AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY BEHAVIOURS OF REGIONAL SMALL BUSINESSES IN RELATION TO THEIR IMPACT ON THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT: The modern concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) involves the performance of companies in financial, social and environmental terms and includes the impact of business activities on various stakeholders, including local community and the immediate environment. Although small business enterprises hold a central position in the Australian economy and society, previous research about CSR has been mainly focused on large corporations. Small businesses should also contribute towards meeting the needs of current and future generations by embracing the principles of social and environmental responsibility. The researchers investigated the awareness and current social responsibility initiatives of small business owner/managers, and the challenges and opportunities of implementing CSR in small businesses in the regional area of Whyalla, South Australia - an industrial city and a hub of small business activity. The project was conducted jointly between the local campus of the University of South Australia and the Whyalla Economic Development Board (WEDB) and the findings will be used to enable the university and the WEDB to work towards enhancing the social and environmental responsibility of both business and society in the Whyalla region.

1. INTRODUCTION

Small firms and their practices play a significant role in the Australian economy and society. Fran Bailey, Minister for Small Business and Tourism, recently commented that "small business is more important than ever", with small business driving innovation, exports and jobs growth (Ministry, Tourism and Resources, 2007).   Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are important for future development and their economic impact should not be underestimated.   To be economically sustainable, i.e. more efficient and profitable in the long run, small businesses need to operate in socially and environmentally responsible ways and aspire to maximise stakeholder value by focusing on the "triple bottom line" encompassing the three components of economic, environmental and social performance (also referred to as "Economy, Ecology & Equity" or "People, Planet & Profits" (Savitz & Weber, 2006)).

The purpose of the Whyalla Economic Development Board (WEDB) is,

amongst others, "to promote the practical involvement of industrial and commercial companies in the development and general well-being of the community" and "to support the development and implementation of programs and projects that facilitate employment, economic and community development for Whyalla" (WEDB, 2006: 5). This research has therefore been undertaken to understand the unique business realities, challenges and opportunities of small retail businesses in practicing corporate social responsibility (CSR).

2. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility

The study of CSR is currently very prevalent and receives much academic attention, although it has also moved up the corporate agenda. The European commission (2001) defines CSR as "a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment." CSR involves complex issues such as environmental protection, human resource management, health and safety, relations with local communities, suppliers and consumers (European Commission, 2001: 5).

Traditionally, two different perspectives on the CSR concept has lead to the 'stakeholder-shareholder' debate. The shareholder perspective (also referred to as the 'classical view') is that the only responsibility of business managers is to serve the interests of shareholders by seeking profits. On the other hand, more recent definitions of CSR describe it through the lens of the stakeholder theory and suggest that other groups and constituents are affected by a business's activities and that CSR concerns the way a company governs the relationship between the firms and all these stakeholders (Post, Preston & Saschs, 2002). A large number of researchers in these areas of study have mostly drawn on stakeholder theory. Post, Preston & Saschs (2002) describe stakeholders as the people and entities that contribute to an organisation's wealth creating activities, and that are therefore its potential beneficiaries and/or risk bearers. CSR involves the performance of companies in monetary, social and environmental terms and includes the impact of business activities on suppliers, customers, employees, local community and the environment. The modern viewpoint of CSR implies that companies voluntarily integrate social and environmental concerns in their operations and interaction with stakeholders (Post, Preston & Saschs, 2002).

Five key elements of CSR are that: business entities have responsibilities beyond the production of goods and services at a profit; their responsibilities involve helping to solve important social problems, especially those they have helped to create; they have a broader constituency than shareholders; they have impacts that go beyond simple marketplace transactions; and they serve a wider range of human values than can be captured by a sole focus on economic values (Branco & Rodrigues, 2007).

2.2 Small Business and CSR

Hornsby and others (1994) referred to "business practices in light of human values" and called it business ethics. According to them ethics is "the study of

whatever is right and good for humans." Studies on the ethical perceptions of small business owners (Hornsby, 1994; Spence & Rutherfoord, 2001) indicated that there were important differences in the nature of business ethics in small firms. Owner-managed small firms, where the owner makes personal choices about the allocation of resources, are able to be very adaptive. Small business owners face many business decisions with ethical challenges, such as employee problems, product pricing, legal problems, product quality and government regulatory problems. The studies indicate that there are underlying dimensions of the concepts of small business ethics which are broader than simple adherence to the law. The owner's value system is therefore a critical component of the ethical considerations that surrounds a business decision (Hornsby, 1994). In SMEs the acceptance of CSR is largely a factor of personal attitudes of the owner/manager (Sweeney, 2007) and small firms are dominated by relationships of trust and openness (Spence & Rutherfoord, 2001).

Closely linked to the ethical decision-making is the viewpoint about and attitude towards the social and environmental responsibility of the business. SMEs are under increasing pressure to address environmental issues from a range of sources, including legislation, supply chain, trade associations and customers. There are also an increasing number of commercial pressures, such as significant cost savings associated with effective management of waste and resources, protection against future cost increases (taxes, waste disposal and transport), market opportunities for environmental goods and services, demands made by insurers, financial institutions and shareholders and contract specifications (Friedman, Miles & Adams, 2000).

A study by Rutherfoord and others (2000) investigated what is achievable in the engagement of small firms with environmental policy. They found that there was a difference in the practice of small firms, the levels of intervention and support, as well as the attitude of owner/managers to environmental issues. Smaller businesses are likely to be less "eco-efficient" than larger firms, mostly because larger firms can benefit from economies of scale regarding resource efficiencies. For instance, it is estimated that smaller firms contribute at least 60 percent to carbon emissions (Rutherfoord, Blackburn & Spence, 2000).

Addressing environmental awareness is a complex issue for SMEs, exacerbated by a lack of resources, including time and environmental expertise (Friedman, Miles & Adams, 2000). As SMEs are constrained by time and financial resources, long-term investment projects in CSR are often not of immediate concern. Spence & Rutherfoord (2001: 131) also acknowledge that owner/managers of small businesses have a limited capacity to deal with issues that are not directly affecting the survival of the firm, due to pressure of having to deal with multiple tasks, cash flow restrictions and other short-term problems. On the other hand, being smaller and flatter may place small businesses in a better position than large firms to take advantage of the changing needs of society (Sweeney, 2007).

2.3 The Impact of being Socially and Environmentally Responsible

Spence and Rutherfoord (2001: 131) identified four ethical frames used by

owner/managers in 20 small firms in the United Kingdom. These frames are:

1. Profit maximisation priority – the drive for money; "as much of it as possible, as quick as possible".
2. Subsistence priority – "ensuring the survival of their firm and security of their livelihood."
3. Enlightened self-interest – being active in social issues which they perceive will have a positive influence on their profit and business in the long term.
4. Social priority – the belief that work is more about a long-term choice of lifestyle than a profit and wealth-maximising mechanism. Social values and actions take priority above maximising profit.

According to this research it is not 'unbusiness-like' to acknowledge social issues. Ethically and socially aware behaviour is a normal and acceptable (even expected) element of business life. Milton Friedman's assertion of 1970 - that the social responsibility of business is only to increase profits - is therefore no longer sufficient. Singhapakdi et al. (2001) argue that, intuitively, ethics and social responsibility should have a positive impact on the success of an organisation, because consumers make ethical judgements that are likely to influence their purchases. A number of literature sources (Deegan, 2002; Parker, 2003; Henderson et al., 2004; Branco & Rodrigues, 2007) agree that one of the reasons why businesses should pursue strategies in social and environmental areas is to survive and succeed. CSR is increasingly seen as a source of competitive advantage and not as an end in itself. It is no longer seen as detrimental to a firm's profitability, but considered as somehow benefiting the business as a whole - to be economically sustainable, more efficient and profitable in the long run. The principles of CSR incorporate environmental and social perspectives in pursuit of sustainable development. Firms can therefore engage in CSR because they can reap benefits from such engagement.

Whilst the primary role of business is to produce the goods and services that society needs, there is also interdependence between business and society in the need for a stable environment. Branco and Rodrigues (2007) emphasise the importance of the environment in saying that "regardless of any stakeholders' pressures, actions which lead to things such as the conservation of the earth's natural resources or bio-diversity preservation, are morally praiseworthy".

An individual's perception about whether ethics and social responsibility contribute to organisational effectiveness is likely to be a critical antecedent of whether he/she even perceives an ethical problem in a given situation. The argument is that managers must first perceive ethics and social responsibility to be vital to organisational effectiveness before their behaviours will become more ethical and reflect greater social responsibility.

3. THE RESEARCH

3.1 Aims of the Research

The investigation was undertaken through collaboration between the University of South Australia's Centre for Regional Engagement and the WEDB

with the ultimate purpose of developing socially and environmentally responsible small businesses. According to Moir (2001) Australian business is experiencing a transition in expectations of its social role. Part of the reason for this is that the social role contributes to the continuing health and growth of business. The purpose of the study was to investigate the sustainability of small businesses in Whyalla through social and environmental responsibility, i.e. whether these businesses aim to increase their profitability by 'doing the right thing'. The focus of previous CSR research was mostly on larger firms with little attention given to the socially responsible activities of SMEs. Small businesses are often not researched as a group because it is too expensive to reach them (Rutherfoord, Blackburn & Spence, 2000). This research contributes by analysing how CSR is understood and implemented, specifically from a small business perspective in a regional area in South Australia. The results from this collaborative research project will strengthen the WEDB's ability to deliver information and resources to support small businesses in the Whyalla region.

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:
1. What is the attitude of small businesses in the Whyalla regional area towards social and environmental responsibility?
2. What social and environmental responsibility initiatives, with regards to the different stakeholders, are currently undertaken by small businesses?

While this project was broad, covering the areas included in these research questions, the focus of this paper is on the social and environmental responsibility initiatives undertaken by the small retail businesses in relation to their local community and immediate environment.

3.2 Research Method

Qualitative research was performed where participants were included based on their personal experience as it related to the focus of the study. The research specifically involved a strategy of investigation based on structured face-to-face interviews. A characteristic of conducting face-to-face interviews is the ability to gain rich and comprehensive data that gives valuable insights and understanding (Sweeney, 2007).

The interview participants were the owner/managers of businesses operating within Whyalla, South Australia. The owner/manager was chosen to access the potentially strongest influence within the firm. In small businesses, ownership and management are usually not separated. Control therefore remains in the hands of the owners, which enables them to make choices about the allocation of resources. The attention given to and acceptance of a specific issue therefore depends on the personal attitudes of the owner/manager (Sweeney, 2007).

The use of face-to-face interviews as the primary research tool was appropriate in this study, as it allowed the owner/managers to define in their own terms the challenges and opportunities in their business, as well as elaborate on the social and environmental responsibility of their business. In her research on the corporate social responsibility of Canadian small businesses, Princic (2003: 10) found that the term corporate social responsibility did not "resonate" with SMEs because it does not reflect their "hands-on involvement with the

community, their environmental concerns and their relationship with other stakeholders". SMEs tend to define CSR informally. Sweeney (2007) also found that respondents from small businesses did not identify with the term Corporate Social Responsibility and found the term to be "grandiose", "daunting" and "confusing". CSR is therefore not the most appropriate term to use in the SME sector, especially as it contains the word "corporate". This study was therefore not presented to the participants as being about CSR, but about business sustainability through social and environmental responsibility, amidst the challenges and opportunities of implementing such responsible initiatives. This was also done to avoid "socially desired" responses. The interviews therefore allowed the contextualised discussion of how small businesses in Whyalla are operated and the emphasis that is placed on social responsibility.

The sample was confined to small businesses from the retail and services sector, located within Whyalla. The city of Whyalla is one of the industrial hubs of the Upper Spencer Gulf region of South Australia and has a population of approximately 22 500 people. It is currently in a unique situation as major growth in the surrounding mineral resources industry offers significant potential flow-on benefits for businesses in the city (WEDB, 2006). Potential participants were identified from the WEDB database and a written invitation to participate in the research project was sent to them. Although there is no single, uniformly accepted definition of a small business, the criterion of businesses with fewer than 20 employees was used to select these participants (Burgess, 2003). However, it was determined during the interviews that two of the firms now employed between 20 and 28 staff, and due to their valuable contribution, it was decided to keep these businesses in the sample. Eighteen small business owner/managers were included in the final sample.

The interview questions were piloted on owner/managers of two small businesses in Whyalla that were not included in the main study. The aim of this preliminary investigation was to check that they captured the information required to complete the aims of the research and identify any ambiguities or problem areas. The questions comprised a predetermined core of open-ended questions to define the areas of CSR and to determine the general perceptions about social and environmental initiatives in small businesses. The interviews also allowed the opportunity to probe and expand the participant responses to structured questions to give the participants a chance to explain their opinions. The interviewers encouraged the business owners to discuss the issues in their own terms, related to their own business environment. All questions explored the responses of business managers in as much detail as possible, to uncover new factors and ideas.

The interviews focused on demographics and background of participants; attitudes of small business owner/managers towards CSR; current initiatives being undertaken and the reasons for implementing these initiatives; the barriers to being socially and environmentally responsible; and what type of follow up support may be required.

During the interview, notes were taken and the discussion audio-recorded. Recording the interviews allowed the researchers to participate in the discussions

as well as taking notes. The interview transcriptions containing the data collected in the interviews were analysed and categorised according to the emerging themes using the NVivo8 software.

3.3 Limitations of the Research

It is acknowledged that the small sample size and subjective nature of qualitative research limits the degree to which the results can be generalised. Also, questions on environmental issues can easily be misunderstood and the owner/managers may have experienced difficulty in interpreting the questions.

4. RESULTS

The research aimed to determine which specific initiatives were being undertaken by the small businesses to enhance their relationship with society and the environment. The owner/managers were asked whether their business was actively involved in the local community in any way, for example, by donating goods or services to local organisations, supporting a local charity, or sponsoring local events; whether they assess and manage the impact of their business on the environment; what steps they take to improve their neighbourhood, conserve energy, and minimise waste; and to elaborate on any other social and environmental behaviours they were involved in. The findings were as follows:

4.1 Local Community Engagement

All but two of the respondents (89 percent) supported community clubs and organisations. Those mentioned were football, golf, bowling, basketball, cycling, netball and hockey clubs, a dance studio, and the radio control car club. One typical response was:

I don't think there's too much we're not involved with and I don't know if that's because I'm too nice or because we believe in the community. We donate goods to police golf days, 5 or 6 footy clubs, soccer club ... I sponsor the junior sport page in the Whyalla News; any worthwhile event that we think is community minded .

Generally the support to the these organisations was in the form of gifts and vouchers for fund raising, but was also provided in the donation of goods and services such as parts and accessories, equipment, trophies, tee shirts and uniforms. One of the comments received was:

We take all of our spare parts down to the track each month so if anybody breaks something they can fix it before their next race; we donate money and goods to the club to keep it going.

Giving time and energy were also mentioned, along with providing services such as photocopying, and running fashion parades.

The businesses also supported community events such as the Fishy Fringe (a local fair held over the Easter period), skate board competition, Christmas Eve Street Party, and the Blue Light Discos. Donations were made to support organisations such as the local branch of the Breast Cancer Council, RSPCA, Lions Club, the Ambulance Service and Riding for the Disabled. Support was given to Schools in the form of "talks" to students about their business activities,

giving presentations during 'Business Week' activities, providing trophies for awards, purchasing products made by the students, and allowing the students informational site visits to their business premises. One the business owner described how he provided expertise to the community by using his boat and diving skills to assist in search and rescue. He added:

We do a lot of work for the environmental companies and we don't often charge full commercial rates for let's say a study, or they might want some help or services or boat or whatever and we'll always supply that free of charge.

Receiving lower payment for work appears to be a feature of doing business in Whyalla. Another owner also mentioned: "we don't charge in Whyalla the rate that would be charged in Adelaide".

Community engagement was often considered worthwhile as there were benefits for the business. One owner discussed his role on the City Council, which took a lot of his time during the day but provided opportunity to network and promote the business. Other owners said it was important to be involved for "goodwill"; one added "it's all advertising because you're supporting the community, sometimes it's more effective than a half page ad in the paper you know".

Lobbying with government departments, spending time in media work to raise concerns relating to environmental issues, and "pushing" for beautification were also given as forms of involvement.

It appears that a lack of available time was a key factor in not being involved with the community. This was evidenced by comments received such as:

It's certainly something I will definitely be engaged in with more help and more staff, so that I have time to go off and do these things ... certainly local communities would definitely be on the agenda.

I have in the past ... But now I don't do something on a regular basis. I don't have time.

While the small businesses were generally keen to assist organisations and activities within their local community, the high frequency of requests for support often becomes a burden and is expensive to them in terms of time and money. The owner/managers reported that "small business gets hit a lot"; "it's very hard to say 'no'"; and that it was important for them to decide what charities or events they would support and to budget for it. Some of the comments were:

I reckon just about 90% that comes through gets something out of us; it probably is too much in reality.

We sponsored local events and then we pulled out. Like everything else we have to be very mindful of the challenge between doing something for nothing and the bank manager. It's a balance you know we run a business at the end of the day.

4.2 Environmental Impact

When the participants were specifically asked "Do you in any way assess and manage the impact of your business on the environment?", a number of business owners answered "Not really, no". However, after asking a few more questions, they realised that they do make an effort, even if only to recycle and minimise waste of electricity. It was found that the following environmentally responsible actions were undertaken by the businesses:

4.2.1 Recycling

Almost all the firms mentioned that they were involved in recycling. Approximately half had large recycle bins that they used for packaging material such as cardboard boxes, if they could not be reused. Milk and drink containers, bottles and cans, glass, pieces of timber and plastic bubble wrap were other items that were regularly recycled. One owner mentioned that they collected dust in a special container. It is noteworthy that only one person reported that they recycled ink, toner, and printer cartridges.

4.2.2 Power and Lights

The businesses generally ensured their lights and air-conditioning were on only when needed and that machinery was turned off until use. Some firms conserved energy and reduced costs by only using every second row of lights or two fluoro tubes instead of three. Other firms have converted to smarter lights that use less energy, or are trialling LED lighting to reduce costs and the amount of heat and emissions. Many businesses turned off their lights at night, or used only security lighting. As evidenced by the following comments, conserving energy through the controlled use of lighting was a common initiative undertaken by the businesses in managing their impact on the environment:

We don't light the whole place up - I mean if we need to put the lights on we put the lights on, if we don't, we don't.

I actually don't put my shop lights on at night because the spots in the window just generate way too much electricity so I try and keep my power down as low as I can.

Another business that used a lot of electricity mentioned that they had a special arrangement with an energy company that involved them paying "a bit extra" but helped reduce greenhouse gases.

4.2.3 Fuel

Several owner/managers aimed to reduce fuel costs by planning their sales and deliveries so that travel was decreased. One business had changed to using fuel efficient four-stroke motors and introduced a group-based transport system. Another business aimed to "think smarter" to reduce the number of trucks being used. Some comments received were:

From a parts delivery point of view, we do five deliveries at once rather than go in and out.

We only ever take one vehicle out to the site, so instead of having each employee going in their own vehicles to work, I supply a vehicle and everybody goes out in one vehicle.

We've tried to streamline it now by using our trucks less and doing it smarter - where we used the one big truck we tend to use two small ones.

4.2.4 Other Products

Many businesses worked towards reducing their environmental impact in other ways such as putting kitchen waste into a compost bin; and using bags, containers and cutlery that are compostable, environmentally friendly cleaning products, and labels printed on recycled paper with vegetable dye inks. Items such as envelopes and bubble wrap covers were reused, oil drums cut up and reused, small boxes reused for packaging, and paper cut up and used for notes. The carpet store reused the carpet poles; the fashion store reused the coat hangers. Several owners discussed their disposal of oils adding that oil and coolants were disposed of according to Environmental Protection Authority laws. One owner avoided waste by saving the used oil for recycling, commenting: "I keep my oil and that goes to some gentleman who comes around and makes fuel out of it". Only one business mentioned that there was "no wastage of water".

4.3 Other Initiatives

When asked whether there were any other initiatives or matters the owner/manager would like to discuss in relation to assessing and managing the impact of their business on the environment, several indicated they were not in a position to turn off air conditioning, and that it was difficult for them to save on power and lights:

We're not in an environment where you can have lights on or off, we don't have little rooms, only one big room.

We burn a lot of energy because we put more lights in and it's essential in that sort of business to have your lights, and the colours and the product stand out more.

One manager referred to the cost of switching over to energy efficient technology:

In terms of pure financials, for us to make an investment and change over to those we probably would have to be investing about another $50-60 000 in this business. The reality is that it's not financially possible for us to do that based on the return that we would get by being environmentally nice.

Lack of time was also cited as limiting the implementation of environmental initiatives:

It was always my plan to inform people about the different initiatives of the shop because I do think it's also a good marketing exercise to let customers know what you are doing ... you know, time again - so that information has never made it to the walls, but I certainly want it to be there.

However, there appears to be an appreciation among the firms that environmental awareness makes good business sense. The importance placed on undertaking environmentally beneficial initiatives is indicated by the following comment:

I think that most probably one is unwise if something is shown to be cost saving in that sense and better for the environment, not to do it, because I think in the longer term it will be more costly if you don't.

Another firm mentioned that they were involved in an environmental monitoring program, commenting: *"We do a lot of video work, soil sampling, counting, and measuring"*.

4.4 Steps to Improve the Neighbourhood

The owner/managers were asked what steps they take to improve the neighbourhood around their premises. Most replied that they swept the footpaths and washed the windows; some painted their building. However, as indicated by the following comment, keeping the environment around their business "clean and tidy" was sometimes problematic, particularly when they did not own the building or were located near industry.

We clean and tidy and periodically hope the landlady will do some upgrading, ... my husband tries to come in about once a fortnight and pressure cleans the area and there's really not much else you can do.

While there was some reliance on landlords to keep the premises attractive, there appeared to be a willingness among the businesses to keep the area, including any gardens, neat. Even though he did not own the building, one manager had graphic art painted on the outside of the shop to increase its appeal and had added a non-slip finish to the entrance steps to increase customer safety. Another manager reported that he aimed to improve the neighbourhood around his premises by developing a network with the adjoining shops; they shared a recycling bin, and advertising campaigns, and generally supported each other. On the other hand, another owner indicated a lack of support for environmental awareness initiatives when he replied:

It's enough keeping up with what's inside the shop let alone what's outside the shop; I couldn't even imagine what you would do anyway.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In today's marketplace it is becoming increasingly important for firms to demonstrate that they are operating in a manner that is supportive of society and its objectives. This includes the firm's interaction with its local community and its environmental policies. The small businesses interviewed generally had community engagement initiatives in place, ranging from donating goods and services to local organisations and charities to sponsoring events and school projects. However, in many cases the managers did not think of all the interventions that they were involved in during the first discussion. Princic (2003: 3) refers to this as "doing good without knowing it". When asked about their responsible initiatives, many owner/managers only mentioned one or two and only realised that there were more after being prompted during the interview.

Many of the interviewees did not consider these practices as particularly 'responsible', but just as good business and referred to the business benefits resulting from these initiatives. However, many businesses did not make interventions only because they expected their business to benefit, but because it was the right thing to do.

A substantial number of businesses made efforts to minimise environmental damage. This was especially noticeable in their concern for the avoidance of unnecessary waste of energy and materials. Most of the respondents referred to waste recycling and conserving energy as means of caring for the environment. In some instances environmental care was associated with cost saving, not extra burdens. Other initiatives mentioned included reducing the use of vehicles, planning deliveries, car pooling, and using environmentally friendly products. There was also concern for aesthetics with many managers making an effort to keep the neighbourhood around their premises clean and attractive.

The findings of this research will assist the WEDB to play an active role in developing sustainable, socially responsible small businesses in the Whyalla region. It could do this by creating a forum for sharing experiences and giving and receiving ideas; to inform about the business benefits of CSR; and to distribute information about the latest initiatives for businesses to become socially and environmentally responsible. The WEDB can provide practical advice on how to implement CSR and help small businesses recognise and understand that they are already practising CSR at some level.

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