

# CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SMALL SHOPS. AN ETHICAL PROPOSAL

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**Abstract:** In this paper we present the main results of a pilot study undertaken in the Autonomous Region of Valencia, Spain, on the implementation of ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in small shops. The study's basic hypothesis is that CSR can become one of the distinctive features of small shops as well as an important value in terms of differentiation from their main competitors, namely, big chains and department stores. The study results confirm the original hypothesis. It shows that the specific features of small shops (their small size, community interaction, knowledge of the neighbourhood, proximity to clients and workers, etc.) can be regarded as sources of potential for making CSR a distinctive feature of small or traditional shops. We could also come to view CSR as a basic value for forging a common shop identity, which they currently lack.

This paper presents: a working hypothesis, a perception study of CSR, their main results and conclusions. It also shows Small shops' potential for introducing CSR and offers recommendations for future CSR implementation: training, expanding the concept of quality to include social quality, improving visibility of good practices and, last but not least, boosting rapport with local administrations in order to forge a citizen trade alliance that recognises Small shops as valid actors in the development of the city model.

**Key words:** *Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR, Citizen Trade, Diagnosis, Small shops, Small and Medium Enterprises.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years the development of policies and actions for promoting Corporate Social Responsibility has centred on big companies and multinational corporations. However, the nature of European businesses has rendered rethinking these initiatives necessary, as well as drawing attention to the ways in which to develop and implement ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). New priorities have arisen, which include taking into account these companies' specific characteristics and their needs and difficulties, as well as their advantages and potential for identifying with the discourse on Corporate Social Responsibility and implementing it.

There is such diversity among small and medium enterprises, both in terms of activity and size, that more specific knowledge of them is necessary in order to create measures that will be truly effective. With this objective in mind the present study has focused on a specific type of SME, namely, small or traditional shops, which we will refer to as Small shops. The discussion of the ethics and the level of knowledge and implementation of CSR in these SMEs are related to the process of globalisation and to consumer's increasing demands. First, the global market scenario no longer allows discrimination between small and large companies in respect to production in developing countries. It is shops that most suffer competition from emerging markets. We must also take into account that society is increasingly of the opinion that economic gain, or companies' profits, cannot be made at social or ecological expense. When a client seeks quality in a product or service, he or she now expects it to include social and environmental elements (CECU, 2006). The starting point of this research proposal is that CSR is a basic factor for small shops' differentiation, as well as a justification for their existence within this current global scenario.

This study seeks to demonstrate how Corporate Social Responsibility can be taken as an opportunity to define the character and ethics of small shops, their identity and the social and economic role they should and are

able to play within cities, neighbourhoods and local context in general.

In order to develop and promote this idea, the first step was to explore small shops' current perception of CSR, their current and desired position in respect to it. In this respect, this study's analysis of the current situation of our small shops is therefore an innovative addition to the development of city shops regarding these topics.

The diagnostic analysis on ethics and CSR we are about to show aims to identify the resources shops already have as well as those that are implicit and need to be boosted in order for them to benefit from the opportunities CSR has to offer. Small shops are in a position to profit from their competitive advantage as long as they develop their recognition and management of CSR.

## GOALS AND BASIC HYPOTHESIS

As you can see in more detail in the theoretical framework, to carry out this study the perspective assumed is the dialogic approach of the business ethics (García-Marzá, 2005; González, 2002), focus on the underlying conditions for consumers' trust of small shops and their products and services, as well as on their social position. From this perspective, moral values are not merely an option of the different commercial strategies it could be adopted by the business, but they should be understood as a part of business character, its ethos. Moreover, only as a part of its ethos these moral values could become resources or assets for the business.

This study has a double goal. The first is to diagnose the current situation of small shops in the Autonomous Region of Valencia, Spain, in relation to ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility. Secondly, based on this diagnosis, the study seeks to analyse Small shops' potential for advancement in CSR implementation and management.

With this understanding, we have worked with the following basic hypothesis: CSR can become a fundamental reason for the presence and importance of small shops within the current global economic scenario.

We propose Small shops present their commitment to CSR as an element of differentiation. They can benefit from it in such a way that they become part of responsible shop or citizen trade, as long as they successfully manage the visible values assigned to them by the community and develop their implicit values. We should not forget that a responsible business is one that is successfully accountable for its activity and social

role before all possible actors. Therefore, communication is crucial within the present Ethics and CSR framework.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this first pilot perception study about the Ethics and CSR in Small shops had 3 phases:

1. Initial phase of non-field analysis. We had several workgroup meetings in order to go in depth into the situation of small shops.

2. Qualitative study, using focus groups as our research technique. We organised meetings in which a small number of people (between 8 and 10) talked and offered information and ideas on the theme under study. We did a total of 6 focus groups or workshops in which representatives of various interest groups or stakeholders took part. We followed the plural business model used within the CSR theoretical framework: shop owners, association and federation representatives, public administration officers and consumer representatives.

3. Quantitative study using the CATI technique (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interview). We interviewed shop owners as well as the wider community, including clients, workers, and public opinion in general. The sample was divided as follows: 400 interviews of shops (shop owners), and 400 interviews to the community (workers, clients and public opinion). Our interpretation, on which we base our recommendations, has a sampling error of  $\pm 5\%$  and a confidence level of 95.5% (2 sigma) in the case of highest indeterminacy ( $p=q=50$ ).

We will use these results to identify Valencian Small shops' potentials and the difficulties it must overcome to become a citizen retailer that is both responsible and competitive.

## INITIAL CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before delving into the results of the diagnosis of the state of CSR in Valencian shops, we need to take some of their features into consideration, which can have both positive and negative effects. Their possible lack of resources to professionally manage CSR is a possible negative effect. However, their structure also makes them more easily approachable and capable in other aspects or dimensions of CSR.

First, the small size of Small shops, has important effects, especially at the internal level of CSR, such as questions related to work flexibility, work-life balance, salaries, etc. Data show that 98.3% of such enterprises in the Region of Valencia are micro enterprises with fewer than 10 employees (Pateco, 2007).

Secondly, we have to take into account that this commercial sector is very diverse. The main result is the lack of a common identity, which renders the implementation of common policies and standards for shops more difficult.

Lastly, there are problems regarding competitiveness with big chains and department stores. Small shops often adopt a reactive position, which makes it more difficult to generate a proactive and differentiated business model from chains and department stores. Such differentiation could stem not only from technical differences but also from the level of commitment to the surrounding community.

This research is based on the theoretical framework of plural business, in which the existence and rationale of shops is linked to a set of resources (human, financial, etc.) the community has allocated to it and for which it is accountable. We must not forget the strong link between accountability and responsibility. It is through accountability that Corporate Social Responsibility takes shape (Figure 1).

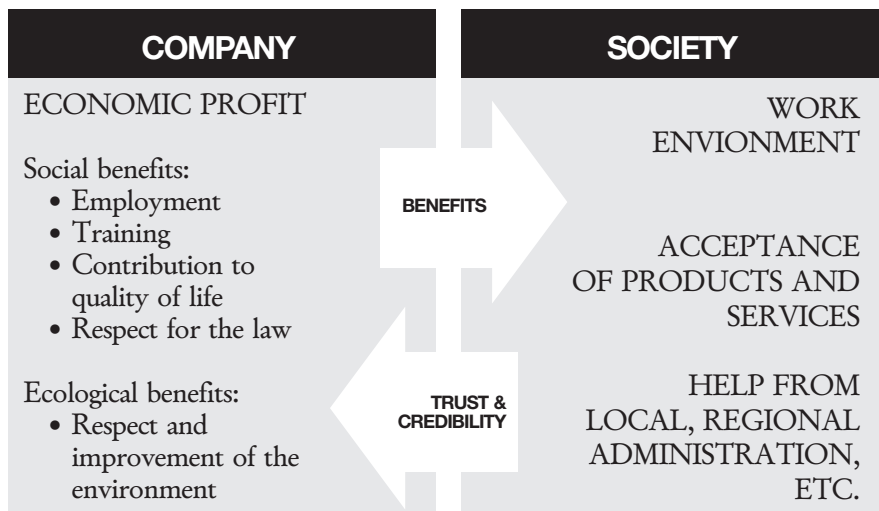


Figure 1. A Company's Moral Contract (García-Marzá, D., 2004)

Therefore, in order to understand and manage CSR we cannot follow pre-set patterns, since there are no clear and standardised measures. We cannot evaluate all our retailers in the same way, since each enterprise is subject to different circumstances, works in different contexts and is faced with different problems. But CSR does ask of all of them that they be publicly accountable for their actions. From the theoretical framework used in this study, supported in the dialogical ethics, for a company to be described as socially responsible it has to prove it is taking steps to adapt its management to a company model based on participation, dialogue and negotiation (Cortina, 2008). The ability for formal justification stems from the moral contract that exchanges company credibility for accountability. This is based not only on a predisposition towards honesty but also that the company should establish a level of public commitment. Publicity and accountability are the difference between good and bad uses of CSR. Only in this way can responsibility become an asset and a resource for creating trust for businesses.

Nevertheless, Small shops cannot and should not adopt the same strategies as large companies. This principle of responsibility can imply, in the case of large companies distanced and removed from many of their stakeholders, codes of ethics, committees, reports, verifications, etc., while for small retailers there is no need for departmental structures or formal documents. In the case of our cities' small retailers, proximity causes the management of CSR, definitively the management of trust, to become easier, and in many cases, causes the personal and business reputation to become very connected. This is the meaning of the phrase "Do what you say, say what you do".

The present paper will give us a measure of the acceptance of Valencian retailers of these intangibles. Intangibles that, once integrated and managed, will make it possible for our retailers to be seen as true citizen companies, as organisations that *activate the city*, as corporate citizens involved in the tasks of their communities. This is, from our point of view, one of the key factors for differentiation in this type of organisation and, as such, of its products and services.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Our findings are divided into five sections. The first four are related to shop owners' and the community's perception of the importance of

the concept, how well it's understood and its level of implementation. The last section deals with specific good practices in CSR, which are easily identifiable by respondents. It aims to create an index of the value assigned to these practices by shop owners and society.

### Popularity of CSR

The first question set by the study was the level of popularity of the concept of CSR. To answer this question we asked respondents if they had ever heard about Corporate Social Responsibility. Results show CSR to be quite unknown, both among shop owners and the community as a whole. 70% of the small retailers and 69.4% of the community said that they had ever heard about CSR.

The analysis of respondents' answers to the practices encompassed by CSR show that it is only the term that is little-known and not its content and meaning, that is, good business practices in accordance of Green Paper, GRI and other international Standards. The degree to which the concept is unknown reflects a need for training for these practices to be associated with social responsibility, especially since many of them are already being carried out. Chains and department stores are already managing the concept. Small retailers cannot stay behind if they want to continue to be competitive, particularly as many of their unique features facilitate closer and better management of good practices.

### Understanding CSR

In spite of the degree to which the concept is unknown, respondents were able to identify the items making up CSR. They even point to the fact that many of such actions, which are identified as socially responsible, are already being carried out by small retailers either subconsciously or are not being managed as CSR. The practices identified could be taken as an initial approach to what a CSR adapted to small retail would look like, as stated by various representatives in the focus groups (retailers', consumer associations, local public servants, etc.). This intuitive definition of what could be described as small and traditional shop responsibility can be summarised in the following items:

- Neighbourhood socialisation. Small shops facilitate contact and community relations in general.
- Security. Small shops promote a feeling of security on the streets they are placed in (lighting, more people on the street, etc.).
- Cleanliness. Small shops make streets cleaner.
- A closer and higher quality service, located within the city.
- A source of stable employment.
- An important contribution to taxes.

Due to the extent to which the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility was unknown, in the quantitative part of the study we suggested several answers to the content of its meaning. These were the answers to the question “What do you think shops’ CSR consists of?” (Figure 2):

WHAT DO YOU THINK SHOPS’CSR CONSISTS OF?	SHOP OWNERS %	COMMUNITY %
Engagement with clients, workers, providers and general community satisfaction.	63.2	53.3
Worrying about the impact of their activity on the community	12.8	12.1
Carrying out social actions that have a positive effect on the town	12.5	13.7
Obeying the law	7.3	13.8
Don ’ t know / no answer	4.1	7.1
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

Figure 2. Understanding CSR

Both retailers and the community agree to identify CSR as a concern for all stakeholders, in the sense of the different interests are been considered and took into account in order to satisfy them. There is, therefore, an intuitive knowledge of the meaning of socially responsible retail. This reinforces the idea that the term and its formal definition are unknown but its specific actions are identified as CSR.

### Motivations for CSR

Third, we asked about motivations for CSR implementation. The focus groups showed that CSR is taken to be related to perceive and managed



the business. Moreover, it is assumed that CSR is undertaken in order to achieve some sort of competitive advantage. Such an advantage does not entail disengaging from ethical commitments, as we repeatedly saw in the focus groups: “It’s a complementary strategy. It’s a strategy with a moral component.” Two main motivations were identified: improving the image of the company and the benefits for all groups involved. On the one side, the company’s image improves, as CSR policies provide companies with content for communication and publicity, which allow them to improve their prestige within their market. On the other side, the groups benefiting from CSR are seen to be clients, employees, providers and society as a whole. Employees are seen to be the ones who can most profit.

The Quantitative Study showed how, as opposed to bigger companies, the motivation towards CSR in Small shops is related to better management. These results appear to be consistent across both for shop owners and the community. We also have to stress the high percentage of respondents, both among the community and among shop owners, who state commitment to the community as a motivation towards CSR. It is also worth noting that a high percentage of the community (29.5%) sees publicity as the driving force behind CSR, which shows the community’s critical attitude (Figure 3).

FIRST MOTIVATION CHOSEN	SHOP OWNERS %	COMMUNITY %
Better Shop Management	50.3	42.0
Commitment to the Community	27.9	23.6
Publicity, to Improve Sales	17.7	29.5
Because it’s Fashionable	4.0	4.9
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

Figure 3. Motivations for CSR

### CSR Implementation

In order to quantify the perception of CSR implementation, respondents were asked how many shops they thought were worried about issues to do with ethics and CSR. 57.4% of Valencian owners said they were some or many as opposed to only 40.6% of the community.

In order to obtain more information we asked respondents who answered

“few, some or many” to identify specific shops they knew to be socially responsible. 58% of owners were unable to do so. 62.3% of community members were equally unable to name any. It is especially significant that members of the community first named chains and department stores as socially responsible. These answers stress the importance of managing CSR, being accountable and valuing what retailers have to offer to their neighbourhoods.

### Index for Corporate Social Responsibility in Retail: From concept to practice

In this part of the study we chose to analyse respondents' evaluation of the good practices carried out by Valencian Small shops, given the degree to which the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility was shown to be unknown in our study of the perception of CSR. Our goal was to render the concept of CSR applicable through a series of more tangible and easily recognisable actions.

In order to relate the concept of CSR to socially responsible practices, we divided the concept into 13 different actions affecting the stakeholders (Figure 4). We then used these 13 easily identifiable good practices to assess the degree of agreement with their actual development in Valencian Small shops. The evaluation used the following scale: 4. Completely agree 3. Somewhat agree 2. Somewhat disagree 1. Completely disagree.

	SHOP OWNERS Average	COMMUNITY Average
They are concerned about offering good service in terms of their product and quality	3.55	3.17
They have a specialised supply that is of value to customers	3.36	2.79
They facilitate contact and relationships among neighbours	3.35	3.10
They increase the feeling of security in the neighbourhood	3.23	2.82
Owners are professionals (they reinvest, modernise, carry out professional management)	3.23	2.74

They take part in the neighbourhood's development and in town life	3.20	2.93
They pay their employees adequately and competitively	3.20	2.40
They are capable of generating stable employment	3.17	2.61
They are concerned about their suppliers' activities	3.10	2.63
The areas in which there are shops are cleaner	2.95	2.59
They are concerned about and carry out good practices in relation to recycling of materials	2.95	2.58
They adapt their opening times to customer needs	2.93	2.47
People who work in traditional retail can achieve a work-life balance	2.82	2.55

Figure 4. Good practices in Valencian small shops

Analysis of the table shows that the general evaluation of good practices being carried out is positive, both by shop owners and the community, whose perception of retail we can conclude is positive. Evaluations by the community are all above 2.5 and over 2.82 by shop owners. However, all items present a difference between shop owners' evaluations, who are always more positive, and the community's, which are more critical. This difference stresses the importance of managing communication in order to bridge the gap.

Shop owners most value quality, specialised supply and neighbour relations. The community, for its part, agrees in valuing quality, but its next highest score is for commitment to the neighbourhood, which is very high, over and above shop owners' opinion. The third value by order of importance for both groups is that of security seen as a good practice. The biggest differences between the two groups are related to workers' adequate and competitive pay, specialized supply and the ability to generate stable employment. The fact that these three aspects are related to the internal part of CSR and the management model, and that shop owners value themselves more positively than the community, point towards the need to manage CSR from within internal SME shop management.

We have created an Index for Corporate Social Responsibility in Retail

that will allow a general approach to the object of study as well as for future comparison on the evolution of the different groups' opinions of good practices. The index will enable follow-up on the effect of measures aimed at the perception of CSR and its implementation. The figure results from the average of the 13 items considered. As seen in the figure below, shop owners' self-perception is of 3.16 out of 4, as opposed to the community's 2.72 out of 4 (Figure 5).

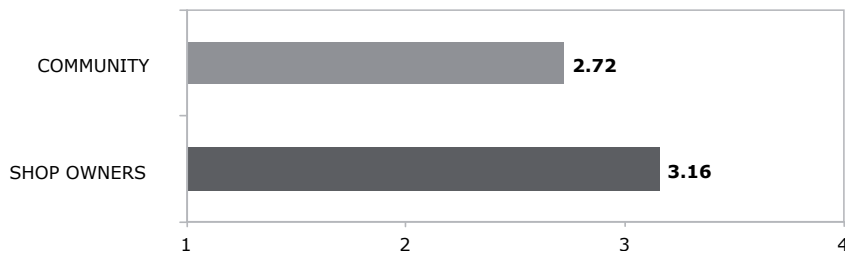


Figure 5. Index for Corporate Social Responsibility in Retail

## SMALL SHOP VALUES

One of the main goals of this study was to use the diagnosis to analyse Valencian Small shops' potentials and difficulties applying and managing CSR, so we could offer recommendations for how to progress in its implementation. We have used the results presented in the previous section to identify Valencian Small shops' potentials and the difficulties it must overcome to become a citizen retailer that is both responsible and competitive.

Some of the main advantages of retail, as retailers are perceived themselves in the focus groups, over chains and department stores are the values previously identified: quality, proximity and professionalism. There is a fourth value, commitment, linked to SME shops' potential contribution to their towns and neighbourhoods. It shows up in comments such as "Retail makes the city more active". In interviews and focus groups, the role of shops *in the city's streets* is often mentioned. Its importance is confirmed by the surveys. However, this contribution appears to be implicit. It is seen to be normal and scarcely worth mentioning. Commitment as a value is hardly acknowledged as a clear contribution of shops to their towns. We must take advantage of this opportunity. The values discussed are an ideal

point from which to manage and improve trust in SME shops, which is a key element for differentiation (García-Marzá, 2005; Hosmer, 1995).

On the other hand, the analysis also shows a series of difficulties, which must be taken into account for CSR management to improve. First of all, the lack of a shared identity is a challenge or difficulty that we find reflected in many respects. We can see it in shop owners' disagreements over the term used to refer to small retail or in society's inability to identify. Small shops' distinctive traits. The great diversity in types of shops also makes integration under a differentiated identity more difficult. As a consequence, small shops often try to copy the chain model instead of trying to create their own.

Second, there is insufficient business vision. Diversity renders a uniform vision of retail activity difficult and, in many cases there is a lack of planning and long-term business management.

Lastly, there are also certain competitiveness problems to do with accessibility, opening hours and competition from large chains and foreign trade. The biggest challenge is to successfully overcome these difficulties not by copying the big chain and department store model, but by identifying and managing their own identity and specificity.

To sum up, there are two types of difficulties to overcome. The first type we might say is related to management. Small shops should work to offer more professionalism, that is, to help and advise clients. They should offer a supply that is more specialised and differentiated, through improved product and service quality, and their stronger ability to adapt to clients' new demands. The second type is related to the current situation. Two key aspects stand out: 1) The need to define a *city model* in which Small shops can have a place through the development of *open shopping centres* or *urban retail*, where shops and services that are comfortable and attractive to consumers are also present. 2) Promotion of business associations. The rationale behind it should be to unite for better competition and negotiating and developing common strategies (opening times, buying policies, publicity, etc.). The future is thus linked to improving conditions of management, professionalism and specialisation, together with a new role of retail in cities, becoming an element of differentiation from large chains and department stores.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF ACTION

The results of our research show the need for further debate on how to apply CSR to SMEs in general and to their different types, such as Small shops. However, we also find that local Small shops can potentially benefit from CSR implementation in very specific ways, which will allow them to develop a differentiated model of sustainable and responsible company within city life. The study shows there is a strong basis on which Small shops can build CSR activities. Proof of this is the fact that shops identify improving management as their main motivation for dealing with social and environmental questions. They do so over and above reputation and image, which link CSR with pleasing the company's stakeholders.

The study has identified quality, proximity, professionalism and commitment to the community as the basic values of Valencian Small shops. It is very important that these values not be neglected. Professionalism and quality were classic reference points that have lost certain sway. Commitment to the community, which has up to now not been a central value, must be reinforced.

As for the perception of Corporate Social Responsibility, it is an intuitive concept, as is shown by how its specific practices are valued according to the Index for CSR in Retail. However, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility is still largely unknown. Shop owners recognise CSR as a potentially important asset but fail to consciously associate the practices it entails, many of which they are already undertaking. This means there is an important task ahead of us: raising awareness and training shop owners. This will prevent them from being left behind in the implementation of CSR and help them turn it into an important factor for competitiveness as well as one of responsibility.

The high level of diversity among this type of shops means that the unique character of shops can be lost as they often imitate large stores and chains. There is a lack of a common identity, and this study seeks to show that a commitment to CSR could be important to the forging of the new identity, acting as one of the main features of the new retail model.

Lastly, Public Administration has a key role in the advancement of these initiatives. Shop owners' opinion is that economic and tax advantages are an important factor in Public Administration support to retail. Nevertheless, over and above these, they expect the promotion of agreements that link trade to urban development.

Since one of the main difficulties in any study is always bringing ideas to practice, we have provided a series of proposals for future development. First, we propose using the term citizen trade as a distinct feature of Small shop identity. After that, the implementation of a training program which included CSR in the sector's professionalization. An example of that would be to build a concept of quality, which includes social and environmental aspects. A third step would be to further the visibility of good CSR practices. Ways to do this would be through a citizen trade certificate, which would be part of the current excellence certificates, or by publicising Small shops' commitments and their results. Lastly, this research is based on Small shops' demand for higher participation and dialogue with local Public Administrations to forge an alliance for a citizen trade that will acknowledge small retailers as valid participants in the development of a city model.

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