

Who cares wins?

The notion of a firm 'giving something back' is now recognised as having distinct business benefits – in business development and improving internal communications alike.

By Tim Illston, CSR partner, Burges Salmon

Law firms have long practised altruism in the form of (traditionally discreet) pro bono services and some form of financial giving to local community organisations. But corporate responsibility is different. The legal profession has now accepted that corporate responsibility goes hand in hand with appropriate publicity. There is no hesitation in promoting CSR on websites, and CSR is now an important facet of the public face of the vast majority of commercial law firms.

But is marketing a firm based on CSR initiatives cynical and/or self-congratulatory? Undoubtedly there is a risk that over-exploitation of a CSR activity for publicity purposes can backfire by seeming tasteless, but publicising some activities can also be of genuine interest to the outside world and helps to show that lawyers are not only good citizens but are also capable of having fun.

With clients beginning to scrutinise CSR credentials before instructing, the temptation to embellish is real, but ultimately CSR is a mark of differentiation that requires substance. You cannot pretend to be something you are not. Law firms quite rightly acknowledge CSR as a business issue. CSR policy statements profile a firm's 'values', provide insight into the personality of the business, its ethos, concern for the shared environment and desire for achieving a positive and sustainable impact through its daily dealings.

And a strong CSR policy is an important business tool for recruitment and retention. Employees are motivated by an employer whose values mirror their own. As a business we benefit from the development of long-term community relationships and a reputation for being good corporate citizens. Engaging employees with the firm's CSR policy is vital, and marketing to our internal audience is just as important as impressing clients.

The Burges Salmon model

CSR forms an integral part of the Burges Salmon strategy. As a top-50 UK law firm we have a reputation of excellence, defined by the quality of our people and of their work, and – as with every facet of the firm's life – we look for similar exemplars of quality and excellence in our CSR activities.

Our strategic goal is to be the first choice of law firm for clients and staff seeking a real alternative to London City firms. CSR is a vital point of comparison. In attracting and retaining blue-chip clients, we need to be able to demonstrate we are a responsible business and good citizens. Our CSR policy is based on alignment with personal values, fulfilling the underlying business aims, and sustainability. Our key

themes are education, access to financial and legal advice, social inclusion, supporting the local (Bristol) infrastructure and looking after our shared environment. The following gives a flavour of how we take our corporate responsibilities seriously and how they may be viewed as differentiating factors. The power of a pink-wigged dragon boat team or media coverage of inspiring a group of dispirited youngsters can be far more effective at promoting our brand than conventional marketing activities – with or without the cynicism!
We're a people business, after all.

Recognition

As an example, the firm was recently shortlisted for a LawWorks Pro Bono Award, in recognition of the support it has offered to the University of Bristol Law Clinic.

Since 2000 we have hosted an interviewing-skills training event for the first-year law students who have joined the Law Clinic. Since 2006 we have also provided sessions covering research and drafting skills. The University of Bristol Law Clinic is a non-profit organisation set up in 1995 to provide free, confidential legal advice and assistance to those who cannot obtain such services elsewhere for some reason. Ranging from basic legal advice and support (such as accompanying clients to hearings or explaining legal complexities) to assistance with form filling and general reassurance, the Law Clinic offers help to those who would otherwise go unassisted, but doesn't encroach on the work of other organisations or the wider legal profession.

Approximately 120 law students staff the clinic, and student training in client interviewing is compulsory. Further talks, for example on case handling, legal research, legal aid, procedures, mediation and relevant areas of law such as welfare and housing, are offered. The Law Clinic advice and assistance is given under the supervision of lecturers from the School of Law, trainee solicitors from Burges Salmon and other barristers.

Business in The Community

On a larger scale, the firm is also a member of Business in the Community (BITC), a well-known unique movement of over 800 of the UK's leading companies, and representing one in five of the UK's private sector workforce – all committed to improving the way they manage business's impact on the communities they serve. We use our membership to share experience, obtain new ideas for community engagement, and importantly, to get the best social value out of the time and money we devote to these activities. We have made a commitment to devote one per cent of our pre-tax profit – in cash, time and gifts in kind – in procuring measurable benefits to the wider community. In addition, former senior partner Bob Smyth is now chair of the 'Seeing is Believing' network, the BITC flagship programme for the West of England.

This is one of HRH The Prince of Wales's initiatives, and aims to inspire business leaders to collaborate and concentrate their corporate and social responsibility (CSR) resources on the most pressing community needs.

Business leaders are encouraged to visit inner city schools, hotels for the homeless, prisons and deprived areas, to see the challenges faced first hand. They are then better able to consider how their businesses can play a real role in tackling some of our most pressing social issues. Smyth was also appointed as HRH's 'Ambassador' for the South West, and has recently engaged the firm in a range of activities, including causes such as Race for Opportunity, ProHelp and Business Action on Homelessness.

Environmental impact

Finally, Burges Salmon is a founding member of the Legal Sector Alliance (LSA), an inclusive movement of 20 law firms and organisations committed to working collaboratively to encourage the legal profession to commit to environmental sustainability. The Secretariat for the LSA is provided by BITC.

The LSA was created in October 2007, after HRH The Prince of Wales convened a summit of UK business leaders, calling for an urgent response to the problem of climate change.

The firm has already taken an active role in the alliance's development of a 'carbon footprint protocol' for law firms, and started disclosing its own carbon footprint publically in November 2008. Managing partner Guy Stobart explains: "The protocol is one part of the initiative, which will also cover such issues as resource use and working with employees and suppliers, and we firmly believe it will assist the profession in making a real difference."

On a smaller scale, commuters at Burges Salmon partook in a Bristol City Council survey that collected information on how people journeyed to work on a particular day in October 2007. Over a third (39 per cent) of our staff declared they had walked or cycled to work, 29 per cent used public transport and almost a quarter (24.5 per cent) drove.

In order to minimise the environmental impact of our business we continue to apply the environmental policy we adopted and published in 1990, and which we seek to operate efficiently and with regard to our impact on the environment. We take such steps, including the following specific actions, as are required to reduce waste of energy and materials and to reduce the impact of the firm's activities on the environment.

- Minimising the use of all materials and energy consumed in the conduct of our business;
- Wherever practicable, using appropriate recycled or recyclable materials;
- Making available to the appropriate agencies or private companies all materials capable of being reused or recycled;
- Encouraging energy-efficient use of office equipment, heating, lighting and vehicles used while on firm business;

- Where there is a choice of comparable suppliers, to choose those who adopt similar or higher environmental standards;
- Reviewing our environmental performance annually.

*Tim Illston is the CSR partner of Burges Salmon LLP. He can be contacted at:
tim.illstone@burges-salmon.com*