**The use of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within strategic alliances as a tool to enhance SME relational marketing**

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**Keywords:** SME relational marketing; Discourse Analysis; Discursive Practice; CSR; symbiosis; strategic alliance and fit.

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**Abstract**

Objectives: To examine the trend toward the use of CSR by SMEs in strategic alliances when, for example, endeavouring to enhance brand image. This approach can be instrumental in affecting change driven out of the necessity to use limited resources as effectively and efficiently as possible. This paper explains how symbiosis achieved in an alliance can become important to the success of an enterprise and how this is driving SMEs toward such alliances in a more positive way.

Prior Work: Much work has been done on relational marketing in the SME context. There is now an increased awareness of the positive impact that the use of strategic alliances can have on organisations’ marketing effort but much is left to be done, especially in the SME arena.

Approach: This study falls within the social constructivist paradigm. Discourse Analysis was employed to make sense of data generated from a small sample of SME and support agency participants. The study employed the semi-structured interview that, when transcribed, provided research texts that were then analysed through a Discourse Analysis lens.

Results: Some of the discursive practices that emerged in the study underline the importance of CSR where the main implication is that small businesses can lead the way in achieving symbiosis by the practice of CSR within a strategic alliance. This paper underlines the importance of SME relational marketing and concludes that there is a belief that CSR has positive influences on issues such as brand image, increased loyalty and associated pricing. The paper suggests that the use of a strategic alliance between the SME and a relevant cause can provide symbiosis through this relationship approach where ‘strategic fit’ or matching is an essential ingredient.

I**mplications:** The paper underlines the importance of SME relational marketing and of the ability to create and launch a brand with the help of CSR within a strategic alliance to create effective and efficient performance.

Value: SME managers, educators, trainers, developers and those involved in SME support should find this paper helpful in understanding the use of CSR within strategic alliances in the marketing arena that facilitates the achievement of effective and efficient engagement with target audiences when launching and building brands.

**Keywords:** SME relational marketing; Discourse Analysis; Discursive Practice; CSR; symbiosis; strategic alliance and fit.

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**Introduction**

## Achieving a kind of symbiosis

## This paper illustrates how symbiosis can be achieved by a relationship approach to marketing in SMEs. The limited resources associated with smaller firms and the need to be effective and efficient especially when affecting change can be helped by achieving a kind of symbiosis within an alliance or partnership as part of relational marketing effort. For example the launch of a small business-owned brand and how changes in the ways in which causes approach things, enabling them to benefit from and are driving them toward such alliances in a more positive way (Copley, McLean and Baker, 2012). Involvement with CSR is now better understood within small firm contexts even though in the past some have questioned this and pointed to the difficulties of achieving engagement with and understanding of CSR beyond obvious and specific practices of businesses where the “values of the founding director in the implementation of CSR” is critical (Murillo and Lazano (2006, p227). These authors suggest that SMEs “have a long way to go towards learning how to inform both internal and external stakeholders of their best practices” and that a “favourable framework for responsible competitiveness” is required on the part of public organisations when dealing with CSR and SMEs.

**The aim of this paper**

The aim of this paper is to examine the trend toward the use of CSR by SMEs often when seeking to enhance brand or corporate image. The idea of the use of strategic alliances between an SME and a relevant cause is not new but it is more recent in commercial terms than the long-established use of CSR by larger organisations. The central idea is that using CSR can provide symbiosis through this relationship approach where ‘strategic fit’ or matching is an essential ingredient. An integral part of this process may be the nature of the entrepreneurial principals involved. This paper explains how the symbiosis achieved in an alliance can become important to the success of an enterprise and how this is driving SMEs toward such alliances in a more positive way.

1. **Background**

### SMEs and relationships

Trust, commitment and loyalty (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) remain central concepts to relationship marketing which has developed for over two decades to include many elements, for example horizontal and vertical trade relationships as reported by De Wulf and Odekerken-Schroder (2001), relationship quality (Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990), and co-marketing alliances (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993). Forms of alliances or partnerships have emerged as the means to achieve objectives of the organisations involved. Clearly there are management issues within alliances and partnerships where much is centred on accountability, ensuring “both internal and external stakeholder voices are heard” (Seitanidi, 2009, p.90). In terms of non-profit organisations (NPO) Seitanidi adds the level of “institutionalisation of the relationship to address any possible skills gaps” as a factor where it is the NPO’s role to “safeguard social standards and high quality program implementation”.

Forms of relationships might be a natural thing to do for SMEs, the SME context being where much has been learned about relationships (Barnes, 1995). Here the special status of principals, commitment, trust, power symmetry and personal interaction are essential to the working of relationships (Newman et al, 2004). Certainly it has been known for some time that relationship marketing can be cost-efficient in SMEs because retaining customers is problematic for SMEs (Fournier et al, 1998) but to win and keep them through building relationships is cost-effective (Buttle, 1996) and means greater profits (Reicheld and Sasser, 1990). Customer retention can be achieved through personal contact networks (Coviello and Munro, 1995) whether informal or formal (Filiatrault and Lapierre, 1997). Interpersonal contact with primary customers has been the norm where word of mouth is key, especially with manufacturing SMEs, advertising as a means of communication being generally seen in a negative light i.e. ineffective and a waste of money (Hogarth-Scott, Watson and Wilson, 1996).

**Large firm CSR is different to SME CSR**

Spence and Perrini (2009) suggest that the incidence of CSR activity is greater than one might expect in SMEs but is different to that of larger firms because it is community based and informal. While larger firms have had the natural inclination to benefit from corporate giving, smaller firms have tended to not take advantage of such situations. If large corporation CSR and SME CSR are different it may be the case, as Morsing and Perrini (2009) suggest, that the ‘business case for CSR’ is being presented after asking the wrong questions i.e. in order to better understand SME engagement with CSR more of the ‘how’ and ‘with what impact’ questions should be asked, a sentiment that resonates with the nature of and purpose of this paper.

There are numerous studies that have emerged in recent years that provide a comparison between large and smaller firm CSR. For example Rodrigues et al (2011) looked at the application of CSR in the Portuguese (larger firm) context of Delta Cafes and perception of the brand whereby there is a willingness to pay a higher price based on perceptions of a higher order image because of CSR and the salience of identity it provides that enhances brand image and loyalty. In contrast Gelbmann (2010) provides the Austrian case of the application of CSR when an official Quality Seal was directed at SMEs to help them communicate sustainability credentials via a visual addition to the brand identity. This latter situation is not without its problems. As Gelmann points out having the Seal does not guarantee practice, it potentially being a snap shot view and therefore regular checks would be needed.

In a comparative study of Italian large and small companies by Perrini, Russo and Tencati (2007, p.285) the authors found that it was the large firms that chose to communicate externally about their CSR activities and that large firms are “more likely to identify relevant stakeholders and meet their requirements through specific and formal CSR strategies”. Santos (2011) demonstrates that, while CSR takes on an informal, non-structured character in SMEs it has been incorporated into the daily management of such companies. In contrast to the workings of large companies, SME CSR is internally focused. CSR is obtained from paying attention to “eco-efficiency, a better social climate or a higher profile in the local community”. Santos suggests the idea of the entrepreneur as a business citizen with SME CSR being “located on the border between entrepreneurialism and business management” and being that citizen.

**SME CSR opportunities and challenges**

The possibilities for the use (and not exploitation) of CSR by small firms within a relational marketing framework are extant and this offers up opportunities and of course challenges. The study of Danish firms by Nielsen and Thomsen (2009b) suggested that SMEs “have no interest in turning their local and authentic practice into a forced marketing and branding exercise, leaving them with an artificial picture of who they are and strive to be in the future” (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009b, p.83). This situation in today’s economic climate is not sustainable. Philanthropy and CSR may be laden with ethical and moral issues but there is perhaps no longer room for such issues to be isolated from the bigger picture and “isolated from strategic communication including public relations and reputation management” (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009a, p.176). If SME owner-managers only focus on internal stakeholders then this is opportunity lost. If, however, internal stakeholder communication is used as a platform for adopting a strategic CSR position the problem then becomes one of how to use this platform to communicate CSR to external stakeholders (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009a). For example, the role and influence of CSR on the development of image and position has been examined in the Spanish context by Fraj-Andres et al (2012, p.266) who suggest an SME has to be proactive and consistent in order for image and positioning to be positive but that “reactive and opportunistic firms may be penalised by stakeholders” (e.g. customers) i.e. a negative perception that could result in damage to the brand and the business.

**CSR is rooted in but more than philanthropy**

The past is littered with examples of corporate giving being rooted in philanthropy. In recent times there has been a realisation that philanthropy on its own is not an option for many individuals and for companies. The EC (2014) suggest that SMEs may not use the term CSR but they do have close relations with employees, the community and business partners, there being a natural responsibility approach to business and an informal and intuitive approach to CSR. This is in contrast to the many countries that are now pushing a social and environmental impact agenda that should show up in annual reports (Luetkenhorst, 2004). Fassin (2008) agrees that there is pressure to include social reporting but much of this applies to larger organisations so that the treatment of CSR in MNCs is not the same as in SMEs. Fassin argues that the SME experience of idealised claims of CSR in MNCs are inconsistent with reality and that SMEs are experiencing this in the supply chain, CSR needing a specific approach when dealing with SMEs that needs to be based on the nature and character of the SME and those who run/own the SME. There is a need for responsible business practice (RBP) via the right attitudes and corporate culture and therefore this can be delivered informally by SMEs without the need for a formal approach. This tallies with the idea that there can be such a thing as a CSR corporate identity as suggested by, for example, Otubanjo (2013).

**CSR activities in differing levels**

Rasi et al (2010) maintain that SMEs have not yet incorporated the concept of environmental sustainability in their strategic planning. This study looked at the drivers for environmental initiatives in SMEs, particularly in developing countries, and recognised that legislation is not the only mechanism for change. Relationships between SMEs and other players in the supply chain, customers and the SMEs own employees should be recognised and valued as should the power of information sharing relating to environmental technologies. The SME’s ability to adapt to significant environmental, technical, organisational and social change and pressure is critical. Similarly Kornican and Ivija (2008) have suggested that CSR awareness exists on 4 different levels, those of Government, community, company and the individual, there being a need for simultaneous communication with each for CSR advancement in society. Santos (2011) similarly suggests that CSR practices exist at the social, economic and environmental levels. Ryan et al (2010) argue that SMEs have very different motivations when engaging in RBP which is more than CSR. Four types or categories are suggested that constitute RBP in an SME; market driven, environmentally driven, socially driven and being a sustainable entrepreneur.

**Motivations, benefits and restrictions on SME CSR**

Santos (2011) discusses “the motivations, perceived benefits, existing obstacles; and the types of support and strategies that render possible an explanation of the factors which place the greatest restrictions on SME adoption of CSR practices”. This includes, for example, increased level of employee satisfaction yet lack of resources such as time and information needed. According to Nijhof and Jeurissen (2010, p.618) there are inherent limitations as to the extent to which outcomes of the use of CSR can be fruitful suggesting a “glass ceiling” effect to the market opportunities for businesses when dealing with “ecological and social problems” CSR having evolved into a marketable asset of companies, in which profit-oriented managers and entrepreneurs are willing to invest. This is a kind of commodification of CSR and it has become acceptable in the business world – but at a price if seen as opportunism i.e. any intrinsic motivation to engage with CSR may be driven out (Nijhof and Jeurissen, 2010). These authors suggest that managers should have certain social values that should be defended at all times and are values that will help prepare employees so that they are able to deal with different inherent dilemmas that bear different responsibilities.

**CSR and strategic fit**

## The idea of ‘strategic fit’ (the successful matching of the organisations involved) is crucial to the success of any venture that involves a business organisation, a cause and CSR. The level of symbiosis achieved is dependent upon the closeness of fit since this determines the ability to create effective targeting and a marketing communications strategy that may involve an advertising or PR message as part of a targeted and integrated communications mix. For many decades the way larger organisations are viewed by the many potential audiences has been through an accountability lens leading to CSR becoming a preoccupation and sustainable development for large corporations, usually MNEs (multinational enterprises) seen to be measured through activities involving NGOs (non-governmental organisations) where CSR involves “global problems such as climate change and poverty” Kolk and van Tulder (2009, p119). For smaller and more localised organisations such as SMEs there has recently been a move toward the legitimacy of supporting causes through various initiatives. Copley, McLean and Baker (2012) report on, for example, the Guardian newspaper's 'Investment Challenge', a scheme to help investors put money into Barnardo’s, the children’s charity and the more recent National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, NESTA, a public body formed by the Government by Act of Parliament in 1998 and now a charitable body since the 14th October 2010 and funded not by the tax payer but from interest accrued from an original £250m UK National Lottery endowment. This created the Neighbourhood Challenge programme that invested in 17 communities to test out innovative ways of involving new people locally (The Guardian,1998, 2001, 2012).

Increasingly causes have become more marketing oriented but the incidence of this is “still comparatively low” (Copley, McLean and Baker, 2012) so that it is recognised that change has occurred and that the size of the firm and ideological or attitudinal barriers posed by management have had in the past an effect (Balabanis, Stables, and Phillips, 1997), strategic fit and matching being important within this context. In larger corporations CSR has been on the increase with partnerships with not-for-profit organisations becoming increasingly prominent. These are often sizeable non-profit organisations (NPOs), Seitanidi and Crane (2009) using the examples of Rio Tinto-Earthwatch and Royal Bank of Scotland-Prince’s Trust as illustrations of such partnerships. However, the principles remain the same when dealing with small firms and organisations.

1. **Opportunities for the use of SME CSR**

The immediate prospect for the business using CSR involves the enhancement of the image of the business (corporate image) and its owner, managers and directors. There are, however, other benefits for the business. The “inside-out” approach to CSR suggested by Nielsen and Thomsen (2009b, p.83) by SME managers means that there will be a “strong emphasis on the internal (corporate culture) dimension”. In this case the benefit of external gain from investment in the community would be lost or not taken advantage of because of the lack of external communication.

The biggest section of not-for-profit organisations of interest to SMEs when considering alliances or partnerships involving CSR as part of relational marketing are charitable causes. Soliciting donations is not their only activity. Of course with larger charities/causes tools such as advertising and PR are used typically to create public awareness of the problems the cause is confronting as well as seeking to motivate the public to donate financially. The opportunities for SMEs to be able to use CSR in a positive manner are, however, enhanced with Government involvement and the recognition that SMEs are key to economic growth. Aggarwal and Heulin (2009) for example discuss ‘Aid for Trade’ as a significant economic stimulus to economic growth in developing countries, such programmes involving large corporations but also SMEs with CSR. Turyakira et al (2012) suggest that CSR can improve survival rates of SMEs through the achievement of increased competitiveness by being workforce, society, market and environment-oriented resulting in enhanced employee satisfaction, business reputation and customer loyalty. Ryan et al (2010) suggest that the opportunity for increased competitiveness locally and globally can be had by acquiring the very same 4 orientations of workforce, society, market and environment.

**Tools to achieve the objectives of SME CSR**

Organisational culture in a particular SME will determine the extent to which relational marketing (which can be described as a management orientation) and hence engagement with networking, alliances and partnerships occurs (Stewart and Durkin, 1999). Some time ago it was established that networking (formal or informal) dominates and takes place where individuals may or may not know each other (O’Donnell et al, 2001). Networking consists of a key set of SME marketing activities and is cost effective, proactive marketing through personal, social endeavours (Gilmore, Carson and Grant, 2001). Based on a Catalan experience Murillo and Lozano (2009) maintain that a network approach can be used to promote CSR in SMEs but that coordination for such projects that requires network management and leadership. The need for tools that can achieve objectives becomes obvious when a management orientation is introduced. Reductions in Government support and an increased competitive marketplace highlights the importance of online activity including social networking. Not-for-profit organisations generally have therefore sought to increase the effectiveness of communication which has a crucial role in building awareness but also in securing future support in terms of, for example, covenants, legacies and trusts. Traditional media continued to be used, especially at the local level because of lower costs. Larger not-for profit organisations may very well have sizeable budgets that enable the use of television and there has been a move away from more tactical approaches to fund-raising to a more strategic outlook, including the strategic use of the newer forms of digital media such as social networks. Certainly the latter are an attractive proposition to smaller, cash-strapped organisations as are any prospects of some form of alliance or partnership with an organisation that might wish to engage with CSR. In such cases CSR can be seen as an asset that has value.

**Methodology**

**Findings and discussion**

## The findings from the study that are relevant to this paper can be found in one of the themes that emerged. Each of the themes that emerged in the study contained relevant discourses. Three discourses relevant to this paper were identified from discursive practices involving some form of CSR in the relational perspectives theme. They are:

Discourse 1 - building a place in the community

### Discourse 2 – relationships based on mutual respect and trust

### Discourse 3 - it’s people who are the business

The behaviour and practices of participants that emerged within this theme is represented by each of these 3 discourses that are presented and discussed in relation to the literature below:

### Discourse 1 – building a place in the community

During the interview I emphasised the word, ***r e l a t i o n a l*** and suggested there is a more holistic context rather than just selling. **Charlotte** (whose business is involved with helping other businesses and is a kind of private development agency) then talked about her ‘‘*building a place in the community’.* Charlotte had set her first business up in the dot com years when, ‘*It was the fast buck time, you know, into the market place, fast buck, exit, start again’* but her leanings tally with the relationship marketing literature generally that suggests that relational marketing is a reality and a management orientation (for example Morgan and Hunt, 1994, De Wulf and Odekerken-Schroder 2001, Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990, Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993).

This also encompasses engagement though networking, alliances and partnerships (for example Seitanidi, 2009). Charlotte does believe though that while things have changed, companies are, ‘*Putting something back in…emm…… through social responsibility now’.* Charlotte has a lot of big company experience but for Charlotte now it is not

‘…*just in existence to make, you know, lots and lots of pounds or dollars with a very sharp teeth approach’.* She thought, ‘*It makes better sense to* ***doooo****, to engage all of your stakeholders’.*

This can be seen in part at least as the enhancement of the image of the business and its owner, managers or directors but also as an ‘inside-out’ approach, including the use of CSR, as suggested by Nielsen and Thomsen (2009b) where the benefit of external gain (Aggarwal and Heulin, 2009, Turyakira et al, 2012, Perrini, Russo and Tencati, 2007) from investment in the community (Spence and Perrini, 2009) is evident and where many stakeholders are involved at the different levels as suggested by numerous writers, for example Ryan et al (2010), in terms of workforce, society, market and environment.

The literature suggests that the special status of principals, commitment, trust, power symmetry and personal interaction are essential to the working of relationships (Newman et al, 2004). Charlotte mentioned her family and in particular her father. This, for Charlotte, was where her sense of ethics, code of conduct and morals stem from, which extend into all aspects of her life. She believed that post-Enron:

‘*that’s a much, much* ***BIGGER*** *area of relationships. The strategic importance of relationships … you know it’s very funny reading about strategy, it’s terrific isn’t it?’*

Her emphasis on ***doooo***and ***BIGGER***suggests a solid commitment and recognition of the importance of relationship in the wider community. There are now a number of recognisable benefits a small firm can gain from being associated with causes through alliances or partnerships. Charlotte sees relationships as central and appears to revel in the idea that technology has not taken over, having been involved with the dot com explosion at the end of the millennium and beginning of the ‘noughties’. Charlotte saw this as ‘*bollocks’* because of relationships but this is part of Charlotte’s importance of people and as such is part of broader management that includes critical thinking and reflection but also getting things right in terms of the idea of strategic fit and the successful matching of the organisations involved (Seitanidi and Crane, 2009) with the legitimacy of supporting causes through various initiatives as suggested by Copley, McLean and Baker (2012). This is in line with social values that are seen in a positive way by stakeholders (Nijhof and Jeurissen, 2010). Charlotte appears to fit with the notion of the entrepreneur as a business citizen (Santos, 2011).

In terms of marketing for Charlotte, choices are made on relationship bases since people *‘don’t just choose on the 4Ps’* but rather on relationships they have with key people in other organisations, this being a classical relationship marketing statement to make. Charlotte thinks that *‘you don’t buy just on price’* because for Charlotte’s business it is:

‘*not about …one-off sales, which is bloody hard’.* It is really about a philosophy where you have relationships with customers and people who work for you. It is about ‘*building a place in the community’* not just making money and even for bigger businesses, it is about ‘*social responsibility’.*

This fits with the possibilities for the use (and not exploitation) of CSR by small firms within a relational marketing framework. The genuine rather than artificial or local and authentic practice of Nielsen and Thomsen (2009a, 2009b) is echoed here. There is opportunity to use this as a platform for adopting a strategic CSR position that would need to be communicated to external stakeholders (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009a, Fraj-Andres et al, 2012). Charlotte believes in the ‘*strategic importance of relationships’* and it is Charlotte who believes there is a gender difference where she ‘*thinks the thinking is different’* which resonates with the Rasi et al’s (2010) concept of environmental sustainability in strategic planning and the CSR awareness that exists on different levels (for example Santos, 2011, Ryan et al, 2010).

### Discourse 2 – relationships based on mutual respect and trust

The participants in this study provided no noticeable challenge to the usefulness of incorporating relational approaches to marketing, they generally speaking following an inclusive and relational path to running a business. Networks and networking, for a long time now held up in the literature as the way SMEs could perform marketing and other aspects of business (for example Gilmore, Carson and Grant, 2001), were accepted and expected and indeed used to get across CSR credentials, as advocated by, for example, Murillo and Lozano (2009). Given the ethical base of **Ann’s** business (basically involved with various aspects of child development including play and toys), I presumed she would not want to have a relationship with someone who would damage that ethical base. Ann agreed with this in terms of suppliers and the ‘fit’ necessary for that base, which tallies with, for example, Copley, McLean and Baker’s (2012) and Seitanidi and Crane (2009) with regard to its importance. We discussed relational approaches in terms of all ‘stakeholders’ and Ann said that *‘marketing was at the core’* but thought there to be ‘*a marketing/relationship …thing there’* and there is a specific reference to relationships with suppliers where ‘*we wouldn’t do something like……have pieces of ivory for example’.*

I suggested that relational approaches include employees and other stakeholders. Ann, like Charlotte, thought every relationship is ‘*absolutely crucial’* to growing the businessand has been from the start. This position agrees with the notion of CSR and communicating with external stakeholders (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009a Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009b, Fraj-Andres et al, 2012).

Ann further explained her business’s ethical stance on suppliers, renewable sources, packaging and not sending out ‘*millions of mail shots that don’t actually mean anything but use loads of bits of paper’.* I probed a little further on how these relationships can be fostered and asked ‘…*what would you like them to be like?’* Ann was specifically concerned about respect, trust and honesty within the team of people who ‘*act as consultants and will go out to advise customers and potential customers’* and where there is ‘*mutual respect and trust’* as central with ‘*an open, honest relationship’* where dialogue is essential to finding solutions to problems. Ann was talking about the core of the business that in part is the vision involving:

‘*effective learning environments for young children. That’s backed by the training that we offer…em…all of those relationships are based on mutual respect and trust’.*

Ann was concerned that staff are honest and trust is created and that solutions are found before ‘*we get into a crisis situation which will impact on our own business’.* Ann felt it was about expectations where, ‘*People feel valued for their contribution …and excited, which is another driving force which often lifts a lot of staff’.* This position agrees with Santos (2011) on increased level of employee satisfaction with the use of CSR, although both Santos and Nijhof and Jeurissen (2010) suggest there are restrictions to achieving this.

### Discourse 3 – it’s people who are the business

In a not dissimilar vein to Ann, **Charlotte** saw relationships in a community and stakeholder kind of way. She described relationships as, ‘w*ell no they’re actually…it actually means that it goes up and down and from side to side’.* Charlotte set her business up in 2000, a time according to Charlotte, when technology was taking over everything. The accountability and both internal and external stakeholder voices of Seitanidi (2009) can be seen in Charlotte’s text:

‘*And my contention then was as it is now is that it’s bollocks because it’s people who are the business……people…… people choose. They don’t just choose on the 4Ps, they actually choose on the relationships that they have with key people in another organization’.*

This, again, reflects the ‘inside-out’ approach to CSR suggested by many writers, for example Nielsen and Thomsen (2009b) but where the internal (corporate) culture has to be ‘right’, as it is with Charlotte who says that:

‘*If you have customers who you develop relationships with …and relationships with people who work for you. They’ll do that’.*

Charlotte’s business is founded on relationships, not pricing or one-off sales and her response to questioning included addressing the skills of staff and the safeguarding of social standards through the quality of what the organisations do (Seitanidi, 2009) and in this way Charlotte expresses a typical relationship marketing predisposition following the trust, commitment and loyalty elements established by the likes of Morgan and Hunt (1994) more than two decades ago.

**Conclusions and further research**

This paper has examined the trend toward the use of CSR by SMEs in strategic alliances or partnerships within a relational marketing management orientation in order to achieve marketing objectives such as the enhancement brand image or the launch or re-launch of a small business-owned brand. The paper illustrates how this kind of approach can be instrumental in affecting change driven out of the necessity to use limited resources as effectively and efficiently as possible.

**Conclusions**

In the past corporate giving was seen largely as philanthropy. Recent times have seen movement and a realisation that philanthropy on its own no longer an option but since SMEs have close relations with employees, the community and business partners, a natural responsibility approach to business and an informal and intuitive approach to CSR, this is not out of kilter with the commentary here. The responsible business practice called for in the literature can be seen in these three discourses, as can the desire to build a corporate identity based on CSR but also on the nature and character of the SME and those who run/own it.

The paper has explained how symbiosis achieved in an alliance can become important to the success of an enterprise and how this is driving SMEs toward such alliances in a more positive way. In order for this to happen the benefits of forming relationships, including the use of CSR in alliances and partnerships, has to be realised by SME owner-managers whereby involvement with CSR is now better understood within SMEs as part of the community but has to be genuine, authentic practice. If acceptable, however, CSR can be more than philanthropy.

The achievement of symbiosis comes not without difficulties. The difficulties of moving beyond the internal domain can be seen to have been overcome through the ability of some of the people involved in this study to look outward and communicate with external stakeholders. It appears that in contrast to the workings of large companies, SME CSR is internally focused. CSR can be seen in issues such as eco-efficiency or some other means of obtaining a higher profile in the local community. In this sense the idea of the entrepreneur becoming a business citizen is a reality. This inside-out approach to CSR was evidence in the literature and this study as was the need to communicate externally with various stakeholders, including communicating aspects of CSR via networks and networking. This also includes increased level of employee satisfaction through involvement with CSR whereby people feel valued and driven by excitement. This is important since in SMEs it is often the case that people are the business.

The values of the founders of SMEs are still important but barriers to the use of CSR are less as SMEs have embraced a more relational approach and CSR has become an option as part of the marketing mix. An integral part of this process is the nature of the entrepreneurial principals involved. Social and ethical standards should be safeguarded through mutual respect and honesty leading to trust and social values that should be maintained and defended at all times.

Strategic fit (the successful matching of the organisations involved, often a charity with an SME) is crucial to the success of any venture. Not-for-profit organisations such as causes, through increased professionalism, are now better able to embrace CSR which is seen as an asset with value. This, however, requires relationship marketing management skills and the ability to manage the downsides of relationships.

The proactive pursuance of CSR a consistent manner has become more acceptable within business communities but the concern should be that an SME is not seen as merely opportunistic. The key here is accountability and this can work well for an alliance. The SME must first and foremost be seen as ethical and moral but with economic climates likely to remain hostile gaining from CSR is much more acceptable than in previous times. The intrinsic motivation to put something back needs to be seen in the organisation’s social values that should be both internally and externally but explicitly communicated where people can be prepared for to deal with dilemmas and responsibilities through critical thinking and reflection and be made to feel valued for their contribution.

Through CSR an SME can not only engage with the local community, it can be immersed and have a place in it by recognising the strategic importance of relationships. There are both opportunities and challenges to the successful use of CSR by SMEs in relationships such as alliances and partnerships.

CSR activity is greater than one might expect in SMEs but is different to that of larger firms because it is community based and informal. In this context enhanced image can become a reality where there can be a CSR corporate identity and if things are done correctly an associated CSR corporate image.

**Further research**

Some areas for consideration for further research include the importance of symbiosis in achieving an effective alliance or partnership and how best to achieve ‘strategic fit’ between SMEs and causes. The problems of perceived opportunism and fear of being perceived opportunistic can be part of the inherent limitations as to the extent to which outcomes of the use of CSR can be fruitful. This suggests a ‘glass ceiling’ or a limit on the worth of an alliance or partnership which is worth pursuing in research terms. The SME owner-manager’s orientation toward strategic alliances with causes and the consequent internal feel of the organisation is an important aspect that needs further study in order to understand drivers or driving forces such as any intrinsic or extrinsic motivations to engage with CSR. The future nature and role of IMC (integrated marketing communications) in SMEs and how best to communicate the effects of CSR activity both internally and externally is a key area that needs further understanding. This would include the illumination of any possible skills gaps. This area is particularly relevant and current to changes online activities might make, in particular social media activities and opportunities. There is some scope in looking further at the continued importance of accountability within CSR and of course how different not-for-profit organisations see the use of CSR within relationships with SMEs.

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