

A RESPONSIBLE POSITION

Corporate social responsibility is still in its infancy, but already it faces a backlash from a sceptical public and a cynical media. In the post-Exxon Valdez, post-Enron world, people find it hard to believe that business can genuinely act responsibly. Most of all, however, people are confused about what corporate social responsibility (CSR) really is.

"I think the backlash is justified in some cases, where companies are just using their profits to sponsor projects in local communities, but are not really concerned about what that project delivers and what the impacts are," says Lesley Brannan, former head of corporate social responsibility at United Utilities (UU), one of the Northwest's biggest companies.

The fact that until three years ago Brannan's job didn't even exist is testament to the rapid evolution of CSR. The conventional wisdom is that CSR was born out of the public relations disaster that followed the Exxon Valdez disaster, when oil giant Exxon managed to alienate huge swathes of the public with its apparently insensitive handling of the crisis. It began to dawn on companies that operating in splendid isolation from the communities and people that supported them was no longer an option.

But CSR has only really come of age in the last four or five years, and for many people it remains a hazily defined concept. In general, it's the idea that companies should operate in a way that is transparent and which takes into account an awareness of the social impact of their actions, as well as concerns about the environment and sustainable development.

One thing CSR is not, says Brannan, is sponsorship. Part of the reason there has been a backlash, she says, is because some companies have been guilty of throwing a little money into the local community, labelling it CSR and milking it for all the PR they can get.

Yet at the same time, Brannan agrees that many companies have been afraid to be seen as too prescriptive. It's as if, having handed over the cash, they might undermine its value if they take too much interest in how it's spent. None of which squares with Brannan's own view of CSR. The fact that CSR is another, admittedly new, aspect of business does nothing to undermine its value, she says.

"Something I am really passionate about is the belief that companies should not be embarrassed or shy about corporate responsibility having a bottom line impact.

"A company is going to make a profit at the end of the day. It's not a charity. It's not a social enterprise. It's a profit making thing. But it can make profits in a responsible way and that responsible behaviour can sometimes enhance profits."

Brannan would like to see the government do more to make CSR better understood and practiced by business. Whilst she opposes regulation, arguing that it would suppress creativity and innovation and encourage a tick box approach, she would like to see more case studies and examples of the benefits of CSR to small and medium sized businesses and large corporations.

Still only in her twenties, Brannan has been with UU since she graduated with a degree in environmental science from Lancaster University in 1998. At first she went around the company as a management trainee on the road to becoming a wastewater specialist, a period she describes as "really good fun and challenging."

Even so, she was on the look out for something less analytical when she spotted a job as a community partnership assistant being advertised within the group corporate centre. It was a big change but one that inspired her. As well as working with community groups, Brannan was soon spending a lot of time on UU's involvement in the upcoming Commonwealth Games. UU were 'Community Partner' to the Games, ensuring people from deprived communities got to see the action.

Then, five months after she'd started, her boss left on maternity leave and Brannan suddenly found herself managing the company's CSR programme.

Those were the early days of CSR at UU and Brannan's understanding of what it is has grown in

tandem with the company's efforts to embed it more deeply in the corporate culture. Which is another of Brannan's central opinions on the subject.

"It's not just about communities and the environment, it's about how we allow people to have a good work-life balance and about how we support their health and improve their working environment." For Brannan, CSR is a two way street, reaching out into the community but also back into the company.

Perhaps the obvious example is Brannan's own experience at UU. Less than a year after working on the company's role in the Commonwealth Games, she was out in the City of Manchester stadium competing for Wales in the women's hammer throwing.

"I've been really lucky," she says. "I get half a day a week off work to train. That has enabled me to travel to a coach in Yorkshire, or complete 2 training sessions on that day, which has had a massive impact."

"If we can support and encourage people and keep them happy in their work then they'll perform better."

MORE INFORMATION:

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**LESLEY BRANNAN, PARTNERSHIP MANAGER
AT UNITED UTILITIES AND HAMMER THROWER
FOR WALES.**

TURNING POINTS

1998

Graduates with an honours degree in environmental science after studying at Lancaster University and the University of Western Ontario, Canada. Joins United Utilities as a graduate trainee.

2001

Changes direction to take up a position as a community partnership assistant. Within five months she is managing the company's CSR programme after her boss goes off on maternity leave.

2002

Competes for Wales in the hammer competition of the Commonwealth Games in Manchester, just failing to make the finals by 13 cm.

2004

Seconded to Groundwork Northwest, in the hope of extending across the country the close relationship between the two organisations that already exists in the Northwest.

