Taking your values shopping: conversations about values and fulfilment: dialogue and engagement with customer stakeholders in the Body Shop, Western Australia

Patricia Morrigan
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Taking Your Values Shopping

Conversations about Values and Fulfilment: Dialogue and Engagement with Customer Stakeholders in The Body Shop, Western Australia

Dr. Patricia Morrigan
Megan Paull

An ECU-Industry Collaborative Scheme Project 2002
Taking your Values Shopping

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Acknowledgements

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The Body Shop researchers were drawn from the managers and staff of the retail stores. They stepped out of their usual role as retail workers and skillfully took on the role of researchers.

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Foreword

Mutually beneficial project partnerships between organisations - like this one between Edith Cowan University and The Body Shop Australia - hold the key to the future of business in the twenty-first century. When two organisations come together to explore a new area of learning the results are not just limited to the actual topic being researched - in our case experimenting with a new way of discussing values with customers – in addition a wealth of experiences unfold in relation to the interaction between the two organisations and the individuals within them. Participation in this project has been an enriching experience for The Body Shop Australia and its employees.

Congratulations to Patricia and Megan for the production of this report with its important message for all businesses - the importance of truly sharing values between business and customers.

Christine Childs
Stakeholder Development Manager
The Body Shop Australia

July 2002
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A Summary of the Research

The first aim of this research project was to:

➢ Make a contribution to knowledge about Customer Stakeholder Management and Corporate Social Responsibility

The specific contribution to this field of study is about customer ‘engagement’, their values and fulfilment. In this research we wanted to have a conversation with customers of The Body Shop Australia (TBS) about taking their values shopping. We found that TBS customers were remarkably clear and passionate about their own personal values and had no trouble expressing them in a conversation with us. Customer stakeholders in this research expressed values that were ‘postmaterialist’, concerned with the environmentally human choice and self-expression, gave importance to belonging among family and friends and showed a marked lack of trust in global or large businesses.

The Body Shop customers that we spoke to expressed, not surprisingly, feelings of fulfilment when their values are met in the purchasing relationship. Fulfilment comes mainly from personal engagement, personal and individualised service, respect and personal care, easily accessible information, knowledgeable employees and business support in the locality/community. This kind of purchasing relationship is more than just good customer service; it is a more complex relationship between business and society.

Paradoxically customers did not always play out their very clear values, in behavioural terms, when they went shopping, although they have a desire to do this. The mystery unravels if you actually listen to what the customers say. They do passionately care about health, well-being, their families, their community and the environment but in a busy life it is not always possible to shop ethically. It is difficult for this to occur where the retailers do not make it easy.

We found that there is a surprising strength of value congruence between the corporate values of TBS, the values of the employees and the values of the customers. We speculate from our own experience and our research that this level of congruence is rare. The values of the customers of TBS also reflect those found in the World Values Survey. TBS customers hold typical values to many people around the globe and are not only influenced by the company’s values. TBS is in tune with the values of a larger group of consumers who would like to take their values shopping if they had the chance.

We note a concern that information from the World Values Survey has not influenced the business literature, especially the literature on stakeholder management. In our search of the literature we found that the data on Australia from the World Values Survey is not available in easily accessible articles. There is an important opportunity to do further research which makes the links between the shift in worldwide values, the data from Australia and the impact on the future of business.

While TBS customers shared a value about the importance of community, the company does have a different, or broader, meaning for the term. Customers emphasised their local community, their neighbourhood, Western Australia and Australia. TBS have a broader definition and still have a role to play in taking their customers ‘global’ as well as ‘local’. Finding out about the different meanings of community highlights one of the strengths of our research methods where we had the opportunity to explore meaning at a deeper level in symmetrical conversations.

Morrigan & Paull, 2002
Customers of TBS were also clear about their views about the relationship between business and society. They supported Cooperate Social Responsibility (CSR) and wanted the relationship between business and society to be authentic, trustworthy and filled with integrity. Customers wanted more from CSR than philanthropy, although sponsorship in the community was important. Customers are demanding that business toe the Triple Bottom Line. They do understand that they have some power to influence business practices by taking their values shopping and rejecting certain products. How much business is lost by the individual act of quietly boycotting of products?

We make the point in this research report that Australian business leaders and managers are not good at ‘people skills’. The forging of good stakeholder relationships and taking the step into CSR does require emotional intelligence, sophisticated communications skills and the development of authentic corporate ethics and values. The emphasis in management and leadership education and training is still on economic skills. Imagine the change in management education if we took seriously skills for Triple Bottom Line accounting where outcomes would focus on social and environmental knowledge as well as economics.

➢ **Offer new ways of engaging with customers using ‘Conversational Research’**

A second aim of this research project was to offer a new way of engaging with customer stakeholders using conversational research. This is social research based on in-depth interviewing in the form of symmetrical conversations or dialogues. Our research methods particularly facilitate ‘engagement’ with customers, by creating ‘dialogue’ or ‘conversations’ as part of qualitative research methods and in doing this generated deep and rich reflective data. We discus that there is a lack of knowledge about symmetrical relationships between businesses and their stakeholders within the literature on stakeholder management.

Our ‘findings’ are in the form of ‘grounded hypotheses’. This simply means that we don’t say that we have come up with truths or proofs about customer stakeholders of TBS. We make a basic assumption that there are no ‘facts’ to be found. Instead we offer interpretations of the conversations in the form of dialogues and invite others to join in the process of discussion and further research.

The conversational data from this project has already contributed to TBS national strategy. At a meeting with senior sales and training staff to look at customer strategy the conversational data was ‘posted’ around the room. This ‘invited the customer into the room’ and proved to be a powerful tool to keep the focus of the meeting relevant.

We are, through this research partnership, able to offer suggestions about adaptation of this methodology for ‘every day’ use. Our methodology is one way of hearing what the stakeholder really has to say.

➢ **Add to the knowledge about collaborative research partnerships between universities and industry.**

The third aim of this research was to build a research partnership between the Edith Cowan University and TBS. We wanted to find out more about partnerships between universities and industry from our own experience doing this research. There is a need for universities to discuss, or have a dialogue, about the research needs of industry partners and whether academic criteria are always relevant in this new research relationship.

Our partnership with staff at all levels of TBS showed that we had entered a refreshing ‘culture of authenticity’ – they are who they say they are. In our twelve-month interaction with staff at many levels we noticed a
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We did not hear criticism; feedback was framed positively. The partnership was forged among women because of the gendered environments from which it grew. This was a project where we all worked closely together, where personal relationships were made. Trust was build through sharing personal stories, owning our values, talking about families and making the transition to friendship.

We learned a lot from this partnership and hope that this research inspires others to build on it.

Patricia Morrigan Ph.D

Megan Paull

July 2002
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<td>The Body Shop International</td>
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<td>CAQDAS</td>
<td>Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>Corporate Social Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECU</td>
<td>Edith Cowan University</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
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<td>QSR - NUD*IST™</td>
<td>Qualitative Solutions &amp; Research - Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Tertiary And Further Education</td>
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<td>UN</td>
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About the Research Project

This research project was funded under the Edith Cowan University-Industry Collaboration Scheme and in partnership with The Body Shop Australia (Adidem Pty Ltd). It began with an engaged personal conversation between one of the Edith Cowan University (ECU) researchers, Patricia, and a former management trainer with The Body Shop (TBS), Margo, in a social setting. This conversation was about the values of TBS and how different they were from those of most business organisations. This conversation was important because it began the partnership that led to the research topic and the research methodology. This was the first dialogue of the project. In this dialogue Patricia and Margo asked the preliminary questions, “Do customers shop at The Body Shop because of the social and political values of the company?” and “Do these values make them feel more fulfilled because they are buying products that are not tested on animals or damaging the environment?”

The Researchers

Dr. Patricia Morrigan from the School of Management, Faculty of Business and Public Management, ECU and Jane Compton (former Manager of Stakeholder Development) from TBS formulated a research proposal. Agreement was reached between the two organisations to jointly fund a qualitative research project among customers of TBS in retail stores in Western Australia. Megan Paull from the School of Management, Faculty of Business and Public Management, ECU, joined Patricia and Jane as assistant investigator. Maryam Omari also from ECU worked at the beginning helping to design the project. Christine Childs took over from Jane Compton as Manager of Stakeholder Development in July 2001. The research was designed within a qualitative methodology and this is explained later. Within this methodology it was possible to include TBS staff as part of the research team. In order to distinguish between the professional researchers from ECU and TBS staff who were part of the research team we refer to two categories of researcher – ECU researchers and TBS researchers. TBS researchers included members of the Management and Staff of the Melbourne Retail Support Centre (MRSC), the Management and Staff, Perth Retail Support Centre (PRSC) and Western Australian Retail Staff.

Aims of the Research

1. To make a contribution to knowledge about Customer Stakeholder Management and Corporate Social Responsibility

This research makes a contribution to the field of stakeholder management. Later in this report we outline some of the literature on the topic and give some definitions. An important and recent discussion in the literature on stakeholder management is about ways to ‘engage’ and create ‘dialogue’ with customers. In this research we wanted to engage with customers of TBS about their values, passions and how they may feel fulfilled in the customer relationship with the company. Most of the research about customers as stakeholders concerns their buying behaviour or what they think about corporate performance and reputation. We wanted to find out if customers ’take their values shopping’.

In this project we also wanted to gain knowledge about customers’ views on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), ‘The Triple Bottom Line’ and the expectations customers have of the social and political role of business. We are concerned that Australian businesses are slow to adopt CSR and rely on the single bottom line based on economic performance.
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**Aims of the Research:**

1. **To make a contribution to knowledge about Customer Stakeholder Management and Corporate Social Responsibility**
2. **To offer new ways of engaging with customers using ‘Conversational Research’**
3. **To add to the knowledge about collaborative research partnerships between universities and industry.**

The project also makes a contribution to research related to women and gives the subjective situation of women stakeholders - as customers, retail workers and researchers - some visibility (see Oakley, 1981, p. 48). The research is not feminist research because it was not specifically designed to look at women’s inequality. The methodology, however, owes a debt to feminist scholarship and this is explained below.

2. **To offer new ways of engaging with customers using ‘Conversational Research’**

The founder of The Body Shop International (BSI), Anita Roddick, makes it clear that the company sees customers as true stakeholders and seeks engagement with them:

*We bring our customers into the heart of the company, we think of them as family, we invite and encourage them to participate in everything we do* (Roddick, 2000, p. 86).

BSI is praised in a United Nations (UN) report about engaging stakeholders. The UN Environmental Programme, Engaging Stakeholders, (cited in SustainAbility, United Nations Environment Programme & The Global Reporters, 2000) tracks and evaluates stakeholder management in the main world regions. In this global report the corporate performance of BSI is considered as one of the best in the world and first in its business sector. It is particularly noted that BSI is one of only two corporations to engage stakeholders in discussions about social, ethical and environmental issues and is named as being third in the world for developing ‘dialogue’ with its stakeholders.

The Strategic Plan for TBS Australia (The Body Shop Australia, 2000a) also promotes engagement:

*To profitably grow loyal and fulfilled customers to empower The Body Shop to achieve social and environmental change.*

Thus a major aim of this research partnership with TBS Australia was to demonstrate a new way to engage with customer stakeholders by doing social research based on in-depth interviewing in the form of symmetrical conversations or dialogues. Our research methods particularly facilitated ‘engagement’ with customers, by creating ‘dialogue’ or ‘conversations’ as part of qualitative research methods and in doing this generated deep and rich reflective data.

There is a lack of discussion of symmetrical relationships between businesses and their stakeholders within the literature on stakeholder management. Most stakeholder dialogue is asymmetrical or a one-way request for information and opinions from management to customers.

TBS includes social research as part of business practice and the ECU researchers wanted to add our research to the company’s social knowledge. Our approach is quite different from the methodology of the social audits conducted by TBS. The social...
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audits are based on surveys, which are not designed to be two-way conversations. We do see our research, however, as complementing the findings from the social audits and we discuss this later.

3. To add to the knowledge about collaborative research partnerships between universities and industry.

Within the university system research is increasingly being funded through collaborative research projects which are jointly funded by the academy and industry. The collaborative partnership is part of the new approach to research funding and needs to be critically assessed within the business research literature (see Encel & Studeneki, 2000; Kjaergaard & Westphalen, 2001). Research partnerships are tied to the research interests of the industry partner and research that results from partnerships with industry is different from research done independently by the university. The funding is often made up from "in-kind" as well as cash contributions from industry. University – industry collaborative research partnerships require high levels of negotiation, communication and team building skills from the participants. Emotional intelligence and critical thinking are required in order to work across different institutions with their variety of interests, social worlds and mind-sets.

The collaborative partnership between the ECU researchers and TBS was done among women. The customers who took part in the research were mainly women. Sharing a common gender was a fundamental element of the partnership. It was not by design that no men were part of the research teams or so few among the respondents. In part it was because of the gendered nature of the retail industry from which this research arises and where the majority of the workers and customers are women. It is also about the gendered nature of research collaboration within the field of management studies. A full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this report but it is clear from a reading of the contents pages of management journals and by noticing the gender of conference keynote speakers that women researchers in the discipline are few in number. In this environment women gravitate into separate social and working groups to do research and offer each other support.

The research partnership therefore became "gendered" by virtue of the environment from which it grew. Within the project the following relationships were created as part of the overall partnership:

University – industry collaborative research partnerships require high levels of negotiation, communication and team building skills from the participants. Emotional intelligence and critical thinking are required in order to work across different institutions with their variety of interests, social worlds and mind-sets.

The collaborative partnership between the ECU researchers and TBS was done among women. The customers who took part in the research were mainly women. Sharing a common gender was a fundamental element of the partnership.

Morrigan & Paull, 2002
• Managers of Stakeholder Development TBS, Jane Compton and Chris Childs building cross-institutional partnerships with ECU Chief Investigator Patricia Morrigan
• Megan and Patricia learning to work together at ECU
• ECU researchers getting to know staff of the Perth Retail Support Centre
• ECU researchers working with West Australian retail staff
• A variety of liaisons with other managers at Melbourne Retail Support Centre
• Dealing with changes in TBS management and retail staff
• Finalising the project with a new Manager Stakeholder Development, Chris Childs, when Jane Compton left the organisation.

The research is based on the following assumptions:

1. The researcher(s) and the researched are ‘knowledgeable’ and play an interdependent role in the interview process. They are engaged in an empathic dialogue and research methods seek to build trust in this relationship.

2. The researcher and the researched are influenced by their social and historical surroundings and are helping to produce and reproduce their environment, although not under conditions of their own choosing.

3. The researcher’s values are revealed. Social research is not value-free and objective. This is a classical subjectivist assumption and arises out of the debate about method and the nature of reality.

4. There is an acceptance that ‘facts’ do not exist independently of their producer’s linguistic codes; the issue is changed when this is discussed or a dialogue is created.

5. Doing research is a personal and political practice (Giddens, 1993; Morrigan, 1997; Riger, 1992).

This was a project where we all worked closely together, where personal relationships were forged. Trust was built through sharing personal stories, owning our values, talking about families and making the transition to friendship.

Methodology of the Research

At the start of any research project choices are made by the researchers about, ‘...what is there and what isn’t, what is to be taken seriously and what isn’t, what is data and what isn’t, what is research and what isn’t (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 154). In this research project we wanted to take seriously the extraordinary skills that individuals have in actualising their own values and beliefs in a world that offers constraints on the way that we can conduct our daily lives. We feel that listening to people and trying to construct shared meanings is research; that if we record and interpret this process we can elicit useful data. This data must be able to illuminate and explain social life (Blaike, 1993; McHoul & Rapley, 2001; Silverman, 2000). This is research is therefore concerned with, ‘engagement’ between the researcher and the researched (Morgan, 1983, p. 13) and takes a subjectivist approach. It does not make any claim to being ‘objective’. The methodological approach to the research has its classical origins in ‘hermeneutics’, and it follows the steps for ‘grounded theory’ after the tradition of Glaser and Strauss (1967), (see also Blaike, 1993; Blaike & Stacy, 1984; Locke, 2001; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Turner, 1981, 1983). It is brought up to date by incorporating Giddens’ structuration theory’ and principles from feminist research (Blaike, 1993; Giddens, 1979, 1991, 1993; Stanley & Wise, 1983).
Issues from the Literature

As discussed this research makes a contribution to the field of stakeholder management, by considering customer engagement, their values and their fulfilment. The research partnership was made between researchers who are also educators of managers at ECU’s School of Management and the team concerned with stakeholder management and engagement at TBS.

Before we discuss stakeholder management and customers as stakeholders we need to review some of the broader issues in the literature on the ‘new economics’ and on corporate social responsibility (CSR). These issues are indelibly linked with stakeholder theories and provide a background.

The New Economy of Corporate Citizenship

There is recognition among some business intellectuals and leaders in the non-profit sector of large businesses that a new kind of economics is needed (Birch, 2001; Carroll, 1999; Dunphy, Benveniste, Griffiths & Sutton, 2000; Fukuyama, 2002; Hawken, Lovins & Lovins, 2000; Post, Lawrence & Weber, 2002; Steiner & Steiner, 2000; Weiser & Zadek, 2000; Wilson, 2000; Zadek, 2001; Zadek, Hojensgard & Raynard, 2001). The ‘new economy’ goes beyond classical and neoclassical economics with its sole emphasis on profit and financial duties towards others (Key, 1999, p. 318).

New economics is characterised by corporate citizenship where businesses also take account of their total impact on a variety of actors or stakeholders, society as a whole and the natural environment (Zadek, Hojensgard & Raynard, 2000, p. 8).

We feel that listening to people and trying to construct shared meanings is research; that if we record and interpret this process we can elicit useful data. This data must be able to illuminate and explain social life (Blaikie, 1993; McHoul & Rapley, 2001; Silverman, 2000).

• Growing and alarming evidence of environmental damage caused by unsustainable development;
• Organisational complexity in businesses that operate in the global economy;
• The relationships between business and society;
• Cultural diversity in a globalising economy;
• The role and management of many forms of knowledge.

The development of the global economy in the last two decades has seen a marked increased in businesses that operate at an international level and a rise in the economic power of multinational corporations. In order to do business on such a scale these corporations have changed their organisational form, to take into account their impact on a number of different cultures and environments as well as maintaining their reputations as good companies or brands among their global stakeholders. Global companies want to be seen as good corporate citizens (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001).

New economics is characterised by corporate citizenship where businesses also take account of their total impact on a variety of actors or stakeholders, society as a whole and the natural environment (Zadek, Hojensgard & Raynard, 2000, p. 8).

This kind of economics has given rise to the literature about CSR which ‘...may be defined as the duty a corporation has to create wealth by using means that avoid harm to protect or enhance
societal assets’ (Steiner & Steiner, 2000, p. 120) (see also Carroll, 1999; Coutsoukis, 1999; Hartman, 1998; Maignan, 2001; Palazzi & Starcher, nd; Post et al., 2002). The measurement of CSR is accomplished by Triple Bottom Line reporting – measuring social, environmental as well as economic performance.

The specific nature of the relationships between business and society and the system of business within society are outlined by Key (1999, p. 319) where CSR is said to cover three main areas:

- CSR 1. Responsibility - corporate stewardship, charity, philanthropy and obligation to members of a community.
- CSR 2. Responsiveness - the way to manage societal demands, social involvement, securing business' legitimacy in the community.
- CSR 3. Rectitude - the ethics that should guide corporate behaviour.

It is possible to see the way that customer stakeholders would be involved with the creation of the three sets of CSR relationships and why stakeholder engagement is necessary. The relationships between business and society in the current complex business environment rely on high levels of communication, or dialogue, among people with diverse world-views, sharing often complex and technical, knowledge, and the building of cross-institutional and cross-cultural partnerships. The organisational forms, design of workplace relations and business systems need to be fundamentally revised. This implies a revolution in business and society:

... radical changes in the nature of institutions of the state and business, and

As Australian academics, who are intimately involved in the education of managers and leaders, we are aware of the enormous challenges that are faced by businesses in the implementation of the new economics.

Business systems within the global society, such as marketing, need to incorporate an understanding of social actors, and the impact that marketing may have on social, cultural values and ethics. Brand images of companies, for example, take over real and virtual space. This has brought business into some ‘private’ or ‘social’ spaces and redefined them. Naomi Klein (Zadek et al., 2001, p. 57-61) argues that there is no longer a private or public sphere of life which is separate from business. The business ‘takeover’ of sport is a good example. Despite this complex environment market research still relies on asymmetric mass surveying which elicits information about consumer behaviour rather than values, culture, or social and political views.

The New Economics in Australia

As Australian academics, who are intimately involved in the education of managers and leaders, we are aware of the enormous challenges that are faced by businesses in the implementation of the new economics.

The New Economics in Australia indicates that CSR is a recent trend (since 1992). Only half of the businesses surveyed have policies of community involvement and many
of these are only concerned with sponsorship in sport and the arts (Centre for Corporate Public Affairs & Business Council of Australia, 2000; Suggett, 2000). Cronin (2001) and Cronin & Zappala (2002) suggest that CSR is coming of age in Australia and there is a growing awareness that community involvement should be a business strategy. Yencken (2001) argues that Australian companies are slow to adopt Triple Bottom Line reporting, governments are deficient in measuring human well-being and there is a failure to include social, environmental and cultural factors in decision-making. Clearly there is a need to accelerate the Australian dialogue about relationships between business and society, CSR, the Triple Bottom Line, and stakeholder management.

The literature which addresses stakeholder management allows some discussion of the specific actors within the business environment and their values.

Stakeholder Management and Values

Freeman’s work (1984) continues to be the basis for stakeholder management theories which address stakeholder values. He argued that companies should identify their direct and indirect stakeholders and look for the congruency or fit between what the company ‘stands for’ and the values of the stakeholders. Wheeler, a senior executive BSI, and Sillanpaa, manager public policy statements at BSI, adopt Freeman’s definition of stakeholders; stakeholders are ‘...individuals and entities who may be affected by business, and who may, in turn bring influence to bear upon it’ (Wheeler & Sillanpaa, 1997, p. x). The latter allows for the inclusion of environmental concerns.

An important issue in stakeholder management is the way that the company is linked to the actors who are the stakeholders. Freeman identified that value congruency between the company and the stakeholders is the most important link (see also Goodman, Zammuto & Gifford, 2001). He explained this as a contract, rather than a relationship of engagement, between the firm and the actors (Key, 1999). Following Freeman’s idea of the contractual nature of stakeholder relationships, research on stakeholder values relied on mapping them and comparing them to those of the company (Key, 1999).

Wheeler and Sillanpaa (1997) have a different approach and advocate the importance of close and continuous dialogue with customers to establish the values alignment or ‘fit’ identified by Freeman (1984). Wheeler and Sillanpaa (1997, p. 241) are concerned with value congruency as it enhances competitive advantage and increases market share (see also Hartman & Beck-Dudley, 1999). They argue that it is important to know why customers want particular products as well as to know what products they actually want. Key (1999), cautions that value congruency does not necessarily predict buying behaviour and our research supports this view. We discuss below how customers do not always ‘take their values shopping’ although, when they do, they feel more fulfilled (see also US Catholic, 1999).

Key (1999, p. 321) also points out that stakeholders do not necessarily fit into neatly labelled boxes; there are limitless linkages between groups of stakeholders and individual actors. The ECU and TBS researchers had ongoing conversations about who were the customers. For example, are customer stakeholders, community stakeholders, and ‘suppliers’ of information.

Morrigan & Paull, 2002
Key (1999, p. 322), seeks some objective measures to identify the linkages among stakeholders and with the company. We argue that more subjective or qualitative knowledge is vital to an understanding of the subjective nature of value congruency and values fulfilment. We are not constrained by a methodology that seeks objective measures! There is not a direct, measurable, link between value congruence and increased profits but qualitative knowledge about customer values will deepen stakeholder engagement and enhance company reputation.

Wheeler and Sillanpaa (1997, p. 252) note that customer perceptions, satisfaction and motivation are different phenomena from customer values. They do, however, advocate the extension of market research and stakeholder auditing research techniques to assess stakeholder values. In this research we have trialed and developed a different approach to understanding stakeholder values which does not adopt the techniques of market research and is more ‘symmetrical’.

Gardner (2000, p. 7) distinguishes between asymmetric and symmetrical marketing techniques. He calls asymmetric communication with stakeholders ‘spin’ where the PR people ‘...persuade, win over or pacify designated groups or publics’. He argues for a more effective communication with stakeholders through two-way dialogue. Gardner recommends a strategic approach to stakeholder management by first mapping or identifying the stakeholders and within that pre-determined structure to work out what conversation the organisation wants to have with each group (Gardner 2000, p. 9). In this research we agree with the goal of symmetrical communication with stakeholders through two-way dialogue we do not agree that dialogue can occur within pre-formulated conversations.

In this research we have trialed and developed a different approach to understanding stakeholder values which does not adopt the techniques of market research and is more ‘symmetrical’.

BSI is at the forefront of social and environmental reporting and TBS in Australia has been a leader in social auditing beginning with an environmental audit in 1996. TBS was the first company in Australia and New Zealand to conduct an independently verified social and environmental audit in 1998 (The Body Shop Australia + New Zealand, 1998, p. 5-10).

'M..persuade, win over or pacify designated groups or publics'. He argues for a more effective communication with stakeholders through two-way dialogue. Gardner recommends a strategic approach to stakeholder management by first mapping or identifying the stakeholders and within that pre-determined structure to work out what conversation the organisation wants to have with each group (Gardner 2000, p. 9). In this research we agree with the goal of symmetrical communication with stakeholders through two-way dialogue we do not agree that dialogue can occur within pre-formulated conversations.

Social Auditing or Stakeholder Engagement

Social auditing is a vital part of the objective measurement of CSR and of the Triple Bottom Line and can give some information for stakeholder management. A full review of the literature on social and environmental auditing is beyond the scope of this report (see AccountAbility, 1999; Albinger & Freeman, 2000; BHP, 2000; Global reporting initiative, 2000; Greening & Turban, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Jones & Murrell, 2001; Jones, 1999; Jonker, 2000; Margolis & Walsh, 2001; O’Rourke, 2000; Raynard, 1998; Sillanpaa, 1998; Waddock, 2000; Watts, 1999). Here we are concerned to show that the methodology required for social auditing does not necessarily bring the company into an engaged relationship with stakeholders.

The methodology for social auditing is, as the name suggests, concerned with objective measures to collect data about social phenomena. Audits are conducted using pre-formulated measures and are subject to accounting processes which can be independently verified. Social audits usually adopt methods from attitude surveys and market research using pre-formulated questionnaires that are mailed, administered in face-to-face interviews, telephone surveys and in focus groups. The independence of the researcher is seen to be vital and usually ‘outsiders’ are called into the
company to conduct the reviews. The relationship between the auditor and the company is carefully constructed and is not meant to be an interdependent working partnership.

Wheeler and Sillanpaa (1997, p. 158) outline their view of the best, and most accurate, way to audit the company by talking to stakeholders. They argue that honest responses to sensitive questions can best be achieved using anonymous techniques, such as telephone interviews with strangers. They recommend that market researchers be used to conduct the audit.

Stakeholder engagement has different outcomes; the purpose is not to audit the company performance but to build engaged relationships with stakeholders so that the company can be more responsive, gaining mutual knowledge from those whose interests are the same. The methodology for this research is also very different from the approach to social auditing. We have argued (above) that the researcher(s) and the researched play an interdependent role in the interview process. They are engaged in an empathic dialogue and research methods seek to build trust in this relationship. We therefore went to some lengths to make sure the researchers were ‘insiders’ and not strangers. The interviews were symmetrical dialogues using questions which had the minimum of pre-formulation. The researchers in this study were ‘involved’ and not independent and make no claim to be free of bias. We admit to sharing many of the social and political goals of the company and sometimes use TBS relaxing bath products at the end of a hard day at the computer writing up this report. In fact we argue that ‘facts’ do not exist independently of their producer’s linguistic codes, by our presence we influenced the outcomes of this research and the research was a personal and political practice. In this research we only spoke to committed customers because our purpose and methods were to deepen engagement and find out about the nature of fulfilment.

Although social audits and conversational research are different ways of gathering knowledge about stakeholders the findings from each can complement each other and together enhance company knowledge. Some of the patterns which have been identified by our research, support the data gathered from the recent social audit conducted by TBS (The Body Shop Australia, 2000b, pp. 41-56). For example mostly committed customers responded to the social audit. About 90% of customers, surveyed in the social audit, agreed or strongly agreed that businesses should act as responsible corporate citizens even if this reduces profit. Also 62.7% would be interested to know the ratings achieved by ethics and social responsibility reporting. The majority of customers (80.8%) said they would keep the ratings in mind while shopping. Paradoxically just over 70% said they would pick the less expensive product regardless of company’s ethics.

It is emphasised that the questions asked of customers in the social audit conducted by TBS (2000b, Appendix, pp 57ff) address customer behaviour or customer perceptions about the performance of the company against the company values. In this research we have specifically asked about customer values.

Values and the World Values Survey

In contemporary business literature the work of Argyris (1993) underpins the discussion of the role of values. He makes a very important point about the relationship between values and action although his ideas are drawn from classical sociologists like Durkheim (concept of anomie) and Marx (concept of alienation). He argues that effective human action can only occur when there is a moral consensus and ‘master values’ are not violated. These core values act as the criteria by which people assess and evaluate the situations they are in, before they act (Argyris, 1993, p. 95), Senge (1992, pp. 139-173), discussing self-actualisation or personal mastery agrees, but goes further. He says that there must be a higher purpose, a calling or a spiritual strength
behind the way we act (see also, Beyer & Trice, 1987; Elden, 1986; Gabor & Meunier, 1993; Jackofsky, Slocum & McQuaid, 1988; Kiechel III, 1990; Maital, 1992; Mink, 1992a, 1992b; Reimann, 1993; Schein, 1988; Simon, Howe & Kirschenbaum, 1978).

The work of Argyris and others is mainly applied to an analysis of employee relations, motivations and the discussion of culture in organisations. The literature on customer values often confuses two concepts - the concept of value, meaning 'worth' (of a company or product), and values, which are strongly held convictions, truths or beliefs. These two terms (value and values) are often used interchangeably in the business literature (Senge, 1992; Wikstrom & Norman, 1994; Zadek, 1998).

If a company wants to build 'value' or worth it may look to product quality, value for money and marketing; if a company wants to engage and share values with its stakeholders (particularly customers) then it is important to develop a dialogue with them (Sillanpaa, 1998). An understanding of customer values may lead to an increase in the worth of the company.

Strategies for the elicitation of values among stakeholders are different from strategies which increase value in a company (Margolis & Walsh, 2001) and there is not always a one-to-one relationship between the elicitation of values and increase in value (Arjoon, 2000; Carrigan & Atalla, 2001; Lovell, 2002; Thorne & Saunders, 2002).

Wheeler and Sillanpaa (1997, p. 252) suggest that the elicitation of stakeholder values is difficult because of the diversity of lifestyles and cultures. Our findings, and those from other research on values, show that there is a surprising lack of values diversity. Lifestyle issues arise out of personal values but they are different from core values, convictions, truths and beliefs. As we shall see from the dialogues in this research customers of TBS say they can put aside their values when they go shopping if fulfilling them is too difficult or affects their lifestyle. When they feel they have to do this, however, they are discontent - and, logically, will not feel engaged with the company they are dealing with.

In order to understand human values it is more productive to go outside the business literature and avoid some of the confusion and limiting assumptions. The World Values Survey (WVS) (1990-2002), for example, shows that there is a remarkable and growing value consensus across many countries, lifestyles and cultures. This survey is a worldwide investigation of the basic values and beliefs of people in more than 65 societies on all six inhabited continents, containing almost 80 percent of the world's population. It builds on the European Values Surveys, first carried out in 1981. A second wave of surveys, designed for global use, was completed in 1990-1991, a third wave was carried out in 1995-1996 and a fourth wave took place in 1999-2001 and is currently being analysed. This investigation has produced important evidence of gradual but pervasive changes in what people want out of life. The data indicates a worldwide value consensus on some important issues relevant to stakeholder management in business.

Inglehart (2000, p. 215) suggests that, 'A growing body of evidence indicates that deep-rooted changes in world values are taking place. These changes seem to be reshaping economic, political, and social life in societies around the world'. The pattern of systematic change in values is noticeable in countries which have recently moved beyond subsistence level economies as well as those in advanced industrial societies (Inglehart, 2000, pp 215-218). Cultural traditions still coexist, and leave their imprint, alongside the changes in values (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). A summary of the longitudinal results of the WVS is found in Figure 1.
Taking Your Values Shopping

Figure 1: Trends in World Values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decreasing</th>
<th>Increasing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materialism</td>
<td>Post-materialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass production, mass markets, standardised choices</td>
<td>Human Choice — the ability of human beings to choose the lives they want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisitive consumerism, economic growth</td>
<td>Quality of life, environmental protection — economic growth is valued but not at the expense of the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Belonging, self-expression, and community participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>Greater subjective feelings of security (although the data comes pre-September 11th 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deference to authority, hierarchical, centrally controlled bureaucratic institutions</td>
<td>Sharp decline in trust of political and business leadership, a fall in voter turnout with a rise of elite-challenging political action and a greater demand for integrity among elites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid religious norms</td>
<td>The search for meaning and purpose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Inglehart, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Welzel, Inglehart & Klingemann, 2002)

The Research Methods

Morgan (1983, p. 19), using a 'games' metaphor for the discussion and selection of a research method, suggests that we select a tennis racquet rather than a golf club to play tennis, because we have some idea about the game, or context, before we start. Following from our basic assumptions about the 'game' or nature of research we decided to collect qualitative data, from TBS customers using 'symmetrical' or conversational in-depth interviewing methods. Symmetry in interviewing is explained by Ann Oakley as follows:

...the goal about finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved if the relationship of the interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship' (1981).

Within this relationship interviews can then be conversations where interviewees can ask questions too and the interviewer is subjectively involved. This is particularly important when the conversation is about deeply personal values and passions.

The research technique or method we adopted is referred to by several names. It is called the 'dialogical method' because it is concerned with interpretation of dialogues between two or more people. The methodology is also called the 'hermeneutic circle' or 'double hermeneutic' (Blakie, 1993; Blakie & Stacy, 1984; Giddens, 1993). The word 'hermeneutic' means 'to interpret'. The
researchers and the researched, or 'actors', have different frames of meaning that derive from different life-styles, values, cultures etc. So there needs to be a translation or interpretation process whereby different frames of meaning are understood and 'mutual' or shared knowledge' is gained. The 'hermeneutic circle' or 'double hermeneutic' emerges because the interpretation process goes back and forth or in a circle. This is our understanding of 'dialogue' as two-way conversations between the researchers and the participants in the research helping to bring about shared meaning or mutual knowledge (see Figure 2).

In order to achieve ethical interviewing environments the ECU researchers asked that TBS retail staff conduct the conversations and collect the data. It was clear that in any interviewing situation the ECU researchers would be 'outsiders'—although we shop at TBS too (see Bryman, 1988; Steier, 1992, p. 2).

By comparison TBS retail staff interact with customers every day and often know them personally. The staff are already highly trained in communication skills and the ECU researchers ran a workshop to access and build on those skills for the data collection process.

The 'symmetrical' approach that was taken in the interview method was also congruent with the policies and practices of TBS and BSI that guide the way that their customers are treated. Anita Roddick says, "So, business leaders have a choice: they can build a huge PR wall and talk down to customers or they can listen and respond." She too values the importance of qualitative knowledge, "From the very beginning we wanted to be able to tell stories." (Roddick, 2000, pp 19 & 37). We also decided to record as many other conversations and stories within the research process as possible using 'diaries', tape-recorded meetings and 'field' notes. As well as these

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**Figure 2: Dialogue as Research**

![Diagram depicting the hermeneutic circle]

- **Researcher**
  - Shared Meaning
- **Conversation**
  - Interpretation of Meaning
- **Researched**
  - Mutual Knowledge

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more conventional approaches to collecting ‘stories’
we also created ideas and questions together
through:

• ‘The Poster Wall’ in retail stores – we asked
the retail staff in 8 stores to write up suggestions
and ideas on butcher’s paper pinned on the walls
of the back rooms of the stores. This idea is
borrowed from the description of ‘Throne Out’
in Anita Roddick’s book (Roddick, 2000, p. 73) where BSI employees were encouraged to
write their ideas on the back of the toilet door.

• Melbourne Managers Brainstorm Questions—
in a senior management meeting time was set
aside for brainstorming what issues needed to
be addressed in the research.

• Perth Retail Managers Brainstorm Passions and
Questions – ECU researchers facilitated a
meeting of retail store managers where we asked
about their values, passions and ideas for the
project

• ‘Your Story’ sheets – all retail staff asked to
contribute stories encapsulating their values.

• Conversations over coffee – most of the retail
stores were in large shopping centres where it
was possible to sit in coffee shops and talk
together.

• Making notes about reflections – ECU
researchers keeping notes, e-mails, and having
dialogues together.

• Telephone and e-mail conversations between
Jane in Melbourne and Patricia in Perth—
between ECU researcher and TBS Manager
Stakeholder Development.

• Megan (ECU researcher) and Sarah (Perth
Training Manager) have regular conversations.

Managers and Assistant Managers following
brainstorming session in Perth recruited staff
researchers. They were asked to fill in an expression
of interest which outlined answers to a series of
questions about availability, interests, interest in the
research and passions. All of those who expressed
interested were included in the project. Their
passions were varied and ranged through, chocolate,
the environment, equality, family, friends and pets.
The recruits were 2 casual employees, 1 manager,
2 assistant managers, and 1 sales adviser and came
from 5 retail stores. All the researchers were female,
and ranged in experience from 3 months with TBS
to approximately 5 years. Turnover in staff caused
some changes to this profile, with one full time sales
person withdrawing without replacement, one casual
staff member being replaced by her manager, and
one assistant manager withdrawing late in the project
without being replaced.

Collecting Ideas:
• ‘The Poster Wall’
• Brainstorm Passions and
Questions
• ‘Your Story’
• Conversations over coffee
• Reflections
• Conversations between
Jane and Patricia
• Conversations between
Megan and Sarah

The Sampling for
the Project

In keeping with our
methodology we adopted
‘theoretical sampling’. This
begins with the choice of
‘natural groups’ which can
logically give information about
the research topic. In this
project there were two logical
‘natural groups’ (or
stakeholders) where we could

The customers were invited to participate by the
retail staff in five stores, four in metropolitan Perth
and one in Rockingham (47 kilometres south of
Perth). One of the metropolitan stores withdrew
because of staff changes and we were left with data
from four retail outlets. The methods of inviting
customers to participate grew and developed as the
project progressed. The initial approach was to
incorporate the invitation into the ‘post close of sale’
discussion when TBS staff promote other initiatives
and give information. All staff were encouraged to

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invite customers to have a chat (and a coffee if they wished) with the staff member who was working on the project in that store.

In one store, Rockingham, the staff member who had taken on the role of researcher placed a sandwich board outside the store and invited customers and potential customers to ask about the project — as well as using the 'post sale' approach. This proved to be a successful move, and generated interest among customers. Another staff researcher mentioned the project to long term customers and arranged a time to talk with them at a later date.

Reviews of the process were done through regular meetings between the TBS researchers and Megan from ECU. Discussions included ideas about raising the profile of the project and the difficulty of separating the role of sales person from that of researcher. Different t-shirts for researchers, and badges and signs promoting the project made asking customers to join the staff in 'brainstorming' sessions using their tacit knowledge as 'insiders' but this was not possible. The research process from the University required us to submit pre-formulated interview questions before funding approval was given. Managers in the Melbourne Retail Support Centre and retail managers in Perth reviewed these pre-formulated questions following the 'brainstorming' meetings and the outcome was as follows:

**Research Questions or Conversation Topics**

The ECU researchers wanted to develop the conversation topics entirely in partnership with TBS staff in 'brainstorming' sessions using their tacit knowledge as 'insiders' but this was not possible. The research process from the University required us to submit pre-formulated interview questions before funding approval was given. Managers in the Melbourne Retail Support Centre and retail managers in Perth reviewed these pre-formulated questions following the 'brainstorming' meetings and the outcome was as follows:

*Initiating a Conversation about Values*

We would like to know your core values especially when it comes to business.

What are you passionate about?

What gets you up in the morning?

What makes you fulfilled as a customer?

Do you believe businesses have a social obligation to their community?

Do you believe that you have any power to influence businesses?

*Initiating a Conversation about Fulfilment*

What makes you fulfilled as a customer?

When do you really feel good about purchasing a product?

What businesses do you deal with where you feel valued?

The typical characteristics of those participating show that many interviewees were young women with mainly secondary or Tertiary And Further Education (TAFE) levels of education who were employed in full-time work. The profiles of customers who took part, however, included four males and ranged in age from 20 - 60+ years. They came from educational backgrounds ranging from compulsory secondary education to postgraduate qualifications, and from work situations where they were not in paid employment, were seeking work or retired, full time professional employment and self employed. Table 1 in Appendix 1 shows details of the sample.

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Initiating a Conversation about Corporate Social Responsibility

Do you believe businesses have a social obligation to their community? Why? What do you think business should do?

Initiating a Conversation about Customer Power

Do you believe (as a member of the community) that you have any power to influence businesses? How? What do you do?

Language for Creating a ‘Dialogue’

Tell me more about...; What do you mean by...; I am not sure I have understood...are you saying......? What specifically... I feel the same, for me....

The Body Shop customers are remarkably clear about their values and have no trouble articulating their ‘passions’ during our conversations. This is interesting when values are usually held unconsciously and not easily expressed (James & Woodsmall, 1998, p. 155). The customers of TBS are reminded of certain values as they enter retail stores – the company values are displayed on the store windows or form part of the product presentation – so there is a broader dialogue about values present in the interaction. Customers clearly expressed congruent values to those in The Body Shop Strategic Plan (The Body Shop Australia, 2000a).

Clarity about Personal Values

The Body Shop customers are remarkably clear about their values and have no trouble articulating their ‘passions’ during our conversations. There was also a third dialogue about their views on corporate social responsibility and the role of business within society.

Applying Interpretative Research Skills

The ECU researchers took all of the written records in the whole process and entered them into QSR - NUD*IST™ - a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) programme.

Making Sense and Drawing Conclusions

The following categories are drawn from the conversational data. Within this methodology they are called ‘grounded theories’ because they are categories which come directly from the verbatim dialogues among people in the project and are therefore not abstract hypotheses:

The majority of customers (and also the staff) expressed strong social values and only one mentioned economic values. They were deeply concerned about belonging; they valued their families and those they loved. Customers strongly supported broad human rights. They had a commitment to self-actualisation and self-expression, the natural environment, and their local community. They prized honesty, respect and fairness in their dealings with others and, as we will discuss, did not feel that these values were being met by business. They distrusted ‘big business’ particularly and felt exploited by ‘big brands’. In thoughtfully expressing their values the customers of TBS seemed quite different from the characterisation of the typical customer portrayed as highly acquisitive and materialistic in advertising or in popular culture.
Taking Your Values Shopping

The Meaning of Community

A key value of customers concerned 'community' and this is shared by TBS. The meaning attributed by customers to the term 'community' was different to a degree from that of TBS. They defined community as 'local community', their neighbourhood, Western Australia and Australia. They did not necessarily share TBS concern with the 'global community' or community development in less-developed countries. The emphasis on the local community was not simply parochial but supported by the view that they were being exploited by large or global businesses that did not care about the well being of Australian people. TBS customers said:

- **Feeling part of a community is important.** Feeling that you are contributing to society as a whole.
- **I want Australian owned, produced or packaged here.** This supports the Australian workforce and business. The ability to work is important...to see all sorts of people who may not fit into a 'normal' [working] environment.
- **I love Australian goods but costs are hugely different...I shop locally - this is my comfort zone.**
- **We must set our own standards...**
- **I am anti-globalisation...**
- **I value the West Australian way of life....**

Support for their own community was also not parochial because they expressed values about broad human rights:

- **Women's rights...I am against sexual abuse...**
- **...human rights, against racial discrimination.**
- **Community work and involvement...working with disabled children...**
- **I am passionate about humanity and respecting culture**
- **Fair wages - no child or slave labour. I don't agree with unfair wages or conditions**
- **I am passionate about human rights...**

Respect and Fairness

Key values expressed by TBS customers concerned respect and fairness, particularly in the context of their dealings with business. The customers said:

- **Businesses should treat all people honestly and fairly**
- **Fairness - fair and open. I understand we need rules, though rules must be fair...**
- **Business should serve the community in an ethical manner.**

The dialogues indicated that acknowledging their individuality and uniqueness was a way they would feel respected:

- **Recognition as an individual – being treated with respect as an individual.**
- **Family, respect for yourself and also other people.**
- **Show that the individual counts.**
- **Belief in people - being involved, integrating with people...**
- **People are people - they bring their whole personality to work, don't leave it at home.**

Valuing Honesty

TBS customers also valued trust - being treated with honesty and for businesses to be knowledgable and transparent.
• Honesty, sincerity and knowledge are values that business should show to their customers.
• No bullshit, people should be upfront and honest about themselves.
• Honesty, respect, integrity and uniqueness...
• I dislike having to lock my windows and doors...
• Accountability - telling the truth...
• In business it is important to be honest and truthful.
• I want honesty and respect from retailers.
• I value people who are honest and don't take advantage of you. For example tradesmen can take advantage and be dishonest because you don't have the knowledge...

Belonging

TBS customers showed a deep concern for those they love, they like to express love for others and draw strength in belonging within their personal relationships:

• I care about spending quality time with my partner.
• I care about my partner, seeing people succeed... helping those in trouble.
• People's health is very important - therefore I care about safe products...
• I care about family and friends respect for others, love spending time with my ageing parents.
• I care about creating a good future for my kids.
• I feel lost without my family and friends. I need my family for guidance and caring, they give me my greatest strength.
• I care about my lifestyle, my partner, my home and security...

Caring for the Natural Environment

It was clear that customers of TBS supported the company values about preservation of the environment and were against animal testing. They valued the knowledge that TBS staff had about the environmental effects of the products they bought from TBS:

• Chemical free everything - food, cosmetics. Body care should be as natural as possible.
• Staff should know if their products are made ethically and be able to let customers know.
• Business should provide information about the impact their products have on the environment.
• I don't mind paying a bit extra if it's environmentally friendly.
• I always try to use organic products.
• No fur, no leather...
• Against animal testing, cruelty to mice...

I care about my lifestyle, my partner, my home and security...

Business should provide information about the impact their products have on the environment.

I have an ambition to be the best person I can be.

Valuing Self-expression

Key values or goals expressed by TBS customers were concerned with self-actualisation and self-expression. Amid their concern for their family, the community and the environment there was time to care for themselves. For some, goal-orientation was a means to self-development for others a relaxing lifestyle using TBS products was clearly a way to the self:

• Self-esteem is important.
• Lemon soap, my cat, long hot baths, animals, head rubs....
• The will to move one step closer to my goals.
• I am passionate about art and doing things with my hands...
• Keeping a good head on my shoulders...If you don't like something - do something about it.
• I have an ambition to be the best person I can be.
• I have a joy for life and must live everyday to its fullest.
Taking Your Values Shopping

• Being polished on the inside reflects on the outside, it makes you a good person - being yourself.

Customer Fulfilment

Following the conversations about values was a series of dialogues about ways that values could be fulfilled. The Body Shop customers are, not surprisingly, fulfilled when their values are met by businesses they deal with. Fulfilment comes mainly from personal engagement, personal and individualised service, respect and personal care, easily accessible information about products and business practices, knowledgeable employees and businesses supporting the locality/community.

TBS customers feel fulfilled when they receive individualised customer service:

• Genuine and keen assistance.
• People going that extra mile.
• What I need not what you are trying to sell.
• Information so I can make an informed choice
• Value for money
• Getting the right product.
• Make it easy for me to shop. Provide a creche for the kiddies.
• Being recognised as an individual.
• Personal intimacy. Being remembered.
• Ask me about something we discussed on my last visit.
• One on one service. Not a robot.
• When businesses take time to ask me, ‘What do you need?’
• Focus attention.
• Easy layout of store, convenience, price.
• Feeling valued as a person - not just taking my money.
• When I know I am buying ethically.
• I love The Body Shop

• Knowing and interacting with people on a one to one basis so they are recognised by their first name.
• Promoting trust and sincerity...knowing the person behind that business makes you more comfortable with that business.
• Going beyond the customer relationship makes a customer feel more important.

Dialogues on Corporate Social Responsibility

As discussed Australian businesses are slow to adopt CSR and ‘The Triple Bottom Line’. Customers of TBS, however, want businesses to increase their level of authentic CSR and are clear that this must not be a cynical marketing exercise. TBS customers want businesses to put ‘something back into the community’ and they set high ethical and moral standards for companies they deal with:

• Business has an obligation to the community. Big business could make less profit and value humans and communities more...give some thought to the human cost.
• If the business puts something back into the community

- **Personal intimacy. Being remembered.**
- **Going beyond the customer relationship**
- They have a responsibility to put something back - locally.

• Business should have a high profile and level of involvement in the community.
• Win/win - customer loyalty = business loyalty.
• ...if business is going to make a profit from people in the community by selling products and services, then they have a responsibility to put something back - locally.
• If business is involved with the community then it breaks down barriers and there is more trust.
• Give business a human face.
• I believe that businesses should not operate to the detriment of any human being. They must ensure that there are no ‘side effects’ produced by what they do.
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- I think businesses should give back at least 10% to a worthy cause or a community in need. I also believe that they should hold themselves to a high standard of excellence when dealing with the lives of people.
- I want products that are not created in a sweatshop.
- Businesses couldn’t exist - be out of business without customers.

The Problem of ‘Big Business’

Customers often feel alienated or exploited by ‘big business’, ‘big brands’. They made no criticism of TBS but did mention their mistrust of large Australian and global companies, expressing a sense of powerlessness, cynicism and mistrust:

- Businesses should not lose sight of their initial intent, as they grow bigger.
- Big business not always able to provide product knowledge.
- The community is less important for big business because it may not be beneficial to them.
- Banks and big business should have more open policies.

Taking Values Shopping

The research dialogues have identified that TBS customers have a clear understanding of their personal values, know how they can fulfil their values and which businesses can meet them. Some customers invariably ‘take their values shopping’:

- Banks and big business should have more open policies.
- Perth is a small place. Word of mouth - I will tell...
- I do not walk in if I think they are unethical or are not in line with my morals...

Paradoxically, an examination of the whole transcripts of the conversations and notes from the TBS researchers, TBS customers say that they do not always ‘take their values shopping’. They make compromises and therefore are not always fulfilled. Customers decide between competing values as they shop especially if they are short of time:

- Stakeholder Boycotts

Customers of TBS also had a sense of themselves as stakeholders and used their customer power against businesses they saw as acting against their values:

- Do ‘boycott shopping’
- Perth is a small place. Word of mouth - so if I am happy or unhappy with a business or operator I will tell....
- Tell other people about the products and services that you receive.
- Yes. I will shop somewhere else. Shop with your feet and your wallet - I just don’t go back.
- I will not buy [name of company] because of poor work conditions.

- Depends on importance of [the] product – time spent researching options.
- … to really live my values when shopping, I would need to do a lot of research personally to find out what products were or were not ethically produced. This would take time and I don’t have that time or its not that much of a priority for the time needed. If I am aware of ethically produced products I will buy them and pay more for them.
- I am passionate about chemical free and safe products. In my life it is probably the most passionate value and greatly influences my shopping habits [especially] if more choice is available.

Merrigan & Paull, 2002
We interpreted factors, from the conversation, which TBS customers feel prevent them from fulfilling their values:

- Lack of convenience opportunity and choice
- Insufficient product knowledge, too much time spent in researching options
- If they feel powerless, disengaged, anonymous, not personally acknowledged
- Where no Australian businesses are supporting their local community or environment

Reflections and Dialogues

In this research project our ‘findings’ are in the form of ‘grounded hypotheses’. This simply means that we don’t say that we have come up with truths or proofs about customer stakeholders of TBS. We have made a basic assumption that there are no ‘facts’ to be found. Instead we offer interpretations of the conversations in the form of dialogues and invite others to join in the process of discussion and further research.

Taking Your Values Shopping

In this research our first aim was to make a contribution to the field of stakeholder management by engaging with customers of TBS and having a conversation or dialogue about ‘taking their values shopping’. Also to find out if customers felt a greater sense of fulfilment in the purchasing relationship if their values were met.

We found that TBS customers were remarkably clear and passionate about their own personal values and had no trouble expressing them in a conversation. In part this clarity of values may be because TBS also makes the company values clear and they are currently displayed in every retail store. The shopping environment at TBS encourages thoughtful purchasing.

The Body Shop customers that we spoke to expressed feelings of fulfilment when their values are met in the purchasing relationship. Fulfilment comes mainly from personal engagement, personal and individualised service, respect and personal care, easily accessible information about products and business practices, knowledgeable employees and businesses supporting the locality/community. This kind of purchasing relationship is more than just good customer service; it is a more complex relationship between business and society.

It may be a paradox that customers do not always play out their very clear values, in behavioural terms, when they go shopping, although they have a desire to do this. The mystery unravels if you actually listen to what the customers say. They do passionately care about health, well-being, their families, their community and the environment but in a busy life it is not always possible to shop ethically. It is difficult for this to occur where the retailers do not make it easy. If retailers do espouse ethical values, however, they have to be authentic about it because customers soon spot a lack of value congruence.

Values and Values Congruence

There is a surprising strength of value congruence between the corporate values of TBS, the values of the employees and the values of the customers. This finding is also supported by the different but related data from the recent social audit conducted by TBS (2001). There is very little research on customer values in the business literature or how congruent they are with the values of businesses that they deal with, so we speculate from our own experience and research that this level of congruence is also rare.

The values of the customers of TBS also reflect those found in the World Values Survey. TBS customers hold typical values to many people around the globe and not just influenced by the company’s values. Customer stakeholders in this research expressed values that were ‘postmaterialist’, concerned with human choice and self-expression, gave importance to belonging among family and friends and showed a marked lack of trust in global or large businesses. TBS is in tune with the values of a larger group of consumers who would like to take their values shopping if they had the chance.
The information from the World Values Survey has not influenced the business literature, especially the literature on stakeholder management. In our search of the literature we had little success finding good research articles on customer values and no links to the World Values Survey. We stumbled on the World Values Survey by taking our search further than the business databases. In our search of the literature we found that the data on Australia from the World Values Survey is not available in easily accessible articles. There is an important opportunity to do further research which makes the links between the shift in worldwide values, the data from Australia and the impact on the future of business.

**Taking Customers ‘Global’ and ‘Local’**

It was clear from the conversational data that while TBS customers shared a value about the importance of community, the company has a different, or broader, meaning for the term. As discussed the customers emphasised their local community, their neighbourhood, Western Australia and Australia. TBS have a broader definition. We are mindful of Anita Roddick’s view:

> [the] sense of community is absolutely vital to business success. But it isn’t simple. There are communities to be nurtured at least at three levels: inside your company; the wider global community to which any company owes certain responsibilities; and the specific communities with which you trade (Roddick, 2000, p. 56).

Finding out about the different meanings of community highlight one of the strengths of our research methods where we had the opportunity to explore meaning at a deeper level in symmetrical conversations.

**Business, Society and CSR**

A further aim of this research was to make a contribution to the field of knowledge known as Corporate Social Responsibility. We found that, as well as being clear about their values, customers of TBS were articulate in their views about the relationship between business and society. They supported CSR and wanted the relationship between business and society to be authentic, trustworthy and filled with integrity. Customers wanted more from CSR than philanthropy, although sponsorship in the community was important. Customers are demanding that business toe the Triple Bottom Line. They do understand that they have some power to influence business practices by taking their values shopping and rejecting certain products. How much business is lost by the individual act of quiet boycotting?

We have made the point earlier that Australian business leaders and managers are not good at ‘people skills’. The forging of good stakeholder relationships and taking the step into CSR does require emotional intelligence, sophisticated communications skills and the development of authentic corporate ethics and values. The emphasis in management and leadership education and training is still on economic skills. Imagine the change in management education if we took seriously skills for Triple Bottom Line accounting where outcomes would focus on social and environmental knowledge as well as economics.

**Doing Conversational Research**

A major aim of this research partnership with TBS was to demonstrate a new way to engage with customer stakeholders by doing social research based on in-depth interviewing in the form of symmetrical conversations or dialogues. Our research methods particularly facilitated ‘engagement’ with customers, by creating ‘dialogue’ or ‘conversations’ as part of qualitative research methods and in doing this generated deep and rich reflective data. We have discussed that there is a lack of knowledge about symmetrical relationships between businesses and their stakeholders within the literature on stakeholder management. Also that managers and business leaders currently lack ‘people skills’.

Chris Childs (the current Manager for Stakeholder Development) at TBS has given us feedback that the early conversational data that was generated from this research has already contributed to the
company’s national strategy. At a meeting with senior sales and training staff to look at customer strategy the conversational data was ‘posted’ around the room. This ‘invited the customer into the room’ and proved to be a powerful tool to keep the focus of the meeting relevant.

Hearing the voices of customers will also be important as the company moves into more informal settings for purchasing their products. TBS aims to develop a party plan approach to selling. In this group environment important dialogues occur and should be recorded, and analysed with computer software like QSR®NUDIST™, so that the company is more in touch with the customer stakeholder. We are, through this research partnership able to offer suggestions about adaptation of this methodology for ‘every day’ use. Our methodology is one way of hearing what the stakeholder really has to say.

**Building Research Partnerships**

It was our aim to find out more about partnerships between the university and industry from our own experience doing this research. The official partnership was really just a contract to carry out research and share the cost. Forging the official contract was difficult because of the differing views about what is research. ECU, as do all universities, has a view about research that supports objectivist fact gathering and testing of hypotheses rather than subjectivist knowledge creation. It was therefore quite difficult to persuade the research and ethics committees that conversational research was acceptable. We represented the research proposal three times before we gained acceptance.

It was easy to reach agreement about conversational research with Jane Compton (former Manager Stakeholder Development) from TBS. She and the company already had experience of working differently and there was great interest in our research methodology. Negotiating the differences between the views of the University and our industry partner was part of the process. There is a need for universities to discuss, have a dialogue, about the research needs of industry partners and whether academic criteria are always relevant in this new relationship.

**A Culture of Authenticity**

In working with TBS staff at all levels, we found, what we refer to as, a ‘culture of authenticity’ – they are who they say they are. Some examples from our data collection demonstrate this kind of culture.

We were part of a meeting where two stories were told:

- **A well-known supplier of women’s clothing began to use animal fur in manufacturing. The Body Shop cancelled their contract for T-shirts...**

  **Our methodology is one way of hearing what the stakeholder really has to say.**

- **There was a discussion among The Body Shop staff about the use of bristles from boars. The group concluded that the boars were being slaughtered for another purpose and the bristles were not the reason for the slaughter. The discussion asked ‘Is this still ethical?’**

In our twelve-month interaction with staff at many levels we noticed a high level of respect was shown towards others and us. We did not hear criticism; feedback was framed positively. The partnership was forged among women because of the gendered environments from which it grew. This was a project where we all worked closely together, where personal relationships were made. Trust was build through sharing personal stories, owning our values, talking about families and making the transition to friendship.

We learned a lot from this partnership; it was refreshing to work in a non-competitive environment and one that is freer from stress than that of the University. We hope that this research inspires others to build upon it.

**Patricia Morrigan Ph.D**

**Megan Paull**
Appendix 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Research Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>28 (24= females, 4= male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 retail stores (1 withdrew - Carousel)</td>
<td>Rockingham, Garden City, Karrinyup Murray Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 staff researcher transferred and did 3 final interviews - Hay St)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age groups</td>
<td>20 - 29 = 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 - 39 = 6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40 - 49 = 3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>50 - 59 = 5</td>
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<td>60+ = 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td>FT = 15 (1 self-employed)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PT = 3 (1 self-employed)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casual = 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Not in paid employment = 8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(4 retired, 1 seeking work)</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Yr 10 or eq = 3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Post graduate or eq = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not stated = 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Morrigan & Paull, 2002
References


Taking Your Values Shopping


