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# ASSESSMENT OF INITIATIVES IN THE FIELD OF ECOLOGICAL CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE OPINION OF YOUNG GENERATION CONSUMERS

OCENA INICJATYW Z ZAKRESU EKOLOGICZNEJ SPOŁECZNEJ ODPOWIEDZIALNOŚCI PRZEDSIĘBIORSTW W OPINII KONSUMENTÓW MŁODEGO POKOLENIA **Abstract:** The purpose of the article is to find out the opinions of young consumers about the knowledge of the practical implementation of actions taken by enterprises on the Polish market as part of ecological corporate social responsibility and an attempt to determine the attitude of young generation consumers towards manifested actions along with the identification and analysis of good practices including range.

Theoretical aspects are described based on the analysis of selected source materials, the practical aspect was developed based on the results of pilot surveys (survey handed out) conducted by the authors in 2017 on a group of 60 consumers of the young generation (18-30 years). The results of the conducted research indicate the importance of enterprises taking initiatives in the field of ecological corporate social responsibility - 87% of responses. In the justification, young consumers usually stated: the need to save non-renewable resources, energy, water and minimize waste production. It is worth noting that an important determinant of lifestyle for representatives of the younger generation of consumers is the consumption of organic food, as well as care for the natural environment and engaging in social initiatives related to it.

Keywords: ecology, responsibility, company, consumers of the young generation

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest poznanie opinii młodych konsumentów na temat znajomości praktycznej realizacji działań podejmowanych przez przedsiębiorstwa na polskim rynku w ramach ekologicznej społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu oraz próba określenia stosunku konsumentów młodego pokolenia do przejawianych działań wraz z identyfikacją i analizą dobrych praktyk w tym zakresie. Aspekty teoretyczne opisano w oparciu o analizę wybranych materiałów źródłowych, aspekt praktyczny opracowano na podstawie wyników pilotażowych badań ankietowych (ankieta rozdawana) przeprowadzonych przez autorki w 2017 roku, na grupie 60 konsumentów młodego pokolenia (18-30 lat). Wyniki przeprowadzonych badań wskazują na istotność podejmowania przez przedsiębiorstwa inicjatyw w zakresie ekologicznej społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu – 87% wskazań. W uzasadnieniu młodzi konsumenci podawali zazwyczaj: konieczność oszczędzania zasobów nieodnawialnych, energii, wody oraz minimalizację produkcji odpadów. Wartym zwrócenia uwagi jest fakt, iż ważnym wyznacznikiem stylu życia dla przedstawicieli konsumentów młodego pokolenia staje się konsumpcja żywności ekologicznej, a także dbałość o środowisko naturalne i angażowanie się w inicjatywy społeczne z tym związane.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ekologia, społeczna odpowiedzialność, przedsiębiorstwo, konsumenci młodego pokolenia

### Introduction

The activities of enterprises affect a wide group of stakeholders, which include not only the owners, managers, employees, shareholders, but also customers and other entities which enterprises have influence on. A unique group of stakeholders is constituted by young consumers who, unlike adult, mature people, feel their needs in a different way, as well as they perceive the world and understand messages addressed to

them differently, and have different value systems and codes of conduct. They represent significant purchasing and decision-making power. Nowadays, in order to build their competitive advantage, enterprises should be engaged in a constant dialogue with consumers so as to optimize the scope of their socially responsible activities. For the growing role of the ecological aspect in the development of enterprises means that companies must more and more frequently take into account the natural environment in the implementation of the concept of Environmental Corporate Social Responsibility (ECSR). The issue indeed appears significant as the activities undertaken by enterprises within the frame of ECSR are increasingly contributing directly not only to their condition and development, but also to consumer perception and the construction of lasting relationships with the customers.

# 1. Environmental activities taken by modern enterprises

Nowadays, the sustainability of relationships between enterprises and consumers is mainly determined by social responsibility, the comprehensive nature of which is presented in the definition developed by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, which reads: "CSR is a business commitment to contribute to sustainable development through cooperation with employees, their families, the local community and the society as a whole, in order to improve the quality of life of all citizens". This commitment, in accordance with the definition of ISO 26000 standard, is ensured through transparent and ethical activities, which<sup>2</sup>:

- contribute to sustainable development, including social well-being and health;
- take into account the stakeholders' expectations;
- comply with applicable law and are consistent with international standards of conduct;
- are integrated with the activities of the entire organization and practiced in its relations.

In addition to its economic and social (ethical) aspects, the concept of corporate social responsibility consists of the ecological aspect, associated with voluntary actions taken in relation to the natural environment. This area of CSR is focused on environmental protection, which is becoming a key element for enterprises. The ECSR business concept is based on the following assumptions<sup>3</sup>:

https://www.wbcsd.org [access: 30.04.2019].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> B. Rok, *Podstawy odpowiedzialności społecznej w zarządzaniu*, Wydawnictwo Poltext, Warszawa 2013, p. 170-171.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> A. Jabłoński, M. Jabłoński, A. Primus, M. Spytkowska, *Ekologiczna, społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu. Raport przedsiębiorstw i gmin odpowiedzialnych ekologicznie*, Europejskie Forum Odpowiedzialności Ekologicznej, Katowice 2010, s. 9; A. Chodyński, A. Jabłoński, M. Jabłoński, *Environmental Corporate Social Responsibility (ECSR) – koncepcja strategiczna budowy wartości firmy oparta na kryteriach ekologicznych*, "Przegląd Organizacji" 2008, No. 3, p. 31.

- ECSR is a concept of increasing the value of a company through the dynamics of using ecological criteria to meet the needs of shareholders and other stakeholders;
  - ECSR is a platform to build an effective business model based on ecological criteria;
- ECSR is a source of creating ecological innovation for the needs of long-term development and growth of an enterprise;
- ECSR creates activities combined with the pursuit of a balance of business needs between shareholders and stakeholders, where the dialogue platform is related to treating environmental protection as the key factor for achieving success, considering critical operations in relation to the greening process and developing bioecological products;
- ECSR is a source of effective use of a combination of tangible resources and intangible factors for a company operating in the context of adopted ecological criteria (pro-ecological raw materials, pro-ecological machinery, devices and other physical resources of the company, ecological knowledge, ecological competences);
- ECSR is a link between the internal and external environment (comparing macroenvironment factors, e.g. the regulatory, legal and political aspects in relation to the internal constituents of a company with environmental impact);
- ECSR guarantees effective reporting of standards of conduct for stakeholders with regards to the internal functioning of the company (human and nature rights, labor and technology, work environment and natural environment, health protection and natural environment protection, etc.);
- ECSR is a platform for an effective use of the intellectual capital of the company (in its relational, organizational, innovative and human dimension) as regards increasing social capital between all stakeholders;
- ECSR is a source of reducing a company's business risk (improving the creditworthiness, improving business credibility, reducing the company's strategic resources process risk).

The ECSR approach means both compliance with human rights principles, labor standards, environmental protection, anti-corruption, and voluntary socially useful measures.

Therefore, a business model based on the ECSR concept refers to: internal business assumptions taking into account ecological criteria (the greening of business processes, the environmental performance of products); external business assumptions taking into account ecological criteria (ecological criteria as a key factor for success, ecological sectoral conditions); assumptions concerning the creation of internal centers of ecological corporate social responsibility constituting a source of measurement and monitoring of the strategy based on ecological criteria; assumptions regarding activities to meet the internal and external needs of the stakeholders<sup>4</sup>. It is crucial that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> A. Chodyński, A. Jabłoński, M. Jabłoński, Environmential Corporate Social Responsibility (ECSR)..., p. 31.

the above-mentioned assumptions are based on cooperation with the stakeholders (including consumers), taking advantage of their environmental awareness, so enterprises can fully implement the principles of ecological social responsibility.

The concept of ecological responsibility of enterprises constitutes a set of initiatives that organizations undertake, which are aimed at limiting a company's negative impact on the natural environment. This applies in particular to manufacturing products with the use of environmentally compatible materials, saving energy, water, resources in the production process, recycling raw materials and products, introducing environmental assessment or reporting environmental activities. The area of natural environment is most of all the efficient use of resources and the management of waste and pollution using environmentally-friendly devices, as well as the introduction of ecolabels and production methods or technologies friendly to the silent stakeholder, which is the natural environment<sup>5</sup>. Enterprises have a positive influence on the natural environment through: efficient and sustainable consumption of natural resources, monitoring the level of greenhouse gas emissions, supervision of the level of emissions of pollutants having a negative impact on air, water or soil, the use of safe chemical agents.

The data analysis contained in the Report<sup>6</sup> shows that in 2017, as compared to 2016, the number of good practices implemented by enterprises in the area of the environment has increased. 102 new initiatives have been submitted. They were described in the following categories: biodiversity, certification, ecological education, eco-office, eco-buildings, eco-efficiency, eco-products, renewable energy sources, environmental schemes, recycling, zero waste, sustainable transport.

Most activities are related to ecological education (30 practices). In response to the problem of smog, companies direct a number of educational activities to their employees and the residents of selected regions, particularly exposed to breathing with poor quality air. These activities are supported by such measures as distributing protective masks or installing air quality sensors. Moreover, companies improve ambient air quality directly by, among others, introducing sustainable transport. What appears to be very popular, too, is the ecoefficiency activities (17 new practices), bringing measurable effects in the form of energy savings in shops or factories or reduction of CO2 emissions and water consumption. Enterprises invest, among others, in solutions in the field of circular economy: heating systems fed with recyclable materials or systems for reusing heat generated at earlier stages of production. Also, companies undertake reporting activities, related to a large extent to the iden-

M. Ratajczak, Ekorozwój jako podstawa odpowiedzialnego biznesu (CSR) w obszarze środowiska naturalnego, [in:] Z. Pisz, M. Rojek-Nowosielska (ed.), Społeczna odpowiedzialność organizacji. W poszukiwaniu paradygmatów, metodologii i strategii, Wydawnictwo UE we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2013, p. 152.
Raport "Odpowiedzialny Biznes w Polsce. Dobre praktyki", 2017, Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, p. 73-92, www.odpowiedzialnybiznes.pl/publikacje/raport-2017/ [access: 28.03.2019].

tification of potential environmental losses. In the category of pro-environmental schemes (14 new practices), initiatives have been described to increase ecological efficiency that involve employees, as well as multi-faceted environmental protection programs. Smaller closed-loop economy projects are described in the categories of recycling and zero waste (including practices that minimize food waste).

The list for 2017 also includes 69 initiatives already submitted in previous reports and still being implemented. Most frequently they refer to actions for sustainable transport (14 long-term practices) and companies' pro-environmental schemes (also 14 long-term practices).

Even though the natural environment, as an area of business impact, is not particularly significant from the point of view of a company's development, it is of particular importance for the general public. The activities undertaken by enterprises in the spirit of the ECSR idea contribute to increasing their profit and protecting social well-being at the same time. The activities of enterprises related to, for instance, saving energy, raw materials and resources, as well as limiting emissions of pollutants and carbon dioxide, intended to reduce the company's operation costs, have an ecological dimension. Thanks to such measures, the enterprise creates a good reputation with the public, gains the image of a responsible company and thus builds attachment and trust, while eliminating a number of threats in its activities. By combining the pro-social nature of the company's operations with simultaneous care for the social capital of strategic human resources, the company stands out on the market among its competitors.

# 2. Young consumers' attitudes and behavior concerning pro-ecological initiatives— analysis of source materials

Young consumers constitute one of the specific groups of consumers requiring continuous exploration. Making use of generational differences, this segment is categorized in terms of two generations: Generation Y (persons born after 1981) and Generation Z (persons born after 1995). In spite of entering formal adulthood (18 years of age) and having significant decision autonomy, young consumers do not always have the purchasing fund on their own (it happens that their decision autonomy is not combined with full economic maturity). Despite the fact that as a segment of buyers they are already an attractive target market for a number of products and an object of market influence of many organizations, due to their young age, in many areas they still turn out to be immature consumers, volatile in terms of their attitudes and preferences, keen on trying new products and new experiences, and making decisions

M. Bączkiewicz, SOB: fanaberia czy biznesowa konieczność, [in:] J. Bakonyi, J. Dzieńdziora, O. Grabiec, M. Smolarek (ed.), Zarządzanie w innowacyjnej gospodarce, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Humanitas", Sosnowiec 2011, p. 245.

of varying degrees of rationality<sup>8</sup>. Young consumers are well-educated people who want to further develop, are active, have high self-confidence, stay longer with their parents, thus delaying the transition to adulthood, attributing high importance to the quality of life and experience rather than possession<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, young generation consumers are also characterized by: quickness of mid and wide awareness resulting from the use of modern technologies to obtain information, searching for shopping opportunities, getting used to using computers and being exposed to electronic media from an early age, using the Internet in the process of making purchasing decisions and carrying out business transactions, expecting rapid changes, being aware of current trends<sup>10</sup>. As the research conducted by the above-mentioned authors shows, the younger generation consumers are characterized by consumerism, which is due to the fact that these people grew up in an era when shopping and spending time in malls began to be treated as a form of entertainment.

As noted above, the young generation consumers constitute representatives of the information society. Therefore, the main criterion distinguishing them from older people is the widespread use of modern technologies, including the Internet, which makes them "global citizens of the world" living in a "global village"11. Modern technologies are ubiquitous in all spheres of life of young consumers, and their development significantly changes their market behaviors. Blogs, social networking sites and forums allow them to express their opinions about products and services, which helps to reveal and disseminate information about unethical activities of companies. Consumers become better informed, turn from passive to active committed buyers, share their opinions but also make decisions based on the online community opinions. Young consumers constitute the active ones, seeking information from many sources, being aware of their influence on the chosen product or service and the reputation of the brand or company<sup>12</sup>. Hence, enterprises should take care to build their image based on ecological, ethical and social values treasured by young consumers, as they are characterized by high environmental awareness. It does not only relate to an appropriate level of knowledge about the impact of human activity on the environment, but also to taking specific actions, changing habits, lifestyles and market behaviors. What is born at some stage of this awareness is the readiness to undertake actions supporting environmental protection in everyday life, pub-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> I. Escher, J. Petrykowska, *Proekologiczne zachowania młodych polskich konsumentów*, "Handel Wewnętrzny" 2015, No. 2(355), p. 130.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> E. Gołąb-Andrzejak, Konsumenci pokolenia Y – nowe wyzwanie dla komunikacji marketingowej, "Handel Wewnętrzny" 2016, No. 2(361), pp. 142-143.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Por.: J.G. Heaney, *Generations X and Y's internet banking usage in Australia*, "Journal of Financial Services Marketing" 2007, No. 11(3), pp. 196-210; M. Bartlett, *Analyst: understanding what shapes generation can help the...*, "Credit Union Journal" 2004, No. 8(21), pp. 14-17.

E. Gołąb-Andrzejak, Konsumenci pokolenia Y..., p. 142.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> A. Dąbrowska, M. Janoś-Kresło, Konsument na rynku e-usług w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, Difin, Warszawa 2011, pp. 54-57.

lic commitment to this protection and readiness to support or counteract certain processes<sup>13</sup>. Activities supporting environmental protection by young consumers include: purchasing ecological products from companies applying the principles of fair trade and CSR in their activities, avoiding non-biodegradable packaging, waste segregation, supporting green organizations and movements<sup>14</sup>.

The attitudes and behaviors of young consumers are also determined by numerous eco trends (e.g. downsizing your life style, rental culture, swap trading, carpooling, etc.). These trends are strengthened by the fusion of new lifestyles, fashion trends (e.g. ecofashion), the trend of returning to nature (back to basis) and the search for savings in everyday behavior (less food waste, longer use of products, saving water, reducing energy consumption, etc.).

It is difficult to attribute all the aforementioned characteristics to every consumer at the age of 18-30. Certainly, each of them can be characterized by an individual approach to the issues. However, there is no doubt that representatives of the younger generation are increasingly interested in environmental problems (e.g. a healthy lifestyle or respect for natural resources).

# 3. Assessment of companies' pro-ecological initiatives by young generation consumers – a pilot study

The results of a pilot survey conducted by the authors in a group of 60 randomly selected young generation consumers aged 18-30, allow us to state that a modern consumer, a representative of the young generation, is a person sensitive to social goals and ecology, living a full life and suffering from a shortage of time simultaneously, with an almost unlimited access to information, open to change and constantly looking for new experiences.

The research problem as posed in the study was included in the question: What is the level of knowledge of the concept of ecological corporate social responsibility in the group of young consumers and the degree of knowledge of initiatives undertaken in this respect by companies operating on the Polish market?

On the basis of the results of the pilot survey, it can be assumed that a large majority of the younger generation (87% of the respondents) share the view that enterprises should take initiatives in the field of environmental social responsibility. Young consumers perceive the significance of the developing trend that not only large corporations, but also small and medium-sized enterprises more and more frequently include CSR in their activities. The following examples of such measures

Raport "Rozwój rynku dóbr i usług ekologicznych w warunkach gospodarki polskiej", UE w Katowicach, Katowice 2014, p. 45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> A. Czubała, Rola marketingu w realizacji społecznej odpowiedzialności przedsiębiorstw, "Handel Wewnętrzny" 2012, No. 5, Iss. 1, p. 28.

are: organizing blood donation campaigns in companies, collecting Christmas gift parcels, planting trees or collecting electro-waste. As far as internal relations are concerned, the respondents particularly emphasized the importance of such issues as: respecting consumer rights (63%), conducting dialogue with consumers (61%), counteracting mobbing and discrimination (56%), guaranteeing good working conditions (44%), organizing educational projects combined with integration trips (42%), investing in employee development (40%), e.g. training courses. In the area of external relations, on the other hand, what was indicated by the respondents as the most important issue was compliance with ethical standards in relations with the environment - 88% of positive responses (yes and definitely yes), and relations with other stakeholder groups (66%), stressing at the same time that the implementation of CSR schemes these days also constitutes a significant investment in the social value of the brand for many companies, which translates into maintaining satisfactory market positions. A brand that seeks the attention of young consumers (e.g. has CSR inscribed in its DNA) is perceived by the group as socially responsible (e.g. the "Sustainablefashion" event organized by one of young fashion designers, encouraging to wear clothes made exclusively of recycled material) or programs addressed to local communities, e.g. those concerning professional activation of people from the "50+" group. It is also worth emphasizing that a relatively large group of respondents (83%) considered consumer education to be an important initiative in the field of environmental corporate social responsibility.

As representatives of the generation that grew up on technology, young consumers are fully versed in hi tech and notice that a new social trend, more and more frequent especially in big corporations, is when they engage in social activities of a viral nature (e.g. the Cooperative Bank in Oława joining the Ice Bucket Challenge campaign).

The representatives of the young generation were also inquired about the leading branches of industry conducting activities to common benefit in accordance with social expectations. According to the respondents' opinions, these are: pharmaceuticals (43%), media (39%), chemical industry (22%). On the other hand, the industries whose level of involvement is perceived by the young generation as low are as follows: tobacco industry (66%), mining industry (58%), automotive industry (43%), transportation (32%), finance (23%), law (6%).

According to the results of the study, the representatives of the young generation expect companies to become more involved in such initiatives as: fighting hunger in the world (74%), fighting social pathologies (51%), access to new technologies (48%), chronic care (39%), health and safety education (26%). Companies operating or selling their products on the Polish market characterized by a visible involvement in socially responsible activities are the following: Coca-Cola (73%), Nike (69%), P&G (63%), Polsat Foundation (56%), Danone (54%).

Moreover, in the opinion of the young generation representatives, socially responsible business is one that will be appropriately adapted to the specificity of a given company and will constitute a source of motivation and inspiration to take initiatives in this area. According to this group of consumers, a properly implemented CSR concept is characterized by taking into account the aspects of environmental protection, as well as the needs of both local communities and employees.

### 4. Final remarks

The assessment of enterprises from the point of view of undertaking actions in the field of ecological social responsibility is becoming more and more significant as a way of making the pro-ecological initiatives undertaken by enterprises credible and strengthening their market image. Such evaluation is also important for the representatives of the young generation of consumers for whom ecological issues are not insignificance as far as their market behaviors are concerned. The environmental values are vitally important for the vast majority of young consumers. They appreciate the significance of ecological issues and are aware of the fact that through purchasing and consuming ecological products they have influence on both their health and the natural environment. It is worth noting that they are willing to change their habits and market behaviors to more pro-ecological ones, especially when appropriately informed (e.g. they are aware that the use of eco-food reduces the risk of falling ill with many diseases of affluence, which in turn may have an impact on reducing the costs of absenteeism at work and long-term treatment). Moreover, in their statements, young consumers emphasized that the production of eco-food prevents degradation of the natural environment and takes care of animal welfare. Therefore, young people are more and more willing to resign from purchasing environmentally unfriendly products (and this is not only a declaration). Furthermore, they pay a lot of attention to eco-labelling of products, they are also willing to pay a higher price for the ecological ones. They are eager to engage in social campaigns of pro-ecological nature or even they are the initiators of such projects (e.g. organizing blood donation events, collecting Christmas gift parcels, planting trees or collecting electro-waste).

Therefore, it is worth emphasizing that undertaking pro-ecological actions is connected not only with the increase of threats related to the natural environment, but also with increasing the level of responsibility for negative changes occurring in the global environment and it becomes more and more frequently a novel way of competing in the global world.

Businesses today should definitely think more strategically about ecological aspects of the management processes. Among the significant factors determining the integration of the ecological social responsibility into the overall strategy of the company, the following can be distinguished:

- a general trend of ecological social responsibility being popular and actively promoted within various initiatives of international character, e.g. undertaken by the EU;
- growing market competition, forcing the search for new opportunities to gain a competitive advantage by using areas which have not been developed so far and which allow to strengthen a company's market image;
- a constantly growing network of stakeholders of enterprises, whose evaluation and the resulting supportive behavior or lack thereof become decisive for the companies' functioning conditions;
- increasing environmental impact of resources consumed by enterprises, such as water and energy.

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