused due to a large amount of information,
- consumers will have a possibility of comparing companies' activities within CSR and, on the basis of that, take specific buying decisions [Karaszewski, Karwacka, Paluszek (eds.), 2011, p. 197].

3. CSR AND CONSUMER INTENTIONALTY IN TERMS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN THE SELECTED REGIONS OF THE WORLD AND IN POLAND

In terms of modern consumption, social reality is variously defined and described, and among others, a term of transactional society is used². Writing about a transactional society, George Soros states that it is anything but a community combined with accepted social values which would force to prefer its interests over egoistic interests of individuals. It is a society in which everyone has to look after one's own interests and the care of others is not a constraint on activities or constraint on mobility [Soros, 1999, p. 113].

According to many theoreticians and practitioners adopting George Soros' point of view, a market society was established and its organizational principle was competition forcing individuals and groups to compete constantly for their particular interests. As a result, the created reality, where the market has dominated society, culture and people, favours the development of hedonism and consumerism in society, thus weakening virtues that created it and, without which, it is endangered. It is difficult to not agree with these statements, especially in the context of the last global crisis which began at the end of 2007/beginning of 2008. Nevertheless, it can be observed that the necessity of increasing clarity of business activities and their consequences is more and more often verbalized, including the necessity of eliminating corruption and unethical conduct in business as well as using good practices in relations with consumers. The research findings presented in Table 3 and Table 4 exemplify these tendencies.

² Transactional analysis - a psychological concept of human relations created by Eric Berne and based on the idea to distinguish three Selves co-existing in behaviours and feelings.

Table 3

Consumers on CSR

Do you agree that:	Poland	USA	UK	France
	(percentage)			
over the last few months ,you have actively searched for information about reputation or ethical principles of any company	29	37	38	53
over the last few years, you have become more interested in rules of corporate conduct and brand images	50	64	53	51
as a consumer, you feel responsible for punishing unethical companies by not buying their products	73	80	69	81
enterprises bear the same responsibility for introducing positive social changes as countries governments	66	70	68	79
it is very important that a company should pursue something else than just a profit	77	86	81	89
corporations do not sufficiently share a profit with employees	36	59	52	75
corporations do not sufficiently respect rights and needs of their employees	27	48	39	68
over the last five years, corporations have raised their standards	70	39	48	58
over the last five years, corporations have worked more actively for charity	33	29	29	8
it is good for companies to make their socially responsible activities or charitable work public	84	73	70	76
in the future, the greatest success and profits will be gained by enterprises which use the theory of sustainable development in practice	75	60	73	79
ethics is an extremely important factor of the best interests of a company	91	91	76	91

Source: own work on the basis of *Przyszłość marki korporacyjnej – raport 2010*, IMAS. The research conducted in 2008 on a representative group of the Polish by IMAS International sp. z o.o., Instytut Badania Rynku i Opinii Społecznej in Wrocław, commissioned by EURO RSCG Sensors http://issuu.com/eurorscgsensors/docs/know_przysz_o_marki_korporacyjnej

Table 4

Customers willing to pay extra for products and services from companies committed to positive social and environmental impact in 2014 and 2011.

Region	2014	Percentage point change from 2011
Global average	55%	+ 10 (2011 - 45%)
Asia-Pacific	64%	+ 9 (2011 - 55%)
Latin America	63%	+ 13 (2011 - 50%)
Middle East, Africa	63%	+ 10 (2011 - 53%)
North America	42%	+ 7 (2011 - 35%)
Europe	40%	+ 8 (2011 - 32%)

Source: own work on the basis of *Doing well by doing good*, NIELSEN, June 2014.

The research findings presented in Table 3 and Table 4 indicate that consumers are conscious of social benefits resulting from adopting ideas of corporate social responsibility and expect their implementation by enterprises. Furthermore, the data in Table 4 implies that consumers in Poland as well as in the USA, UK and France more and more actively search for information about reputation and obedience to ethical principles by enterprises. In Poland, there is approximately 30% of such consumers. It should be also observed that in Poland as well as in the aforementioned countries, the percentage of people who for a few years have been intensely interested in rules of corporate conduct is very similar. 66% of the respondents in Poland think that enterprises bear the same responsibility for introducing positive social changes as the government. This opinion is shared by the majority of respondents in the UK, France and the USA. 80% of respondents in the USA and France, 69% in the UK and 73% in Poland are convinced that their duty is to stigmatize enterprises working in unethical way by boycotting their products. 8 out of 10 respondents think that enterprises should not take care of their financial results only. 36% of respondents in Poland (52% in the UK, 59% in the USA and as many as 75% in France) state that enterprises do not sufficiently share a profit with employees. Likewise, approximately 30% of the Polish, British and more than 68% of the French think that enterprises do not do a lot in terms of respecting rights and needs of their employees. 75% of the responding consumers from the analysed countries think that in the future, the greatest success and profits will be gained by enterprises which use the theory of sustainable development in practice. At the same time, more than 90% of the respondents from Poland as well as the USA and France think that ethics is an extremely important factor in enterprise functioning.

In Poland, quite a big part of the society does not still reflect on ethical and moral aspects in the relation between a business entity and a consumer. In particular, a lot of people of the older generation brought up in the socialist tradition do not especially think about these issues. Education of this part of the

society is quite difficult because most of them are retired and dispersed people, reluctant to any proposed ideas. Due to that, the authors decided that the research would be conducted among young consumers, that is a social group which knows the mechanisms of modern economy because it was brought up in democracy and liberal market economy, and which seems to be more certain about its position and consumer rights. The exploration was conducted by means of a questionnaire. It was carried out in March and April 2015 in Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship and Wielkopolskie Voivodeship in Poland. The research involved 229 people aged 19-35. Among them, there were 56% of women (that is 128 people) and 44% of men (101 people). Figure 2 shows the structure of the responding consumers.

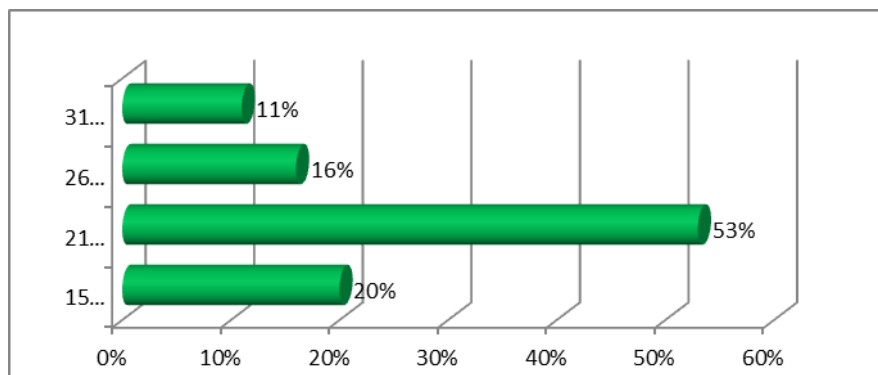


Figure 2 The structure of the responding consumers in Poland according to age in Zachodniopomorskie and Wielkopolskie Voivodeship in 2015

Source: own work on the basis of the questionnaire

From Figure 3, it appears that over a half of the respondents were people aged 21-25, whereas the youngest people constituted 20%.

The findings of the analyses on the basis of the respondents' answers are presented in Tables 5-10. The questions concerned a motive for choosing goods and services while shopping, including, in particular, such issues as: obeying ethical principles by an enterprise, honesty towards consumers, supporting local community and carrying out activities for environment protection.

Table 5

Is and how important is while buying a product or service meeting objectives of CSR by an enterprise?

very important	4%
important	52%
quite important	42%
not very important	1%
unimportant	1%

Source: own work on the basis of the questionnaire.

Table 6

Are products and services of enterprises, which take care of ethics, environment and undertake activities for society, of better quality than those of enterprises that do not obey these rules?

Definitely yes	3%
Rather yes	76%
Rather no	21%
Definitely no	0%

Source: own work on the basis of the questionnaire.

Table 7

Do you trust enterprises declaring that they implement CSR rules selflessly?

	Yes	No	I don't know
Do you check production conditions of products you buy?	84%	7%	9%
Are you willing to pay more for products of socially and environmentally responsible enterprises without checking the conditions?	62%	29%	9%
Do you trust all declarations made by enterprises about their activities for society and the natural environment?	65%	24%	11%

Source: own work on the basis of the questionnaire.

Table 8

What are reasons for enterprises to engage in activities of corporate social responsibility?

improving image	71%
building customer loyalty	62%
building employees' loyalty	34%
increasing profits	36%
encouraging people (often by using manipulation methods) to buy their goods and services	52%

Source: own work on the basis of the questionnaire.

Table 9

Assess objectively (express in percentage) your knowledge of activities undertaken by enterprises within CSR.

very big	0%
big	19%
small	57%
very small	21%
no	3%

Source: own work on the basis of the questionnaire.

Table 10

Have you and how often over the last 12 months:

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
actively searched for information on enterprises working ethically?	5%	7%	13%	56%	19%	0%
resigned from buying a product of an enterprise which activities are unethical, that is they harm the environment or exploit employees/break human rights?	4%	12%	47%	32%	7%	0%
recommended products of an enterprise to your friends/family because of its engagement in	5%	36%	27%	22%	10%	0%

environment protection or a local community and obedience to ethical principles?						
chosen a product because of the fact that it was produced ecologically, that is without negative impact on environment and health, as well as with respect for employees' rights?	6%	16%	41%	23%	14%	0%
bought products which were not tested on animals?	12%	51%	17%	5%	2%	13%
bought products made of recyclable waste?	4%	0%	47%	22%		27%
bought products which have the Fair Trade certification?	0%	0%	21%	11%	3%	65%
bought energy saving household appliances?	91%	6%	3%	0%	0%	0%
bought non-GMO products?	7%	6%	22%	41%	3%	21%
bought other, e.g. free-range eggs, meat without antibiotics or other chemical substances, etc.?	24%	16%	17%	34%	0%	9%

Source: own work on the basis of the questionnaire.

Implications of the research indicate that the ecological and ethical awareness of young Polish consumers increases. Acceptation and understanding of CSR ideas also increase. These trends are shown by the research findings which also prove that:

- More than three quarters of the responding young consumers observe a positive relation between a product quality and meeting objectives of corporate social responsibility by an enterprise.
- The majority of the responding young consumers is interested in production conditions of goods they buy, e.g. in materials used in production and their harmfulness, exploiting children in production, experiments not done on animals,
- Almost a half of the respondents declared that can resign from buying a product of an enterprise which works unethically, that is it exploits employees, breaks human rights and harms the natural environment.
- The majority of respondents chooses energy saving products.

However, it is alarming that although young consumers understand the importance of business entities activities within corporate social responsibility, more than a third of the respondents do not trust declarations made by enterprises

about their activities for society and the natural environment, or they do not know what to think about such declarations. According to the respondents, the main reasons for enterprises to engage in activities of CSR are, among others: improving image (71%) and building customer loyalty (62%). It should be also observed that more than a half of the respondents consider CSR to be a manipulation tool which aim is to use and provide true and false information regularly in order to achieve customers and the whole social groups.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The young Polish consumers' distrust of credibility of intentions to implement social responsibility of enterprises is not unjustified. In Poland, for years, large enterprises and international corporations have done a lot to be considered as socially responsible since they are the subject of a thorough observation and evaluation of both consumers and non-governmental organizations. Therefore, voluntary initiatives, which benefit, among others the natural environment, a local community and employees, are included in the management strategy of almost every large enterprise. Polish micro-, small and middle-sized enterprises do not properly value the significance of corporate social responsibility yet. They mainly focus on meeting short-term market objectives without the further strategic vision. The reason for being reluctant is very often not understanding the corporate social responsibility idea and identifying it with philanthropic activities. Nevertheless, every year, however slowly, it can be observed that awareness and understanding of the CSR concept among micro-, small and middle-sized enterprises increase. More and more entrepreneurs running a business realize that a moral or even axiological character of the relation between an enterprise and a consumer requires maintaining such a system which would not establish a dominant position of one of the sides. The idea is that in a system between an enterprise and a consumer, there is a balance of influence, credibility and honesty.

As it was emphasized at the beginning of the article, more and more enterprises observe changes in consumer attitudes, especially these resulting from considering by consumers other attributes of a product than just hedonistic ones. Thus, it is positive that enterprises take it as a clear signal that socially responsible enterprises inspire consumer trust and their competitiveness depends on developing and maintaining strong relations with consumers.

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