

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PRACTICE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL
RESPONSIBILITY IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IN THE SOUTH WEST
REGION OF IRELAND**

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Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is the term used for addressing a business's operations on three different levels – Economic, Environmental and Social, (the triple bottom line), (Visser, 2007:466) and is used by a company to demonstrate that it is acting in a responsible manner where all of its stakeholders are concerned. 'Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, whereby companies voluntarily integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations, have become increasingly popular,' (Madden C, 2009). However, Sweeney (2007) goes on to add that research is limited concerning the comprehension of CSR from an Irish perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of the primary research carried out in relation to CSR activity from the consumer's perspective and also the hotelier's perspective in the South West Region of Ireland. The methods used to collect the primary research were both qualitative and quantitative adopting a mixed method approach. Questionnaires were distributed throughout the South West region of Ireland to both domestic and international hotel users. Semi structured interviews were also carried out with hotel managers across ten properties in the region covering both rural and urban properties and privately owned and group owned properties, across the three, four and five star markets.

The customer survey revealed that the majority of hotels users did not actively search for socially or environmentally conscious hotels, but, if they did have knowledge of these activities, then over half of respondents stated that it would influence their perception of the hotel. However, over half of the respondents indicated they would not pay more for an environmentally and socially conscious hotel, while a quarter were undecided.

The interviews with the hotel managers revealed that only one of the respondent hotels holds a written CSR policy. It is clear, though, that the majority of the hotels had policies in place for areas that come under the CSR umbrella, particularly in relation to the environment.

Key Words: Corporate Social Responsibility, Environmental Activity, Social Activity, Hotel Industry, South West Region of Ireland

INTRODUCTION

This paper will address the level of CSR activity being carried out in hotels with a focus on the South West region of Ireland in particular. It begins by looking at the concept of CSR in general. This is followed by a more focused look at CSR in the international hotel industry and then in an Irish context. The research methodology is outlined for the collection of primary research; this includes the use of a triangulation method consisting of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews based in the South West region. This is followed by the presentation of the findings from the primary research and an analysis of these findings.

CSR IN GENERAL

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is relatively new. According to research, CSR as we now know it has only been in common existence since the 1960's, (Barnett, 2007). While originally the concept consisted of only doing good to be seen to do good, now it has developed into a more mutually favourable activity which not only benefits society but also the organisation, (Kotler & Lee 2005 p.8-9). The President and Fellows of Harvard University provide a comprehensive definition of CSR as we know it today;

“Corporate social responsibility encompasses not only what companies do with their profits, but also how they make them. It goes beyond philanthropy and compliance and addresses how companies manage their economic, social, and environmental impacts, as well as their relationships in all key spheres of influence: the workplace, the marketplace, the supply chain, the community, and the public policy realm.”

The President and Fellows of Harvard University (2008: online)

There are a number of areas in an organisation's business activities that CSR can be applied to. According to the Ashridge Centre for Business and Society there are seven core areas that make up the concept of CSR;

Area 1 – Leadership, Vision & Values

Area 2 – Marketplace Activities

Area 3 – Workforce Activities

Area 4 – Supply Chain Activities

Area 5 – Stakeholder Engagement

Area 6 – Community Activities

Area 7 – Environmental Activities

(Ethical Performance, 2006 *cited in* Blowfield and Murray 2008)

Breaking down the concept of CSR into sub-areas allows for a deeper and fuller understanding of the concept as well as allowing for a more structured translation by an organisation into achievable activities.

Traditionally there is a view that the practice of CSR is only applicable to large corporations. However, this is not the case. Visser (2007:123) states that ‘the concept of CSR applies to all sizes and shapes of businesses but the focus tends to be on larger organisations as they generally have more power and are more transparent’. This is particularly relevant to the hotel industry as it consists of a high degree of small and medium size enterprises (SME’s). According to the UNWTO (2008), Europe has 5.45 million hotel rooms and SME’s account for 90% of these. Therefore it is important that CSR is recognised as a valid area of activity for businesses of all sizes.

‘Increased economic profits, employee organizational commitment, public scrutiny, improved investor relations, the good of society as a whole, up to and including the general view that CSR is the “right thing to do”.’

(Gan, 2006; Juholin, 2004 *cited in* Holcomb *et al* 2007: 461)

There are many motivations listed for the practice of CSR, these include; to improve corporate image, to enhance employee morale, to improve employee retention, to build firm relationships with governments and communities and to respond to increasing expectations of customers and social groups, (Lee & Park, 2009:105). However, there is still some scepticism regarding the positive impact that CSR might have on the bottom line. This is evident from Lee & Park’s list of motivations mentioned previously where there is no reference to CSR contributing to improving profits. Vogel (2008) indicates that part of the reason why CSR doesn’t pay is because there are only a few consumers, a niche market, that care whether or not the company from which they are buying a good or service is socially responsible. Consumers still

make purchases based on price, convenience and quality. Vogel does not consider the increased profits that can be gained from the reduction in costs for an organisation through better environmental practices such as increased levels of recycling and energy saving lighting.

CSR AND THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

In the hotel industry CSR is still an emerging concept, there is evidence of large multinational hotel chains engaging in CSR activities however the small and medium sized enterprises still struggle with the concept and are of the belief that it is only applicable to large businesses with greater resources. As previously noted, SME's make up a large portion of the hotel industry and the collective impact of small and medium size hotels will have a significant bearing on the environment and society as a whole.

“There can be no doubt that the corporate social responsibility programs of large hotel groups have a substantial reach and impact on the local and global environment and upon surrounding communities world-wide. But the collective efforts of smaller scale establishments are no less significant.”

(Green Hotelier, 2005)

In fact, Greenhotelier (2005) consider smaller hotels to have numerous strengths in terms of adopting a CSR policy. For example the installation of soap dispensers/ energy efficient lighting/ water saving equipment can be implemented swiftly and unilaterally without larger corporate constraints and considerations. In addition smaller hotels may be more in tune with the needs of their surrounding community and how to help them the best.

The hotel industry's use of CSR in its corporate strategy and daily activities is imperative due to the symbiotic nature of its relationship with the surrounding natural, economic, social and cultural environment, (Rodriguez & Cruz, 2007). Rodriguez & Cruz (2007) go on to suggest that being socially and environmentally responsible is linked to the quality of the product offered and therefore gives an increased level of competitiveness to the hotel firm and by offering a better quality of product/service, this will in turn effect the financial performance of the organisation in a positive

manner. To give an example, the Scandinavian hotel group, Scandic Hotels, provides an environmental framework from which many other hotel businesses could learn from. The Scandic environmental policy states that;

“No company can avoid taking responsibility for the environment and focusing on environmental issues. Scandic shall therefore lead the way and work continuously to promote both a reduction in our environmental impact, and a better environment. Scandic shall actively contribute to a sustainable society”.

(Pegram, 2008:9)

The hotel group has achieved a lot in this area, in the past 10 years the Scandic Group and their guests have saved;

- Enough electricity and heating to supply 9,000 households for 1 year,
- The equivalent in fossil carbon dioxide as driving from Stockholm to Gothenburg and back (496 miles) 270,000 times in a petrol car,
- Enough water to fill 683 Olympic size swimming pools,
- Unsorted waste by 2770 lorry loads.

(Scandic Hotels, 2010)

These achievements are not only benefiting the environment but also the hotel group's financial position through reduced costs. There are many financial advantages to be found from developing a CSR policy within a hotel like the examples show above by Scandic hotels. The carrot and stick metaphor is used by Cushing (2004) to describe CSR activities within hotels; the financial advantages to be gained from CSR activities is the carrot and the increasing pressure coming from employees and customers of hotels to be more sustainable and greener in their operations is the stick. According to Philip Rossiter, the chief executive of the Institute of Hospitality, CSR can only bring benefits to the industry. Through operational methods that demonstrate visibly an environmental consciousness, he states that ‘customers will thank us, society will be better for them and the benefits will go straight to the bottom line’ (Caterer & Hotelkeeper 2007: online).

A number of organisations provide support and guidance to the hotel industry in relation to the area of CSR. These include the website www.caterersearch.com, the

online version of Caterer & Hotelkeeper magazine, the Institute of Hospitality, Irish Hotel Federation (IHF). The International Tourism Partnership (ITP) publishes a quarterly magazine called 'Green Hotelier' which is distributed to members of the ITP and addresses CSR issues and offers practical solutions. There are also numerous awards and accreditations that hotels can achieve in order to become more recognisable as a green hotel;

- The Emeraude Hotelier of the year from the International Hotel & Restaurant Association, (IH&RA),
- The Green Hospitality Award in Ireland from Failte Ireland, the Irish Hospitality Institute (IHI) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- The Association of South East Asian Countries (ASEAN) gives the Green Hotel Award to the top ten most environmentally friendly hotels in the region annually.
- The Caterer & Hotelkeeper give the Green Award and the Green Hotel of the Year Award and their annual award ceremony- The Hotel Cateys.
- The Considerate Hoteliers Association gives a number of green awards to hotels each year in the UK.
- Green Globe is the worldwide environmental standard for the Tourism Industry.
- European Eco Flower

By having these incentives and support tools in place to aid hotels to achieve a greener existence allows for a greater degree of implementation of CSR strategies. Websites such as www.hospitableclimates.co.uk and www.tourismpartnership.org/ and organisations such as Failte Ireland, Greenbox, Optimus Business Excellence, and the Green Hospitality Award allow for hotels to come together and share experiences and ideas with each other as well as gaining information from the experts and in some instances accreditation also. These organisations, publications and websites can provide valuable support to any hospitality organisation that wishes to become more active and gain information in the area of CSR.

There are also organisations that are not aimed specifically at the hotel industry but can be accessed by hotels to help them succeed in the area of CSR. For example in Ireland there are organisations such as Chambers Ireland, Business in the Community (BITC), Sustainable Energy Ireland and CSR4U. Chambers Ireland and BITC come together annually to recognise those businesses that practice CSR as part of their operations. In 2009 a total of 55 companies were short-listed, for categories such as; Good Neighbour Community Award, Eco-Business Award, Responsible Employer Workplace Award, Marketplace Customer Award and Supporting Employee Volunteering Award. These accolades were awarded to large indigenous companies and multinational corporations as well as SME's.

CSR IN IRELAND

In recent years the level of interest in CSR activities in Ireland has become progressively prominent. 'Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, whereby companies voluntarily integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations, have become increasingly popular.' (Madden, 2009:online). However according to O'Dwyer *et al* (2005) *cited in* Sweeney (2007) there has been a lack of academic attention to and discussion of CSR in an Irish context to date. Sweeney (2007) goes on to add that research also is limited concerning the comprehension of CSR from an Irish perspective.

Already in Ireland some hotels are leading the industry in CSR initiatives. The Inchydoney Island Lodge & Spa has installed 80 square metres of solar panels, a wood pellet heating system and heat exchangers. These initiatives resulted in reducing the hotel's carbon footprint by 495 tonnes per year and earned the hotel the Sustainable Energy Ireland award for best renewable energy project in 2007, (Irish Tourist Industry Confederation, 2008). Kilashee House Hotel and Villa Spa are involved in sponsorship and support of local businesses in the Kildare region, in 2008 they received an award for Community and Social Responsibility at the Naas Chamber of Commerce Excellence in Business Awards, (Hotel & Catering Review, 2008). At the Fifth Annual Presidents Awards for CSR hosted by Chambers Ireland and BITC the Castleknock Hotel and Country Club received the SME eco business award for their carbon neutral project and the Clontarf Castle Hotel were awarded the

ourstanding achievement responsible employer award for its disability awareness programme and for tackling discrimination both within and outside the workplace, (Clontarf Castle Hotel, 2009). At the Green Awards 2010 the Westport Woods Hotel & Spa received the Green Small to Medium Enterprise Award, (Green Awards, 2010)

METHODOLOGY

As well as the analysis of secondary data, primary research was also conducted using a triangulation method which includes quantitative and qualitative research methods in its post-positivism approach. Semi structured interviews were conducted with hoteliers in order to gain an insight into the views of the industry on the topic of CSR. The sample consisted of 10 respondents from a mix of urban/rural establishments, group/independent establishments and the 3/4/5 star market. The 2 star market was also approached but these establishments declined to contribute to the research. Questionnaire surveys were carried out with hotel customers in order to find out the views of the public in relation to hotels that are socially responsible. On the street surveying was carried out at Blarney and Killarney during the months of July and August and also with business customers of a well know Cork hotel. The purpose of approaching the primary research from these two angles was to evaluate CSR in terms of the perceptions of the hotel industry against the expectations of the hotel customers. The research included both domestic and international hotel customers. In 2007 the domestic market accounted for 35% of hotel customers and the overseas market accounted for 65%, (Failte Ireland, 2009d), therefore it is important to look at both markets in this research.

The primary research of this paper focuses on the South West Region of Ireland. In relation to tourism, Failte Ireland has divided Ireland into seven geographical regions; Dublin, East & Midlands, South East, South West, Shannon, West and North West. The South West Region is the area of Ireland being focused on for this piece of research; it is made up of Cork and Kerry and accounted for almost 22% of total tourist revenue and just over 19% of total visitor numbers to Ireland in 2008, (Failte Ireland, 2009). The South West region is the tourist region in Ireland with the largest number of hotels and therefore most relevant to this research, table I.

Table I - Regional Tourism Figures 2008

<u>Region</u>	<u>Tourist Revenue</u> <u>(€m)</u>	<u>Tourist Numbers</u> <u>(000's)</u>	<u>No. of Hotels</u> <u>(2009)</u>
Dublin	€1665.8	5627	160
East & Midlands	€484.3	1869	130
South East	€26.2	2190	112
South West	€1205.5	3781	166
Shannon	€28.8	1998	92
West	€71.8	2754	148
North West	€23.1	1596	107
Total	€605.5	19815	915

Source: Failte Ireland (2009) & Failte Ireland (2009c)

As is evident in table I also, the South West region received the highest tourist numbers and tourist revenue outside of Dublin. As the region is comprised of large areas of scenic beauty as well as urban centres it was chosen over Dublin to gain an insight into a broader range of hotel products.

In terms of two major Irish hotel industry support tools; Green Hospitality Award and the Optimus Programme, the South West as a region has achieved significant results. Of the 159 hotels that are participants in the Green Hospitality Award 33 are located in the South West, this is just over one fifth of all members. The South West region also accounts for almost 30% of gold medal awards from this organisation. When the spread of Optimus awards is examined, in 2010 the South West region accounted for 28% of total awards and includes the only hotel that has reached the highest level of award achievable. This is important for the research as it indicated some degree of awareness of CSR or various aspects of CSR among hoteliers in the South West. Therefore allowing for the research to examine the success or failure and advantages or disadvantages that may be associated with the practice of these activities.

FINDINGS

The customer surveys revealed some interesting results in terms of CSR activities and the hotel industry. Price, location and quality of service were found to be the top three most important factors considered when choosing a hotel to stay in with the majority of respondents agreeing that they did not actively seek socially or environmentally active hotels (74%). However, 57% of respondents stated that knowledge of the social or environmental activities of hotels would influence their perception of that hotel. This indicates that the communication of social and environmental activities by hotels could influence purchase behaviour. One respondent stated 'I haven't in my limited experience come across hotels that wave an environmental/ social responsibility flag- but it needs to happen'. Over half of the participants indicated that they would not pay more for a hotel that practices CSR and almost a quarter were undecided. There is a belief that if a hotel is practicing CSR, particularly on the environmental side of it, then there is a cost saving implication for the hotel and therefore guests should not be charged a premium for activities that do not cost the hotel extra. In this study also, 30% of respondents stated that the current economic climate did influence the level of importance that they placed on a hotel's social and/or environmental activities. However if all other factors were the same then 50% and 46% respectively stated that social and environmental activities in a hotel would be a deciding factor when choosing a hotel to use. This indicates an opportunity for hotels to gain a competitive advantage from the practice of CSR in the current climate. Participants believe that the two primary reasons why hotels carry out social and environmental activities are for public relations advantages and financial benefits. The environmental activities can reduce costs to the hotel and the social activities can improve the reputation of the hotel. PR can provide revenue by communicating an organisations image positively and openly to its stakeholders, the public in general and the media, Henslowe (2003).

In phase two of the primary research, the semi-structured interviews revealed that 70% of the sample was familiar with the term CSR, however each explanation of CSR was distinctly different and all were incomplete. Only one of the respondents held a written CSR policy in their establishment, however, the majority of respondents held policies for various areas of CSR, particularly in relation to the environment. When the hotels were asked about the types of activities they carried out in relation to the environment, many listed activities such as recycling of plastic, glass, cardboard and paper as well as energy conservation and water conservation. Fifty percent of the

hotels interviewed are participating in the Green Hospitality Award which requires various degrees of activity in the areas of waste, water and energy management. Recycling and energy consumption were the main environmental activities that the respondents reported. There were also some specific activities which individual respondents practiced;

- composting,
- solar panels,
- heat exchangers,
- wood pellet burners for heating,
- combined heat and power units that generate electricity from the gas that is used to heat the water,
- water treatment,
- wine deliveries with a zero carbon footprint
- choosing a links style golf course which has a large amount of rough areas therefore reducing maintenance needs and in turn reducing their carbon footprint

The combined heat and power unit installed by Hotel F has not only saved them money through the production of their own electricity but it has also reduced their carbon emissions by 650 tonnes per annum.

The most common motivating factors that the respondents revealed for involvement in environmentally positive activities were the financial advantages, public relations and doing the right thing. The view of one hotel was that they were not big enough to justify environmental activities beyond what is required by law. This links back to the belief that CSR does not apply to SME's and that they also lack the resources to actively participate in CSR activities. Pressure from stakeholders was listed as a key motivating factor for another hotel because the town in which they operate is heavily involved in promoting environmental and community activities that benefit the area as a whole. The barriers listed by the respondents in terms of practising environmental activities were the initial cost of the initiatives, lack of knowledge, lack of time in the current climate and the lack of suppliers.

In relation to CSR activities and their impact on the customer, four out of ten hotels state that their guests would be aware of their environmental activities to some degree. In general the respondents reported that guests did not comment positively or negatively about their environmental activities. Many respondents commented that while it is important to practice environmental activities in order to reduce costs and/or help the environment, these activities should not affect the guest's experience. However, one hotel stated that customers don't comment when the environmental activities are implemented because they now perceive it as a standard practice, if environmental activities were not being followed by a hotel then the customer would comment on the lack of environmental activities. A hotel operating in the five star market listed specific restraints in informing guests of environmental activities and asking them to participate in these activities due to the luxury nature of the product and service being provided

The social activities varied throughout each property depending on the location and size of the property. All of the hotels contributed to local charities and sponsored local events and sports clubs. None of the hotels have a specific budget in place for these activities, each request for sponsorship or a donation is considered individually. One hotel revealed that they tend to work with a core group of local charities each year and they are chosen on the basis of there being an element of reciprocal business for the hotel. The current economic climate has had some impact on the level of social activity now being engaged in. In the past Hotel B had donated 1% of annual earnings (approx €75,000) to children's charities each year however in 2009 that had to be scaled back. Finding the time to dedicate to sending managers out to local schools and out into the community at the moment has also been reduced as staff levels are restricted. One hotel states that their level of charitable contributions will not be reduced because of the reciprocal business generated from the donations, another hotel deems any sponsorship that they give to local events or clubs as a for of marketing for the hotel and therefore is generating business also.

Respondents were also asked if they thought CSR activities were important to their customers; overall, the majority opinion was that it is certainly becoming more important to them. It is not yet a deciding factor but it is something that their customers are aware of. Over half of the respondent hotels believed that if all other

factors were the same the presence of CSR activities would impact positively on the customers purchasing process.

All respondents stated that they did not think that their customers would pay more for a hotel that practices CSR. However a number of respondents indicated that this may be because of the current economic climate and perhaps they would pay more in the future. One respondent posed the rhetorical question; why would they?

'...a more environmentally friendly hotel and environmentally conscious hotel should be a far more efficient and lower cost base hotel by its nature....green initiatives are generally cost saving so therefore a hotel that operates in that environment should be even cheaper for the customer if nothing else'

Richard, Hotel J

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the concept of CSR in terms of the hotel industry both from the consumer's point of view and the hotelier's. Overall the primary research showed there was a positive response to the concept of CSR. Many customers are becoming increasingly conscious of social and environmental activities when making purchasing decisions. On the other side, hotel managers are also aware of the benefits to be gains from social and environmental activities from a business point of view. While it is evident that it is still an emerging concept the area of CSR is growing in awareness and importance.

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