

Exploring the Usage of CSR in Small and Medium-Sized Companies

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| Abstract <p>The objective of this study was to examine how small and medium sized companies understood the concept of corporate social responsibility and how they incorporated it in their business strategies. The topical nature of this subject made it interesting and worth researching. In addition to discovering ideas about CSR, the study also focused on marketing communications and the competitive advantage that CSR provides.</p> <p>The methodological approach used in the study was that of qualitative research, and the primary data was collected with theme interviews and observation. The theoretical part of the study covers the general ideas about CSR in small and medium sized companies, the main themes that were revealed in the findings of the study about corporate social responsibility as concepts and marketing communications especially in relation to CSR. The interviews focused on three main themes, and some follow-up questions and subjects were included based on the information gained. After the interviews were conducted, the data was analyzed with a content analysis.</p> <p>Most of the interviewed companies had some activities regarding CSR but did not consider them on a strategic level yet. Common themes emerging during the interviews were workplace wellbeing and sustainability. As a conclusion, it could be stated that the concept of CSR was not as unambiguous as one could assume, since the definition varied between different companies. In order to have noticeable benefits from CSR activities, they should be clearly stated in and implemented through a company's strategy.</p> | | |
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| Tiivistelmä <p>Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää, miten pienet ja keskisuuret yritykset ymmärtävät yritys vastuun konseptin ja kuinka se on sisällytetty yritysten liiketoimintastrategioihin. Aiheen ajankohtaisuus teki siitä mielenkiintoisen ja tutkimisen arvoisen. Yritysvastuusta heräävien ideoiden lisäksi tutkimus keskittyi myös markkinointiviestintään ja yritys vastuun tarjoamaan kilpailukykyyn.</p> <p>Tutkimusmetodina käytettiin kvalitatiivista tutkimusta ja primääriaineisto kerättiin teema haastatteluilla ja havainnoinnilla. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen osuus kattaa yritys vastuun yleisesti pienissä ja keskisuurissa yrityksissä, haastatteluista esiin nousseet olennaisimmat teemat käsitteinä ja erityisesti yritys vastuuseen liittyvän markkinointiviestinnän. Haastattelut keskittyivät kolmeen pääteemaan, joiden lisäksi esitettiin jatkokysymyksiä ja -teemoja jo saadun tiedon perusteella. Haastatteluaineisto analysoitiin sisällönanalyysiä käyttäen.</p> <p>Kaikilla haastatelluilla yrityksillä oli joitain yritys vastuuseen liittyviä toimia, mutta niitä ei ollut käsitelty vielä strategisella tasolla. Haastatteluissa esiin nousseita yhteisiä teemoja olivat työhyvinvointi ja kestävä kehitys. Yhteenvetona voidaan sanoa, että yritys vastuun käsite ei ole niin yksiselitteinen kuin voisi luulla, sillä sen ymmärtäminen vaihtelee suuresti yritysten välillä. Jotta yritys hyötyisi yritys vastuusta huomattavasti, tulisi se sisällyttää selkeästi strategiaan ja toteuttaa sen kautta.</p> | | |
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1 Introduction

Corporate social responsibility has a long history in business culture, but it is mostly a product of the 20th century (Carroll 1999, 268). Furthermore, it has gained more importance in companies' structure from the early 2000's as stakeholders, employees, customers and governments have encouraged companies to devote more resources to CSR activities (McWilliams & Siegel 2000, 603). Integrating CSR in the corporate strategy has a major impact on a company's brand image as well, and it has been proven that organizations that focus their efforts more on CSR issues, such as sustainability, workplace wellbeing and societal issues, gain competitive advantage because of it. The examples of when corporate social responsibility fails or is not addressed at all and what that does to the company's brand, are everywhere. As Dans (2015) writes:

The Volkswagen case represents above all an absolute failure in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The company deliberately set out to design a means to circumvent emissions control—a stratagem known at the highest levels—with the aim of giving the company an unfair advantage over its competitors that made it the world's number one car maker, in large part on the basis of its supposedly environmentally friendly cars; meanwhile it was poisoning the planet.

The CSR of the company failed and it became a marketing catastrophe. While it is important to note that successful CSR can give the company a competitive edge, it is equally important to remember that neglecting it can lead to an instant financial and reputational loss.

When we started to go through ideas for our thesis topic, corporate social responsibility came to mind through personal interests and since there were two of us, we wanted to include both of our interests and, therefore, linked marketing communications to the equation as well. Going through previously made theses, we found quite a few studies covering CSR, but not many theses that would have had the same, wider perspective on the topic that we wanted to have. Our aim was to focus on what kind of a role corporate social responsibility plays in small and medium sized companies -and, more specifically, to find out how our case firms understood CSR,

and what kind of a competitive advantage it would provide them if any, and how they included it in their marketing communications and strategy in general. One could say that we ultimately wanted to see how well the SME's selected for the study had familiarized themselves with this topic.

It was decided to name the problem as "exploring the role of CSR for SME's", which led to three research questions:

1. How can small/medium sized companies benefit from including CSR in their strategy?
2. How can including CSR in a small/medium sized firm's strategy be seen in their marketing?
3. What is the competitive advantage for SME's to include CSR in their strategy?

The nature of this research was qualitative, and, therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five companies in total. A further discussion of the methodology is later in the thesis. At the start of this study, the assumption was that sustainability would be one of the most widely discussed aspects of corporate social responsibility. It was expected to surface more in the interviews and that it would be a bigger aspect on the companies' marketing communications. It was also assumed that the companies would have at least a moderate understanding of CSR, and that it would show in their actions on a strategical level, at least in the bigger organization we managed to interview.

Previously made theses about corporate social responsibility can be found, but most of them are case studies specifically on one company. However, this study addressed the topic with a wider spectrum since it had more than one company's opinions and views about the subject.

2 Theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework, the relevant concepts and theories on this subject have been explained. Figure 1 below shows all the components of this chapter and clarifies their connection to each other.



Figure 1 Structure of theory

2.1 Conceptualization of Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility, often shortened as CSR, was the main focus of this study. One well-formed explanation for CSR is that it *“refers to the general belief held by growing numbers of citizens that modern businesses have responsibilities to society that extend beyond their obligations to the stockholders or investors in the firm”* (Visser, Matten & Pohl 2010, 106). In this study it was relevant to define corporate social responsibility through external and internal dimensions based on the findings of the study. Internal CSR refers to taking care of employees’ rights, safety and health at work and to the use of natural resources as well as the environmental impacts of production. External CSR refers to activities regarding local communities, suppliers,

consumers and global environmental concerns, to mention a few (Belz & Peattie 2009, 35.)

However, even though companies throughout the twentieth century were already accused of not taking action in CSR, corporate social responsibility has taken a long time to achieve a status where it is considered an important part of a company's business culture. The Economist published multiple articles in 2005 castigating the managers who considered corporate responsibility something that would benefit their companies. The general tone of the articles was judgmental, and implied the managers to be absurd. The articles also accused the managers of consciously "*taking their eye off shareholder interests*" (Blowfield & Murray 2011, 4). At the time, according to a survey made by the Economist Intelligence Unit, only 35 percent of managers felt that corporate responsibility was a priority (Blowfield & Murray 2011, 4). The fact that there is no strict regulation or requirements for CSR makes it a hard topic to tackle on. ISO provides an ISO 26000 Social responsibility standard, which gives guidelines for companies to be socially responsible, but it cannot be certified due to its nature (ISO 2017).

The conceptualization of CSR is difficult and it can therefore, cause confusion amongst those practicing it and researching it (Fassin et al. 2011, 425-453). There is a general understanding, though, that CSR is important for enterprises in terms of their own interest, as well as in the interest of the EU economy and society. CSR makes enterprises more sustainable and innovative, provides benefits in, for example cost savings and risk management and offers a set of values on which we can base a more sustainable economy (European Commission, 2015).

2.2 CSR in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

The theoretical literature about corporate social responsibility in small and medium sized businesses is quite scarce and hard to find. To be able to understand how the dynamics of CSR work in small and medium-sized companies (SME's), significantly

more studies, attention to and interest it are needed (Von Weltzien & Shankar 2011; Morsing & Perrini 2009; Perrini et al. 2007). Vázquez-Carrasco and López-Pérez (2012) pointed out in their systematic review of literature on CSR in the SME context that in their findings, 65% of the articles relating to this topic were published in 2009 or later, which would indicate that the subject is a trendy one and has more opportunities for further research.

Some claim that SME's are by nature more responsible than bigger companies due to aspects, such as close relationships to communities, long-term family ownerships and less pressure to add shareholder value (Blowfield & Murray 2011, 271). Von Weltzien and Shankar (2011) state that CSR should be seen as "*a value-building*" factor whether or not the motivations are unselfish. One aspect worth mentioning is that usually SME managers have more autonomy in the firm, which can be seen as more power over CSR agendas and actions (Jenkins 2006). CSR in SME's has been characterized as "*unstructured, non-formalized and nonsystematic*" (Russo and Tencati 2009), whereas in bigger corporations CSR strategies are often more planned and measurable (Jamali et al. 2009). Fassin et al. (2011, 441) revealed in their study that small business owners associated CSR and sustainability very closely in their minds and saw sustainability as a more practical aspect than CSR as a whole. The fact that relationships tend to be more personal in SME's and that employees are likely to know each other well creates a feeling of a family, which probably has shared values, and this cooperation is often the key to their success. A tight, respecting work community is probably more involved in the local community as well (Forbes 2013).

The European Commission has published their guidelines for small and medium-sized enterprises regarding CSR online, aiming to improve the quality and quantity of CSR advice for European SME's. They provide so called roadmaps of CSR for SME's, reminding that one size does not fit all at the same time. The European Commission wants to be able to help European SME's to enhance their reputation as leaders in corporate social responsibility (European Commission 2013, 5). The Commission en-

courages small and medium-sized enterprises to be creative with their activities, willing to learn, listen actively, build networks, identify and communicate benefits, stay practical, be an ambassador for the cause and keep adaptability in mind when developing CSR practices for their business (European Commission 2013, 8).

Social capital can be defined as “*social networks, the norms of reciprocity and trust that arise from them, and the application of these assets in achieving mutual objects*” (Tripp, Payne & Diodorus 2009, 1), and it is important in terms of efficient performance in modern economies. The central idea in the social capital theory is that relationships form networks which then form a valuable resource for the making of social affairs allowing their members to have “*the collectivity-owned capital*” (Bourdieu 1986, 249). Recently, social capital has been highlighted more at an organizational level (Mohtsham Saeed, M. & Arshad, F. J 2012, 219). Organizational social capital is a resource formed within the firm by having shared trust and goal orientation. Therefore, the concept of social capital is “*a value enhancing system resource*” (Leana, C.R. and Van Buren, H.J. 1999).

Tripp, Payne and Diodorus (2009, 3) point out that if our interest is specifically in how social capital works within organizations and not in social relations generally, then these notions are “*emptied of meaning almost completely.*” That is because, typically, organizational relationships’ effectiveness does not depend on their individuals having similar lifestyles or similar salaries, but on many factors relating to that particular organization at a specific time. Those factors can be, for example, the organization’s values, communications and the establishment of shared goals. These are factors that are prone to change in quite a short time (Tripp, Payne & Diodorus 2009, 3).

Workplace wellbeing rises as a central aspect of social responsibility through our research findings. Traditionally, the concept of a healthy workplace has been mainly concentrating on the physical safety of employees, and the focus has been more on

the physical working environment and the employees' physical safety there. An increased interest in the other aspects of individual health has expanded the healthy workplace perspective from the traditional models to including models of health promotion focusing on the employees' lifestyle and behaviors, for example, smoking cessation programs and weight-loss programs (Day, Kelloway & Hurrell 2014, 5). In addition to this, recently, the concept of healthy workplaces has expanded to also include broad psychosocial aspects of well-being at work (Kelloway & Day 2005).

The physical environment and the physical health and safety of the employees are, without a doubt, essential aspects of healthy workplaces, but they should not be considered the sole attributes of a physically healthy workplace (Day, Kelloway & Hurrell 2014, 5). In addition to those aspects, the promotion of healthy lifestyle choices can potentially make a significant contribution to a healthy workplace. Sauter, Murphy and Hurrell (1990) identified six different risk factors to employees' health when they examined The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) strategy for preventing job-related psychological disorders: high workload and pace, rotating work schedules and night work, high role stressors, career concerns and job insecurity, poor interpersonal relationships, and job content that does not provide enough stimulation of meaning. According to Hurrell (2005), most psychological initiatives were focused on the first two factors.

Work-related subjective wellbeing is sometimes operationalized as job satisfaction, but Warr (1990, 2009) thought about the subject differently and developed a model of affective wellbeing in the work context. Job satisfaction refers to how people report their satisfaction with different features of their work (Warr et al. 1979). It has been studied that, for example, the quantity of control over different work tasks as well as the related demands and variety can make an impact on the well-being of an individual employee (Fotinos-Ventouratos and Cooper 2005; Holman 2002).

2.3 Strategic management and CSR

As briefly mentioned before, strategic management is a central aspect of integrating corporate social responsibility in business' operations. There are four essential components when defining strategic CSR. First, firms should incorporate CSR in their strategic planning. Secondly, any action they take should reflect on their core values and thirdly, they must incorporate the stakeholders' perspective. Finally, rather than managing the firm's resources and key stakeholders' relations with a short-term perspective, the company should shift to a medium or long-term perspective (Chandler 2011, 40).

Corporate social responsibility is strategic when it has been taken into consideration in the business strategy process by expanding risk assessment and the examination of the company's operational environment from CSR's central aspects as well (Juutinen 2016, 38). At one point, companies made efforts more on a philanthropic level by means of sponsorships and making donations to organizations, such as the Red Cross, but these kinds of actions are not considered to show a sufficiently big effort anymore for a company to have fulfilled their responsibilities (Juutinen 2016, 36).

In order for corporate responsibility to create value within the company and for the company to create value for society, it is believed that CSR should be included in the company's business strategy rather than treating it as a separate operation. According to Blowfield (2011, 149), there is a widespread belief amongst corporate responsibility thinkers that companies should fully align corporate responsibility as a core driver to their business and develop management operations that support this action.

Leon Bracey, a Business Development Leader for Brown Public Relations notes that *"the trust and confidence of the consumer can have a direct and profound effect on a*

company's bottom line" (Bracey 2012). The **reputation** of corporates has become increasingly important, as big companies have had to stand up for themselves in times of crisis in order to maintain their reputation. Even though reputation is an intangible concept, it holds much power and can benefit a business in multiple ways. Having a good reputation in the marketplace might win the organization consumers' preference, even if there are similar products or services available with different prices from the competitors (Bracey 2012).

Organizations can have many types of corporate reputations (Carroll 2015, 4): (a) the actual reputation that consists of what individuals see in the company now, (b) the communicated reputation that is achieved through controlled and uncontrolled media e.g. marketing, advertising, sponsorships, word of mouth or social media, (c) the perceived reputation which means how the company is seen by multiple selectors, (d) the construed reputation that is the top management's view on how stakeholder's see their reputation, (e) the covenanted reputation which is what they promise with their brand and what the customers and consumers expect, (f) the ideal reputation which is how the company optimally wants to be positioned in its market in a given time frame, and (g) the desired reputation, that is how the company wishes to perceive their reputation deep down in their hearts and minds. These are the different types of reputations that Carroll *et al.* (2011, 4) point out in The ACID Reputation Framework.

According to an American study, there are ten main components of organizational reputation that are used in the reputation measurement system. They include, for example, ethics, employees and workplace, financial performance, management, social responsibility, quality, emotional appeal and reliability (Bracey 2012). Additional components were also found, but the components mentioned above seemed more important.

Bracey (2012) also mentions that before social media and platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, an organization's reputation relied mostly on word-of-mouth or very carefully implemented campaigns. He now encourages firms to establish their online presence, educate the stakeholders and employees on what kind of a message the firm wants to communicate to the general public, and to be responsive in case of a crisis. Bracey brings up trustworthiness, transparency and responsiveness as essential to the survival of any organization.

The link between CSR, **competitive advantage** and strategic management is also relevant in this study because competitive advantage is an important part of strategic management (South, 1981; Baaij et al., 2004) and because corporate responsibility will boost the company's innovativeness, make risk management more effective and facilitate growth within sustainable development (FIBS 2015). Porter (1985) states in his book about competitive advantage that it "*stems from the firm's ability to create superior value for its buyers*". Competitive advantage may be hard to identify and even harder to give a simple definition to. Some managers may not even be able to name the concept since it lacks "*semantic content*" (Sigalas, 2015).

Responsibility will bring competitive advantage to the company when it does more than it is legally demanded. A company can gain competitive advantage by providing something that its competitors do not provide, by integrating responsibility with the whole business and by responsibly following through the goals and principles in every action by asking itself whether or not that specific action was responsible, ethical and sustainable. Competitive advantage can also be gained by helping customers to make responsible, ethical and sustainable choices by communicating about their responsible products, services and practices understandably and inspirationally in situations and channels where the customers make their decisions (FIBS 2015).

2.4 Usage of marketing communications

This thesis examined how a company communicates its message of corporate social responsibility. In order to identify different ways for it, one needs to take a look at the company's marketing communications. Marketing communication is often used as a synonym for advertising or branding but in reality it is much more than that (Egan 2015, 3-4). In the book *Marketing communications*, Egan (2015, 4) defines marketing communications as *"the means by which a supplier of goods, services, values and/or ideas represents itself to its target audience with the goal of stimulating dialogue, leading to a better commercial or other relationships"*. Marketing communications can also be defined as part of the marketing mix, which consists of product, place, price and promotion, also known as marketing communication (Egan 2015, 10-14).

When talking about marketing communications, it is important to distinguish between the marketing communications tools and the media which delivers the message. Marketing communications tools means the process in which the message is developed and presented, and media means the channel in which the message is carried through. Some examples of well-known marketing communications tools are advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and corporate identity. Some marketing tools are more effective than others in certain situations, depending obviously of the product, company and target audience in question. The biggest developments in marketing communications in the last years can be found in the subject of marketing communications media, which never stands still but adds more and more mediums to it all the time. From print to radio and television, and more recently to digital marketing and all its branches, media in marketing communications means the channel in which the message is delivered. (Egan 2015, 18-23.)

Digital marketing and social media has become a crucial marketing communications channel in the last 20 years. One of the company's biggest and most valuable digital marketing assets is its webpage, and in the 21st century, if a company does not have

a digital presence, at least, a webpage, it does not exist. When designing the company's webpage, the key thing to remember is that "*content is king*" (Kananen 2013, 39). In traditional marketing, the communication is only one-way, hence the communication channels. However, in digital marketing and social media, the communication goes two-ways and includes the consumer (Kananen 2013, 39). In digital marketing communications, the consumer can decide what sort of content they will consume and use, which makes it increasingly important for the company to know their customers and make content useful and interesting specifically to those customers (Kananen 2013, 39-40).

A key part of a company's webpage and strategy in general are the mission and vision statements. Mission statement is a statement that somehow defines the company's purpose and aim and tries to distinguish it from similar organizations (Boddy 2011, 240). It can also tell more about the company's values, priorities and beliefs and where they hope to go (Stallworth Williams 2008, 96). Vision statements is a broader, general statement of what the company wants to become (Dressler 2017, 107). Both of these are good marketing communication devices when adding them to the company's webpage. From there, the consumer can clearly see, what the company's values are and what their intentions are. Blogs are usually a part of a company's webpage as well. Company blogs are typically personal: a company can write within their official lines, and alternatively people from the staff can write from their own perspective. Blogs help the company to get traction on their webpage but it can also be one of their marketing channels. (Kananen 2013, 149-160.)

Social media can be seen as the modern equivalent of word-of-mouth marketing: the best type of marketing is something you hear from other consumers, not from the company itself (Castronovo & Huang 2012, 128). Stories, experiences and especially complaints can spread through social media like wildfire and there is very little a company can do to prevent it from happening, except to be active on social media themselves. The biggest difference between social media marketing and traditional marketing is it being 'social', and the communication works two ways: from the company

to the consumer and vice versa. In social media, the users make the content themselves and its main features are constant change and openness. Companies can use social media to sustain their customer relationships, and through social media it is very easy for consumers to give feedback or complain about the company's products or services. (Kananen 2013, 13-14.) Social media as a marketing channel is very cost effective and suits especially new, smaller companies whom may not have the resources to put together a traditional and expensive marketing campaign (Castronovo & Huang 2012, 117). Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn are the biggest and most important social media channels for a company to use. Especially Twitter can be seen as a customer service for individual customer, where they can take directly contact the company's representative and give their feedback and actually be heard (Kananen 2013, 160-162).

In the 21st century, communication needs to be more entertaining and personal than ever. Successful communication needs to have an open structure in order for the customer to make itself heard, especially in situations where there is something to complain about. Much can be said about a company when seeing how they handle negative situations. (Sounio 2010, 89). This also affects the company's brand since much of the brand comes from the company's marketing communication.

2.5 The Importance of branding

Branding has become immensely important to companies in order to distinguish themselves in the markets they operate in. Egan (2015, 76) has collected a few different definitions of branding and ultimately defined it as following: "*Branding is a collection of actual and emotional characteristics associated with a particular identified product or service that differentiates that product or service from the rest of the market place.*" All the elements of the brand, including the brand name, logos and symbols, should be meaningful and memorable as well as distinctive from other brands (Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van den Bergh 2010, 52). The most relevant thing about branding in connection to this thesis is the notion that a brand is able to add value to

the company and to the product or service in question (Hollis 2008, 15). Brands influence the customers choices as well as the choices of employees, government authorities and investors, and because of this, brands are the most valuable intangible thing that companies have. The most valuable brands of the world seem to also be the oldest: Coca Cola, which is the world's most valuable brand, is over a hundred years old. (Clifton & Simmons 2004, 28.)

Egan (2015, 77) notes that both the company and the customers can benefit from branding. From the customer's point, it is important to recognize preferred and non-preferred brands. The recognition can come from first-hand experience, but also from the communication that the company puts out, which makes branding important. Brand awareness consists of brand recognition and brand recall (Keller 2013, 73). Brand recognition simply means that the consumer can recognize a brand from some kind of prior exposure or experience. Brand recall on the other hand means the consumer's ability to recall a specific brand when given a product category. (Keller 2013, 73.)

Brand promise means the promises associated with a particular brand, for example security and low prices. Egan (2015, 76) gives an example from the hotel business, noting that if an inexperienced traveler is travelling to the Far East for the first time, they might choose to stay at a branded hotel chain such as the Hilton or Holiday Inn. This may not be because these hotels are better than the local ones, but because the traveler feels safe with the image that this hotel brand has around the world and knows what to expect. In this context, the definition of brand promise appears. Brand promise means the set of promises that are associated with the particular brand, and the brand promise of these hotel chains is that they offer the same level of quality all round the world. (Egan 2015, 77.)

For companies, branding is probably mostly important because of differentiation, which Egan (2015, 78) explains to be the process of making a brand different from its competitors. A close connection to brand differentiation is the concept of brand

identity, which is composed of the features of the brand that make the brand recognizable and different, for example brand name, symbols and logos. These features, as well as the brand itself, can be protected by law through commercial branding, which includes, for example, trademarking. (Egan 2015, 78-79.) The idea of brand promise and taglines are also very important pieces of branding. Brand promise is the outward expression of the brand in which the marketers can build upon the features of the brand and a good tagline can strengthen the brand promise. (Hollis 2008, 15 ; Geller 2006, 33). Taglines (or slogans) are short, simple, direct statements that should represent who you are a company (Geller 2006, 35) and in some cases, can represent your values.

As an explanation of how brand works, Egan (2015, 76) suggests to thinking a brand as a halo that surrounds the product or service, and inside that halo exists the core and the augmented aspects. The core includes the functional characteristics about the product or service: basic product or service, texture and shape, performance and physical capacity, and any changes in the core will directly affect the basis of the product or service. Augmented aspects means things like packaging and presentation of the product or service, price, guarantees, extras and post-sales services. From these two, marketers choose characteristics that are most attractive for the audience, and that part is seen in the halo by the outside world, and is considered as the brand. (Egan, 2015 76.)

We now need to consider why branding is so important. Mostly it is because of the constant competition especially in the global market. The reality of it is, that no matter how good the product is, if a strong brand is lacking and nobody knows about the company, the revenues will not come flying through the door. In its core, branding is about making one's name known globally, and since consumers tend to buy what they know, it helps if they know the brand's name. (Sounio 2010, 27). In connection to CSR, environmentalism and social responsibility have become somewhat "trendy" values to highlight in a company's branding and advertising. Today, it seems to be

more of a norm for every company to have some sort of an environmentalism stand, and it is noticeable if there is not one.

According to Wood (2000, 662) if a company wants their brand management to be successful, they need to think of it strategically and part of their strategic management. Wood (2000, 662) also states that *“the lack of an effective dialogue between functions that are disparate in philosophy and do not have a common and compatible use of terminology may be a barrier to strategic management within organizations”*. Simply put, this means that brand management requires all parts of the company to co-operate for the benefit of the brand, not just marketers.

One of the newest ways of thinking about the value of a company is the concept of brand valuation and **brand equity**. Egan (2015, 88) defines brand equity as *“the value associated with owning a particular brand compared to a generic of the same type in the same product or service category”*. In the heart of it, this means that the brand is crucially important for the company’s profits and should not be taken lightly. No other intangible thing has a stronger link between the market and the financial profit (Sinclair 2011, 1). For this reason, brand and brand equity are crucially important for the company’s competitiveness and should be paid attention to.

Brand equity consists of brand awareness and brand image. Sometimes brand awareness alone is enough for the customer to decide to choose a particular brand (Keller 2013, 73). Brand awareness can be created through repeated exposure, and usually, the more of the brand’s elements can be marketed, the better. Although repetition increases recognizability, brand recall is very important as well. Brand recall makes linkages in customer’s memory between the product and the appropriate product categories. Slogans and jingles are crucially important marketing tools when it comes to brand recall, because they are the ones helping to make those connections. (Keller 2013, 75.)

A distinction should be made between financial brand equity and consumer brand equity. Financial brand equity means the financial value of the brand for the company and is formed from a financial analysis, a market analysis, a brand analysis and a legal analysis. (Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van den Bergh 2010, 64-66.) Consumer brand equity, or customer-based brand equity, is based on the idea that the power of the brand lies within what the customers have learned, felt, seen and heard about the brand, either through their own experience or through second-hand experience (Keller 2013, 69). Basically, a brand has positive consumer-based brand equity when the customers have a positive and favorable reaction to the brand. Therefore, people may accept more easily new brand extensions, price modifications and new distribution channels (Keller 2013, 69).

2.6 Marketing CSR and sustainability

Some people might argue that corporate social responsibility is just a plain marketing strategy, a way of getting positive publicity and trying to convince the general public that the company cares about its environment (Neisser 2016). For others it can be one of the most important matters about the company culture. For a consumer, it can be the deciding issue between a company that communicates their social and environmental responsibility to the customers, and a company that does not. Marketing in general can be often seen as unethical and merely a way of getting people to buy what you are selling, and thus it is extra important to remember ethics when communicating corporate social responsibility and sustainability (Egan 2015, 331). Juutinen (2016, 217) says that it is difficult for companies to execute their marketing in an ethical and truthful way, and seeing the issue in two ways: some feel that companies 'greenwash' their products in their marketing, while some think that companies are timid about telling their responsible and sustainable actions. Many companies have responded to the increasing interest towards CSR by publishing Corporate Social Responsibility reports on their webpages for the general public to read about the company's efforts on caring and serving the environment while making socially good actions (Belz & Peattie 2009, 35).

In order for the marketing around sustainability to be valid, it needs to be grounded in somewhere deeper in the company's ideas and values. Belz & Peattie (2009, 114) state that "*Well-intended corporate sustainability statements expressing concern and environmental issues are of little worth if they are undermined by the pursuit of short-term economic objectives*". This means that while setting up the company's goals, social and sustainability issues need to be present in order to be used in marketing as well. Company's values can be shown and stated in the mission statement.

When using sustainability and being green in marketing, the company must be careful not to make false green claims (Williams 2008). CSR Europe has made a Guide for Sustainable marketing (Williams 2008) in which they state clearly what green claims should and should not be. Most importantly, a green claim should be truthful, accurate and able to substantiated, relevant to the product or service in question and also clear about the environment aspect in question. If using symbols in green claims, the company must be explicit about the meaning of any symbol, with the exception of those required by law. The use of language is also very important. Green claims should be in plain language and in line with the standard definitions. (Williams 2008.) According to Pelsmacker, Geuens and Van den Bergh (2012, 630), in addition to green marketing, some other forms of marketing corporate social responsibility are cause-related marketing and fair-trade marketing. Cause-related marketing means that a company supports a social cause by donating money to them and making it a marketing communications action as well. Fair-trade marketing means selling products that embody certain social and ethical values, such as products free of child labor. (Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van den Bergh 2012, 629-632.)

Regarding different medias to use when communicating CSR strategies to the general public, Juutinen (2012, 171) states that especially when the company is only starting its CSR activities, using different medias is very important. She singles out presentations and statements from the management in different occasions as an important

step when changing or establishing the company's CSR approach, as well as the company's webpage and social media channels. Juutinen (2016, 170-172) also brings up a point about the spokesperson in the company commenting their corporate social responsibility actions in the media. She points out, that when constructing the CSR strategy, it should be defined who communicates about it in the media. For example, if there is a question in the media about a raw material the company uses, it should be defined clearly in the plan who answers these questions in the media: the CEO, the person in charge of getting the raw material, or the expert on corporate social responsibility. Juutinen (2012, 170-172) states that although all three people might be giving the same message, the role and status of the person communicating can affect the public's perception of things.

As climate change has convinced the general public to be a real problem, corporates' environmental responsibility plays a bigger part in their strategies and communications now more than ever. Unfortunately, some companies have been accused of **greenwashing**, and some "green claims" have even spurred lawsuits (Kewalramani & Sobelsohn 2012). Green claims "*set out the standard of information that the public can expect to be given about the environmental impacts of consumer products*" (Williams 2008). In a study conducted by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. in 2007, greenwashing is described as "*the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.*" (TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. 2007.) The study shows a more in-depth overview of the term by naming The Six Sins of Greenwashing™ which go as follows:

- Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off
- Sin of No Proof
- Sin of Vagueness
- Sin of Irrelevance
- Sin of Fibbing
- Sin of Lesser of Two Evils

In worst cases firms rely on these false claims in order to polish their product or enhance their reputation as the better option, when in reality their actions towards CSR are rather poor and green claims merely a marketing strategy.

3 Methodology

When conducting any kind of research, the biggest decision after deciding on the topic is to decide on the research design. Research design in short means the overall plan of how to answer to the research questions (Saunders et al. 2012, 159). Research design includes choosing the research approach (quantitative, qualitative or multiple methods), which will largely direct the research process (Saunders et al. 2012, 161-170). From the start, it was clear that considering the topic and research questions at hand, the choice would be qualitative research. There was a relatively small amount of previous research on corporate social responsibility and the possibility of obtaining numerical data on the subject seemed very unlikely, almost impossible. The differentiation between quantitative and qualitative research can simply be done by separating numerical data and non-numerical data (Saunders et al. 2012, 161). For this thesis, it was important to obtain opinions and ideas instead of numbers.

The initial idea for this thesis was to implement it as a case study for one specific company and determine how their corporate social responsibility plans and actions through marketing communications affected their customers and their decisions. This proved to be immensely difficult, and the company that had been planned for this did not have the needed plans and actions regarding CSR in order for us to complete the originally planned study on them. Moreover, there was a number of already existing studies on the subject conducted as different case studies, so we wanted to try a different approach. We decided to change the intended angle of our research to cover multiple small or medium sized companies and focus on their ideas about corporate social responsibility, how important they considered it to be and how they planned to execute it if they had not already done so. The research problem changed in the process as well.

3.1 Data collection

In this thesis, the theoretical framework for the subject was based on textbooks, articles and already existing research on corporate social responsibility. The theoretical framework has multiple purposes in a study: it shows if there are already existing studies on the subject, as well as creates a framework for the subject. A good literature review can help the reader to connect the study to a larger subject or phenomenon and work as a benchmark when comparing the results (Creswell 2014, 27-28). We made ourselves familiar with the definitions and existing research on the subject and realized that there were no other studies of this sort.

The primary data for this thesis was collected with two methods: semi-structured theme interviews and observation. Primary data means the information collected specifically for the project or study at hand (Saunders et al. 2012, 304). Two methods were used, since it was considered important to obtain both the companies' own ideas about and plans for corporate social responsibility and how they marketed it, and see if what they said could be seen through the consumers' eyes. We approached some small and medium sized companies at a close distance to us so that it would be easy to conduct interviews face to face. It turned out that not many companies were interested in participating since they felt that they did not have enough information or material in their own strategy for the study. Most of the contacted companies did not respond at all. The companies that we ended up interviewing were those to which we already had existing relationships either directly or via our friends and family.

The people interviewed varied from company to company. The only requirement for them was that they had the knowledge of at least some parts of the company's corporate social responsibility. Some of the interviewees came from the top of their company and some did not. However, they all had knowledge of the matters that we wanted to discuss and/or they were individuals with whom we had pre-existing relationships. Since we interviewed only one person from each company, the answers

did not necessarily describe the whole company's absolute idea of their stand on corporate social responsibility, but only that of the specific individual. In most cases the company had no official corporate social responsibility plan, which could be concluded on the basis of the respondents' knowledge and idea of the subject and on the basis of how the company had communicated about it within in the firm and to its employees.

Four of the companies were small or medium sized companies, and during the interviews, it became apparent that a larger company with an already existing corporate social responsibility strategy could be an interesting addition to the primary data. This was supposed to help us to compare the companies and see at what stages CSR had started to be relevant for them. The fifth company was selected for the study because of their longer history of having corporate social responsibility strategies and actions as well as because of the fact that they had plenty of material on the subject on their webpage. In addition, we had an existing relationship with someone within the company who helped us to contact the right person.

The interviews were conducted as theme interviews, which meant that instead of straightforward and limited questions, the interviewees were presented with larger themes on which we wished to gain information. Within those themes more specific questions were asked based on what the respondents told us. (Kananen 2015, 148.) The theme interview method was chosen since it was obvious that different companies were in different phases of corporate social responsibility. Therefore, if the structure of the interviews had been tightly pre-decided, it would have prevented us from obtaining the required material.

The themes were chosen on the basis of our research questions: How can CSR be seen in the company's strategy? and How does CSR show in the company's marketing communications? As it became apparent that most of the companies were not too familiar with corporate social responsibility and did not have specific strategies

for it, we decided to add the general idea of corporate social responsibility as an opening theme and ask how the company and the person interviewed understood it in general. Moreover, since some of the companies defined themselves as startups, we added the question of how they would like to improve and develop their corporate social responsibility in the future. Since the interviews were theme interviews, they resembled a conversation more than straightforward interviews. Kananen (2014, 79-80) introduces three types of questions that are good for theme interviews: open questions, follow-up questions and hypothetical questions. We used all of these question types. Before every interview, the interview was planned by making an interview plan and a theme interview frame, as advised by Kananen (2015, 153-155). The interviews were recorded with an audio device and then transcribed to text format.

Altogether five interviews were conducted. Three of them were done face to face in the office spaces of the interviewees' companies, one was made via email and one via Skype. We initially wanted to have all the interviews face to face because we felt that it would have been more conversational by having the opportunity to directly ask some follow up questions and thus gain as much information as possible. In the case of one company, this turned out to be logistically almost impossible, but since they were a perfect subject for this study and eager to participate, we decided to collect the primary data through email. In order for the email interview to be valuable for us, it needed to be interactive. The first email sent to the company's representative contained the main four themes and questions: How does the company itself define corporate social responsibility? How can CSR be seen in the company's strategy? How does the company include CSR in their marketing communications and how would the company like to improve their CSR in the future? After the first few interviews with the other companies, we also sent them the question of if they had noticed CSR giving some added value to their company. After receiving the answers to these themes and questions, we went through them and asked some follow-up questions about the themes and the company itself.

In addition to the theme interviews, we collected primary data by observing the interviewed companies' marketing material. According to Kananen (2008, 69), using observation as a primary data collection method is justifiable when the topic at hand is not well known and there is little information on it available. For this thesis, although the main primary data collection method was the theme interview we felt that an appropriate addition to this would be to see if and how the issues mentioned in the interviews actually communicated themselves to the consumers. The observation happened mainly through their webpages and social media platforms, and in a few cases, by observing and examining their products. The idea of this kind of observation was to compare what the companies had said about how corporate social responsibility showed in their marketing, and how it was actually visible to the consumer's eyes. Some of what the companies had said in their interview related to marketing could not actually be seen as clearly as they may have thought, but mostly the companies' statements in the interviews and the results of the observation were coherent. We tried to minimize the possibility of error in the data collection part by using technical applications such as recording the interviews and not just relying on our memory and notes (Kananen 2008, 121-128.) The observation part was also a way to make the study more reliable, since it was a way to prove some of the points made in the interviewees valid and correct.

3.2 Data analysis

Since this thesis was implemented by using qualitative research methods and observation, there was no need to use any computer programmes to analyze the data, as would have been the case if this had been a quantitative study. According to Kananen (2015, 159-160), in qualitative research, it is important to transcribe and make the collected data commensurate. The interviews were transcribed to text shortly after concluding them so that it was easier to summarize the important points and topics that had risen from them when writing the Research findings chapter of this thesis.

The analysis method used for this thesis was content analysis. This seemed the most appropriate one considering the extent of the information gained through the interviews and how many themes and topics were covered in them. In addition, since we had used the method of semi-structured theme interviews, the data was already somewhat categorized by themes. After transcribing the interviews, we went through them multiple times and looked for commonalities which were then collected from all the interviews under different headlines (Chapter 4 Research findings). When doing this, we also excluded the non-important parts that were not useful for this study, which mainly included specific examples from the companies. (Kananen 2008, 94-99.)

In order for us to remain objective, we used the fact that there were two researchers to our advantage. The biggest part of this was when analyzing the data, in which we used the method of one of us analyzing the data and writing the discussion and conclusions chapter and afterwards checking the reliability by having the other researcher read it and agree or not agree, make comments and additions and modify the text to a point where both agreed on how the information was displayed.

3.3 Interview themes

- How does the company itself define corporate social responsibility?
- How can CSR be seen in the company's strategy & how does the company include CSR in their marketing communications?
- How would the company like to improve their CSR in the future?

Interview themes and follow-up questions in Finnish:

- Miten yritys itse määrittelee yritysvastuun?
- Miten yritysvastuu näkyy yrityksen strategiassa?
- Miten yritys sisällyttää yritysvastuun markkinointiviestintään?
- Mi(t)kä yritysvastuun osa-alue(et) tuntuvat tärkeimmiltä yritykselle? Miksi?

- Onko yritysvastuu osana yrityksen strategiaa auttanut luomaan lisäarvoa yritykselle ja yhteiskunnalle? Jos, miten?
- Onko yritys huomannut yritysvastuulla olevan vaikutusta rekrytointiprosessiin? Jos, miten?
- Onko yritys huomannut muutosta asiakaskunnan suhtautumisessa yritysvastuuseen? Jos, miten?
- Miten yritys haluaisi kehittää yritysvastuuta tulevaisuudessa?
- Missä vaiheessa yritysvastuu on otettu mukaan yrityksen strategiaan ja toimintaan?

3.4 About the companies

Company A

Company A is a Central-Finnish firm that works in an international wellness sector, focusing on three main fields: workplace wellness, licensed programmes and high-level competitive sports. The company is a fast growing startup, founded in 2002, currently holding about 90 employees and working in over 40 different countries.

Company B

Company B is a Central-Finnish firm that also concentrates on the wellness sector. The company manufactures products that focus on indoor air problems. Company B is a startup, and holds about 65 employees. The company has expanded its business outside of Finland, and currently has clients in Sweden and in the United States as well.

Company C

Company C is a Finnish firm operating as a small producer in the food industry. The company was founded in 2008, and has had rapid growth between 2010 and 2015. Company C has 13 permanent employees.

Company D

Company D is a Central-Finnish startup operating in the field of other paper, cardboard and carton product manufacturing. It has only two employees, who are both the founding members of the firm as well. Company D was launched in 2015.

Company E

Company E is a Finnish company operating in the foodservice industry. The company is over a 100 years old and operates globally with hundreds of employees. Company E has multiple brands and operating branches under them.

4 Research findings

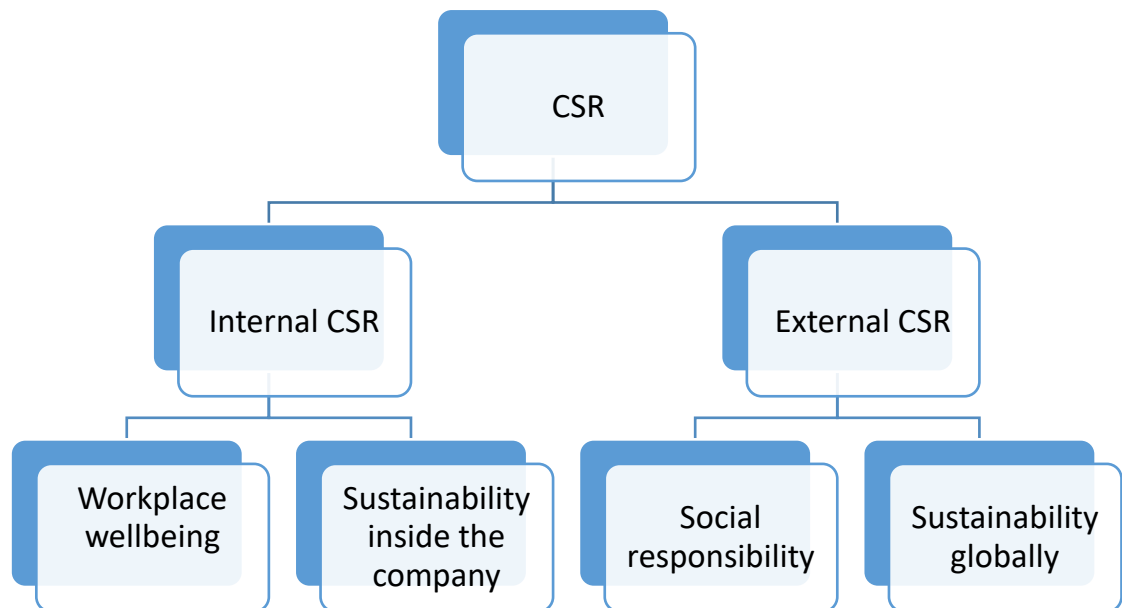


Figure 2 CSR divisions

4.1 State of understanding the concept

Company A said that although it does not have any official CSR statements or any particular CSR strategy written down in their business strategy, it has discussed it within the management team and tried to incorporate some matters in the day-to-day activities of the company. Company A understood corporate social responsibility as taking responsibility of their workers and their wellbeing.

Company B admitted not really talking about corporate social responsibility, but noted believing they are doing a good thing by trying to advance people's health and therefore care for the wellbeing of others. They noted that for them, CSR culminates in environment, people and society, and they focus on maintaining this by taking part in different kinds of programs that come across their way. As an example, company B mentioned the Trusted Partner -organization which keeps track of the trustworthiness of companies in Finland. In addition, Trusted Partner makes sure the companies under the license do not have any unpaid taxes, misdemeanors or complaints from

their clients or workers. Company B stated it wants to make sure to be following those standards and, furthermore, be certain the partners they choose to collaborate with are following those standards as well. Company B did not have any official, written-down CSR strategy, either.

Company C defined corporate social responsibility as *“a key value of its operations”*. The company explained that since they have started as a family business, the company recognizes the value of local co-operation and clean environment. Company C said CSR is actually mentioned in their strategy, but executed more situationally than according to any specific strategy or guidelines.

Company D described their understanding of corporate social responsibility as acting morally, ethically and responsibly towards society as well as having good rules and values. The company compared it to *“people having good manners”*. They talked about financial responsibility, which the firm holds towards their shareholders as a profitable business. Company D also mentioned having responsibility towards interest groups, personnel, financiers and owners. They had heavy emphasis on environmental responsibility, which is showcased in their marketing as well. Company D did not have a separate mention about corporate social responsibility in their strategy, but felt that it came naturally with the company’s core values.

Company E, as a significantly bigger organization in comparison to the other interviewee companies, had a very precise take on corporate social responsibility. Lately the company had been talking to a great extent about *“shared value”*. The company was aware of their impact on society and environment, and wanted to have a wider take on CSR by not focusing solely on paying taxes and making profit. Company E has had a CSR strategy for a very long time, but recently renewed it in 2014. During the update CSR was shared in five different fields: first, people were discussed, meaning the workforce and employees. As a second field there was value chain and its impacts. As a third field were *“naturally, the environmental issues”* as a part of their strategy. The company explained, that being a part of the environment makes them

understand the significance of resources, and as a company operating in the food industry the central idea is to produce quality products. In order to make quality products, one needs quality raw material. In order to have those quality raw materials, company E recognizes the importance of taking good care of the land, the air and the water because it understands that without those resources they would not be able to make their quality products. The fourth field is business activity on a daily basis. It has plenty to do with the added value for owners and interest groups. In addition, the company talked about their reputation – as a family-owned company it is important for them to have a persistent, long-span continuity for business activities and development. The fifth and last field of the company's current CSR strategy raised by their interest groups: health and wellbeing. Again, as a company in the food industry, the company has a huge impact on people's health and wellbeing through their products. It had been a part of the company's strategy before as well, but after 2014 there has been a more powerful focus on that particular matter.

Company E was presented with the question of when corporate social responsibility had become a part of their strategy and operations as well. The company replied by stating it had become a part of their strategy fully in the early 2000's, and a more considerable part since. The company also noted CSR activities being a part of their operations and day-to-day business well before that, since the start of the company, but it had not been thought in that particular sense. Company E is a family business, which has made the family atmosphere staying as part of the business throughout its history. As a result, responsibility towards the company's employees and their families has always been a key part of the organization. According to company E, it was most likely because of global trends that corporate social responsibility issues started to be considered more systematically and became a part of the strategy in the company.

In both company A's and company B's interviews, the emphasis was on **workplace wellbeing** and the workers feeling good about working there. Furthermore, equality was important, and the companies emphasized a diverse working environment

where everybody has a sense of belonging. Especially company A stated to be focusing on employees' physical wellbeing by doing ergonomic checks and making an effort on other similar issues since they are working in the wellness sector themselves. Since one of their areas of their business was helping companies take care of their workers, they also wanted to make it a reality for their own employees. Flexibility was important for company A as well, since they wanted their employees to be able to combine their personal and working life successfully. In company B, it was important for them to preserve one hour per person per month to go through any possible conflicts and problems in their personal and professional life which would distract or affect their efficiency at work.

Company C brought up workplace wellbeing after being asked more specifically about social responsibility. The company stated to have put effort on workplace wellbeing by creating less stressful working methods and by developing work ergonomics.

Company D did not have much to say about workplace wellbeing since they are a startup and the company currently consists of two people. They said, however, that when the time comes to expand the company and hire more employees, they want to make sure all their ethics and workplace wellbeing plans are in order. One of the company's biggest focus areas, both in marketing and the company itself, is the fact that all their materials and production is in Finland. Therefore, a comment was made it being hard to imagine the company moving their production abroad at some point, but if it ever were to happen, it would have to be an area where the company could see and monitor the conditions of the workers.

Company E felt like workplace wellbeing was very important and mentioned having different programmes for bettering their employees' mental wellbeing. A big agenda for them has been workplace safety, in which they had had "*big issues*" in and "*too many accidents happening*". The company has been trying to improve that area and

have reached some of the set goals, but still, plenty needs to be done. Another considerably important agenda was mental wellbeing, but the company *“still has a lot do with that as well”*. Company E mentioned their ‘flexible working model’ as *“typical and ordinary workplace wellbeing support”*, and brought up the company’s new linings with remote work and ways it could be adjusted to every employee’s own stage of life. Ergonomics was briefly mentioned as well. Company E conducts a ‘People Power Survey’ usually every year, in which a central issue had to do with many having the feeling they had been working too much. Inspired by the survey, company E has tried to tackle the issue in their annual performance appraisals by emphasizing the importance of rest.

Regarding **social responsibility**, company A stated having some co-operation with sports organizations through their employees and their children, but none of the co-operations have been permanent. The company has also donated presents for the children’s hospital every year and plan to do so in the future. Both company A and B said the social responsibility part has not been planned beforehand, but whenever there was an opportunity to engage in an event, the company has taken it. Company A pointed out social responsibility and taking part in organizations and events being one important issue for them to work on in the future. Company C mentioned seeking for local solutions as an important matter for them, and by doing so the company is supporting local communities. Company C has been awarded the Key Flag Symbol of the Association of Finnish Work, which is used in the company’s webpage and in their products.

Company E mentioned having close relations with suppliers and wanting to take care of the communities where the raw materials are produced in as well. In addition to educating the farmers about responsibility towards the environment and making sure they have the tools and wisdom to prosper on their own as well, company E had offered their help to build schools. This was a wish from the locals. The company also educated the locals about protecting wild animals, waste, use of water and chemicals

and other *“certificate-related aspects”*. The company makes sure the nursery gardens are in good shape, and in addition, there is a child labor liaison officer at the premises to make sure nothing illegal takes place. Both company E and the farmers have been very pleased with the results. Initially, the company wants to support, empower and develop the communities as well as they can, even though it can get rough at times. The company emphasized resilience and perseverance with these kinds of programs in such complex countries.

Company A admitted not paying that much attention to **sustainability** in particular, at least for now. Since they are a Finnish company, office materials and such tend to be purchased from a Finnish supplier, however, the company did not have a particular plan for sustainability. The company has a more case-by-case take on the issue, and tries to buy things that last longer. When it comes to making green choices in general, the company admits to not being there yet. Company B had thought more about sustainability, and at the moment is focusing more on research and product development in order to make products which are more environmental friendly and low on emissions. Both company A and B seemed focused on developing their strategy and especially material purchases to be more sustainable, but at the moment did not have the resources to put their plans in action.

Company C emphasizes sustainability in their operations. The company tries to make their *“manufacturing processes cleaner and more sustainable for the nature by offering solutions that can benefit the whole industry”*.

Company D stated sustainability being the biggest matter seen in their company’s activities, since it is the basis of their entire business. The company’s business model comes from circular economy, since they make consumer products from a material that is easily accessible in Finland, and recyclable. The company’s aim is to make zero waste. As far as customers go, company D has defined their customer as a *“conscious consumer”* (suom. ‘tiedostava kuluttaja’). According to company D, sustainability and environmental values are growing trends and *“there is no other way”*. The challenge

in sustainability according to company D seems to be the fact that no matter how much they underline their environmental values and ideas, it does not always travel all the way to the consumer decisions.

Company E had a whole field in the company's strategy devoted to environmental and sustainability issues. The company works very closely with their suppliers – as an example, the company has a program executed with a raw material supplier in an African country. Due to the program, the company has mapped the area and knows exactly where the raw material comes from and how many farmers are on this specific area. The company makes sure the farmers have the knowledge and skills to be able to develop them further and survive independently as well. The latter is extremely important, since someone from the organization visits the area only once a year – the farmers must be able to operate "*the remaining 364 days*". Another environmental and sustainability related issue the company mentioned was the Baltic Sea: if, for example, the company has a wheat supplier promising to cut down emissions which enable eutrophication by investing and using new technology, company E wants to stay committed to them and keep buying the wheat from this specific supplier. Company E emphasized the importance of perseverance here as well.

4.2 Level of communicating CSR through marketing

Company A and B both agreed on not putting an intentional effort on showing their CSR through marketing material, but relied more on their slogans and mission statements reflecting their company's core values which were heavily related on wellbeing. That is why both A and B focused on social responsibility within the firm, mostly on workplace wellbeing. Company A stated that since communications these days is very concise, the message comes across in what they are as a company and how they function on the grass roots level – for example, in which way the company treats their employees and what kind of partners they choose to associate themselves with. They also stated that as a Finnish company, the laws and standards of Finland give them a certain quality and that could be incorporated in the company's marketing

when, at some point, they expand their business to the Asian markets. For example, the wellbeing and safety of workers is, again, one thing that the company sees as an important factor at that point as well. Company B said that although they do not necessarily market their CSR directly, they write blogs about their different teams and highlight the work they do, as well as their workers wellbeing, through it.

Company C has branded themselves on delivering the idea of local production to the consumer and they try to associate their company name with clean, quality products that are made locally. In their marketing they use the Key Flag Symbol awarded to them in their webpage, products and marketing campaigns. They also said that they like to share their stories behind local co-operation in their blog and social media channels.

Although company D's business is based on environmental values and they bring it up in their marketing communication, they do not consider it as a special marketing asset since, at least in Finland, it is very difficult to get the environmental values all the way to the consumers buying decision.

Company E said that they have tried to communicate their corporate social responsibility actions to the public but could also do better in that area. They have large amounts of information on their webpage about the subject, both regarding the organization's CSR strategy as well as individual topics that they are focusing on. In addition to that, they have tried to bring out these issues in their products' packaging after getting feedback on it from customers. Being domestic is important for the company and they do highlight the fact that some of their products have been manufactured from 100 percent homegrown raw materials. Company E brought up a specific marketing communications action by describing their new visiting center that they have built to add more to the visiting experience. The visiting center was described to be more educational than before when it comes to corporate social responsibility issues, since it has exhibits on their different projects regarding sustainability, about their social agreements and about specific raw materials they use when

manufacturing their products that have had some ethical or responsibility discussions in the past. Company E also pointed out that since they have many different branches of business that do different things, marketing CSR is seen in all of them in different ways. They noted that most the CSR issues can be seen in their restaurant branch, since they do a lot of campaigns and marketing considering food waste.

4.3 Level of strategic planning

Neither company A nor company B had a written CSR strategy or had really thought it through extensively. Company A said that because they have been growing so rapidly and fast in recent years, the day-to-day workings of the company had been the number one priority. CSR had been talked about a little in the management team, and they had hopes soon having time to focus on it more and add something to their strategy. If company A had a written statement about CSR in one year, it would be ideal and realistic. They also pointed out that as they continue to grow and work more internationally, they need to get the best workers, and in order to do so, CSR needs to be in place and will become more important for them. Company B stated that it was important for them to constantly develop their corporate culture, but had not, at this time, made no official plans to put more focus on CSR. When it comes to specific things, company A stated that they should plan their social responsibility a little more and make some more permanent deals and plans for it, since right now, they have not participated in organizations and events regularly, but whenever there has been a chance.

Company C did not have any larger plans to improve their corporate social responsibility. They will continue to seek more environmentally friendly and sustainable solutions, as well as to seek for sources of co-operation in their local community. Company D also could not identify any wider plans for corporate social responsibility. They did however say, that as they grow as a business, they will need to write out their own corporate social responsibility strategy and define what the different parts

of it means to them specifically. This will help them company to be more open for their interest groups.

Company E thought that their corporate social responsibility strategy has become part of the day-to-day business, and since their base level is intact, the company does not need to focus on maintaining that immensely. However, they wanted to redirect their focus on larger global goals: for example, the ones set by the United Nations. The company wanted to figure out which points from those goals are important to them and what they need to work on. They also noted the strategy for health and wellbeing as something they would like to work on in the future, especially the health aspect of their products.

4.4 Experienced added value

When asked if aspects of corporate social responsibility have brought some added value to the company, both company A, and company B said yes. Company A brought up the fact that as they already work internationally and continue to do so, CSR will become more important for them in the global marketplace. Company B felt as it cannot be emphasized enough how important CSR is for gaining trust from both customers and investors. The company felt that CSR is important for both business and the ethics of the company, and the added value of CSR is so wide that it almost cannot be put into numbers or words.

Company C thought that CSR had brought added value to the company, especially marketing communications wise. They said that consumers and co-operative companies had recognized their actions towards their local community and cleaner environment, and have clearly stated their active marketing about CSR issues and actions guiding the customers' interest towards the company and products. Company D had not have yet thought much about their own CSR strategy, which made it impossible for them to comment whether or not it had yet brought any added value to them.

However, they did point out that since environmentalism and sustainability are growing trends, and, even in Finland, people are aware of the global challenges, they did not see any other way of doing business than being sustainable and responsible. They also noted that however important people think these things are and how much the company underlines their environmentalism, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to transfer that to the consumers buying decision.

When asked if they think corporate social responsibility brings them competitive advantage in the market, company E said "*of course*". They felt that CSR has plenty to do with the company's reputation, and with that, effects on everything: whether or not consumers want to buy their products, people wanting to work for them, and investors wanting to invest in the company. They said these things affect straight to the company's financial result, which is why they have justified the need to invest in corporate social responsibility with the large efforts they have made. They also noted that keeping track of their resources and materials and being efficient in that regard, minimizes their expenses which also helps their competitive advantage. Company E also brought up the fact that globally the base level for CSR subjects and issues has risen, which means companies can no longer simply do what they want and not be responsible regarding the environment, society and interest groups.

4.5 Implications of marketing plans

In company A's webpage, there is no separate mention of corporate social responsibility and it cannot be seen in their marketing. In their webpage, the company has their story which entails the company's founding idea – advancing the wellbeing of people. They also mention that they want to work with partners with similar goals and values. Although company A is fairly active on its different social media channels, there are only some posts regarding their own workers workplace wellbeing and some group activities they have done together to enhance that. Nothing else really points out to the direction of CSR.

Company B's business idea is based on the wellness of people and making lives better by enhancing the quality of indoor air. Their belief is clearly stated on their website: *"healthy air should be a human right"*. Company B appeals to the consumer by stating that indoor air is unhealthy in all major cities and should be improved. There is no straight mention of their core values or corporate social responsibility, but their mission and vision is to help millions of people breathe healthier air, and the company combines nature and technology in order to do so. By observing their website, there is no sight of a matter the company mentioned in the interview concerning social responsibility - 'Reliable Partner' (suom. 'Luotettava Kumppani') service. What can be seen on their website, however, is the blog mentioned in the interview. It focuses mostly on marketing the good outcomes and benefits from having a little bit of nature indoors. The blog has lots of potential in terms of being a valuable marketing tool for their environmental and social responsibility, since the company seems to post new articles quite often. Company B has engaged quite well in different social media platforms, just as a modern company nowadays should: it has profiles for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and YouTube. On those channels, it focuses on self-promoting, but also on sharing links from different sources concerning taking care of the environment, and the importance of nature in people's lives - the core value of the company. This goes well in hand with their mission and vision statement. Their Instagram page is visually pleasing and seeing the green leaves and plants could make the consumer associate it with "being green", responsible and sustainable.

Company C brings out corporate social responsibility into their webpage where there is a separate page for it. In their page, the company says to be working together with their business sectors union in order to make the drinking culture safer, and lists the projects they are involved with. They also talk about their products being made in Finland and how they are open about the sorts of raw materials the products are made of, and how organic the products are. As a result of the products being made from Finnish raw materials, they have been awarded with the Key Flag -symbol that can be seen in all their products. Sustainability has a large role in company C's corporate social responsibility part in their webpage. They have listed all the ways they

have committed to the industry's environmental politics. For social responsibility, company C emphasizes the fact that they are a family business, and want to take care of as well as give back to the community. They also write that they have recognized their responsibility as a growing company in the food industry as an employer, which has made them try to create more jobs. Company C is present on two social media platforms: Facebook and Instagram. Their Facebook page is mainly devoted to promoting their products, informing about events they are participating and highlighting the merits and awards they have been acknowledged with. Responsibility does not necessarily come through on that platform that much. They do, however, communicate a lot about the fact that they are a domestic and local company, which is a big part of their brand. On their Instagram page, company C does not have that much content yet, but the content they do have is clearly focused on promoting their products.

Since company D's business idea comes from sustainability and ecological values, those matters can clearly be seen on their webpage. Their slogan catches the eye first, which points to the ecological factor of the business. This theme continues all the way through their webpage, although they do not have a separate corporate social responsibility or sustainability headlines. The company does, however, have detailed explanations about the material they use and how environmentally friendly they are. Company D also clearly states that they have "*sustainable and nature friendly products*" which implies being environmentally responsible is an important matter to them. The company's social media platforms consist of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. It does not seem as if the company tries to push environmental responsibility through those platforms as much as on their webpage, but they do have a good amount of content that focuses on the importance of nature and health in people's lives. Company D's Instagram page focuses more on design than on their environmentally friendly materials. Same goes with Twitter, with a little more emphasis on promoting their products.

Company E has a lot of information on their webpage about their efforts on corporate social responsibility. They have clearly stated out the big picture of the entire organization and the different areas of corporate social responsibility, as well as individual things and areas the organization concentrates on because of the kind of business they are in. Their mission, vision and values are clearly stated on the webpage, and one of their values is about being responsible in everything they do. Every year they publish their corporate social responsibility review as well, which is available to the public on their webpage. The review goes through the previous year in the context of CSR and tells what the company has done, in which parts they have succeeded on and what issues needs to be worked on next year. On their social media channels, the focus seems to be on advertising different products. Company E has clearly caught up with the trends of the recent years, and either started to make some new healthier products, or just advertises them more, since those products particularly are clearly seen in their social media. On company E's Twitter page, they have shared articles written about the company, or related to their industry that has content about corporate social responsibility. They also seem to answer customer feedback quite frequently on their Twitter page and treat it like a customer service program for individual customers. This supports the company's openness with customers. One issue raised up by the company's representative themselves as well had to do with their products, and how corporate social responsibility did not necessarily come through the products as much as the company initially would like it to. They mentioned that some of the packaging has different marks that show traces of responsibility or can be linked to CSR, but they have been criticized by their interest groups of *"doing much, but not showing it"*.

5 Discussion & Conclusions

5.1 Challenges of CSR in practice

The idea of this thesis was to find out how corporate social responsibility can be seen and is understood in small and medium sized companies, and how it affects the competitive advantage, if in any way. The intention was to see how CSR is included in the companies' strategies and how it is communicated to the consumers through marketing.

Our first research question was how small or medium sized companies can benefit from including CSR in their strategy. From the five companies interviewed, only two had CSR strategies and actions written down and had paid attention to them. For the rest of the three companies, which were all either small startups or fast growing companies, they admitted to not having thought much about corporate social responsibility as a subject, but could identify some CSR actions that they had taken and were part of their daily activities. The lack of CSR strategy in these companies was due to either lack of resources, or other business operations and day-to-day workings of the companies being considered a higher priority at this point of the company's life span. All of the companies, however, admitted the importance of CSR, especially in cases where the company was planning to expand globally, and saw CSR strategies and actions as a mandatory thing in the global business market. When collecting the primary data, the question of when more established companies with specific CSR strategies had taken those as part of their strategic management arise. When asking the question from the biggest and oldest company interviewed, the response was it not being any specific time in the company's lifespan, for example a certain growth stage or starting to work globally, but the impact of global trends that had reached Finland in the early 2000's. From this, a conclusion was made: taking CSR into the company's strategy could not necessarily be decided on the basis of the specific time of a company's life spa, for example growing steadily or expanding to working globally, which had been the expectation previously. Since CSR is a current trend in the

business world, it could be said that every business wanting to succeed or work around the globe needs to have corporate social responsibility strategies.

With our second research question we wanted to discover how including CSR in the company's strategy can be seen in their marketing. None of the interviewed companies admitted to using corporate social responsibility as a marketing strategy, but the same companies who had already included CSR in their strategy, communicated their CSR actions to the consumers, at least in some ways. In those cases, it could be said that being responsible and domestic with the raw materials are a part of their brand as well. Both of these companies are in the foodservice industry, hence using domestic raw materials and finding domestic solutions in general was the biggest matter they had branded themselves as using. In other cases, the companies thought that when expanding globally and starting to work in some specific countries, being responsible and ethical would be a good issue to highlight in their marketing communications as it would be valued by consumers.

Our third research question was seeking for an answer on how including CSR in the business strategy would bring the company competitive advantage. All five of the companies recognized the competitive advantage that CSR gives or would give them, but in the primary data collection there was not necessarily anything that would prove that. One company brought up the point that although they had branded themselves as a company manufacturing sustainable and economically friendly products, it was incredibly hard to expand and apply that to the consumer's buying decision. All of the companies agreed with the fact that, especially when working in the global business market, CSR actions and strategies are more of a must these days than an added bonus.

One of the biggest things that came out in this study was that although most of the companies did not have specific CSR strategies and had not thought about those aspects in that context, when discussing specific parts about CSR, such as workplace wellbeing or sustainability, many of the companies already had these matters in

place. Although the first reaction of many of the companies' that were contacted f was them knowing nothing about this subject, and having no official plans on it, many of them had unknowingly fulfilled at least some aspects of corporate social responsibility. This could be a consequence of the standards of businesses in Finland being relatively high, and generally having very good working conditions and ethics compared to other countries. This was also pointed out by some of the interviewees.

Workplace wellbeing was brought up by every company as one of the most important CSR aspects. They noted that in order for the company to be successful, they need to have the best employees, and to have those best employees, workplace wellbeing and taking care of your workers needs to be intact. Workplace wellbeing is also one of things that is generally organized well in Finland because of the laws and regulations, and ethics of businesses. This was raised as one of the reasons it was hard for some of the interviewees to imagine outsourcing, for example, manufacturing to a country where these issues were not taken care of properly.

The assumption in the beginning was sustainability being the biggest and easiest part of corporate social responsibility that would have risen from the companies' actions and marketing communications. Although, sustainability was seen as an important aspect in all of the interviewed companies, only the companies that had branded themselves on that area, had taken significant actions on this field and were shown on their marketing communications as well. Making green and sustainable choices in their raw material purchases and manufacturing processes were seen as an important and quite easy way to execute sustainability. That being said, most of the companies noted having some developing to do in the sustainability area. This finding was surprising, since the assumption was sustainability and environmental issues being a major part of the companies' every day choices, no matter the field they operate in.

In conclusion, CSR can bring significant competitive advantage for a company if done correctly. Since “doing what is right” is a big part of Finnish business culture, it is easier for new companies entering the markets to use CSR in a strategical level as well, even if it has not been discussed or written down in their business plan as a separate part. In our mind, the companies have not taken full advantage of communicating their CSR actions to the consumers and using it as a valuable point in their marketing. The exception are the companies that have already branded themselves through one or more CSR fields. Right now the interviewed companies seemed to prioritize other aspects of their business, and did not feel like they had the time or resources to think about CSR in more depth.

In factuality, if a little more attention was paid to corporate social responsibility, it would most definitely pay itself back in the long run and gain good reputation for the companies. One issue with the subject was every company interviewed having their own definitions of CSR. Therefore, incorporating it to a business strategy as a clear concept can seem challenging, especially for SME’s. Including CSR activities on a strategical level in a company clearly requires more resources and knowledge than the companies have at this stage in order to be truly effective with corporate social responsibility and gain noticeable competitive advantage with it.

5.2 Limitations of the research

The biggest limitation of this study turned out to be the sampling size: the sample was only five companies, and most of them did not have any official corporate responsibility strategies. The problem when choosing the companies to interview and observe was that not many of the companies initially contacted were interested in participating, which resulted in the companies that ended up in the study not necessarily being the best ones. Another problem in this study was the size difference and the history between the companies interviewed. The size of the companies varied from a two-person startup to an over a hundred-year-old organization, that employs hundreds of people. Because of the limited interest for companies to participate, we

had to take what we were given, which is why we ended up changing the research problem and the research questions. It would have made the study more valid if the companies interviewed were all on the same place regarding size, age and the place they are regarding the lifespan of the company. The people interviewed were also all in different stages of their careers in the companies, and almost all of them spoke mostly from their own personal beliefs and understandings of the topic, since most of the companies did not have any official statements on corporate social responsibility.

One of the limitations of this study would be the difference of the ways the interviews were done. From five interviews, three were done as face to face discussions, one was done via Skype and one via email. Initially, the idea was to do all the interviews face to face in order to have a conversational and relaxed atmosphere, and for us to be able to ask new questions on the spot. Logically this was not possible for two of the companies, which resulted to the decision of using Skype and email as well. The Skype interview worked very well as an option for a face to face interview, but the email interview could be seen as a limitation. Although, multiple emails were exchanged and additional questions were asked, it does lack the semi-structured nature of a face to face discussion. With the email interview the struggle was to get specific and information-packed enough answers, even though we tried to send as detailed follow up questions as possible.

Finally, it has become evident while conducting this study that the topic chosen ended up being too large and difficult. With the resources and knowledge that we as researchers have at this point, this thesis will most likely end up having a lot of limitations and reliability issues, although we did our best to be objective and make this study valid.

5.3 Future research topics

While doing this thesis, some other topics for research related to this topic were found. One of them would be to study how a company's corporate social responsibility strategies and values in general affect the recruitment process. Since social responsibility and environmental values seem to be more on trend, it would seem impossible that young, socially and environmentally conscious people looking for employment would not take into consideration CSR factors when looking for future jobs.

Another topic for research regarding CSR could be approached from a consumer's point of view: how the consumer feels about corporate social responsibility and how it affects their buying behavior, or does it have an effect at all. This could be approached at from the company's point of view as well: if they have noticed any difference in their customer's behavior, or a general shift from one attitude to another regarding corporate social responsibility. These two aspects could be researched simultaneously and compared afterwards to see if the consumer's point of view differs from the company's way of seeing the issue.

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