

# Does Your Company Need a CSR Brand?

By Eric Johnson, Director, Strategic Communications  
The Works

Letting people know what your organization has been up to is an integral part of Corporate Social Responsibility. But, as any marketer or IR specialist will tell you, the space for communicating with stakeholders is already jammed with competing messages stuffed together like commuters on the 5:15 p.m. subway.

However, a strong brand is still a powerful tool for focusing communications and helping a company stand apart from its competitors. With this in mind, in a cluttered marketplace of ideas, could a stand-alone CSR brand help your organization get its message out?

Early in 2010, The Works researched the ways that different organizations were communicating about their brands and their CSR activities. This included a special examination of the benefits derived from having a distinct CSR brand. We began by reviewing a Canada-wide group of companies in a specific sector, seeing how they represented themselves and their CSR activities. To get a more comprehensive picture, we also looked at four very different companies: a city-based credit union, a national quick food company, a national telecommunications firm and a multinational manufacturer of outdoor clothing. These companies are all known for their strong brands, effective communications and a commitment to CSR.

We made many interesting findings, but only one truly surprised us. Our initial assumption was that several of the organizations in our sample group, particularly those with a national or international scope, would have developed a distinct CSR brand. Instead, none of the organizations we looked at had a CSR brand. Not one.

Yet we knew such brands were out there. If you'd like to see an example, there's probably one pretty handy to you if you live in an area with paved roads, cable television and at least one Sushi restaurant. Just go into a Starbucks. Starbucks™ Shared Planet™ represents the coffee giant's commitment "to do business in ways that are good for people and the planet." Specifically, activities

related to ethical sourcing, environmental stewardship and community involvement are all aligned under the Shared Planet brand. The brand provides a platform from which it can communicate about these activities. Shared Planet and also subtly reinforces the message that Starbucks' operations extend everywhere, from Seattle to Singapore.

A stand-alone CSR brand also puts some distance, however slight, between a company's CSR performance and the rest of its operations. Of the companies we looked at, the most effective communicators on CSR issues created compelling, memorable messages by leveraging values and associations found within their corporate master brands.

- The local credit union had a long record of community involvement and activism, and it was able to build on this record to develop messages and campaigns directed at driving and guiding social change.
- The Canada-wide quick food chain reinforced its strong connection to Canadians – the core of its brand – and drove home its commitment to CSR by highlighting all the community-level sports and activities it supports across the country.
- The national telecommunications company drew upon its history to show how it conducted its CSR activities with the support and guidance of long-standing employee and pensioner groups.
- The globe-spanning outdoor clothing manufacturer used breathtaking shots of people atop glaciers or in the middle of an African veldt to support stories, spanning every link in its supply chain, about the company's efforts to moderate the negative environmental and social impacts of its manufacturing activities.

These four companies did not need to package their CSR activities under a separate CSR brand. With all of them, CSR was, to use a favourite expression of The Works,

“baked into the cake.” That is to say, CSR was an integral part of their identity and the way they related to the world. For these companies, employing a separate CSR brand would dilute the essential qualities of their core brand – it would divide without adding anything.

This article starts with a bit of a trick question: “Does your company need a CSR brand?” Our answer is an unequivocal “yes,” with the understanding that such a role is best filled by an organization’s existing corporate brand.

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#### **About The Works**

The Works Design Communications Ltd. is an award-winning integrated communications company. Providing a full range of in-house communication services, including strategic counsel, writing, design, multimedia development and print production, The Works has developed IR and CSR communications for many of Canada’s most well-known and well-respected organizations. We help clients define their objectives and then work with them to create compelling messages and breakthrough communications.

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