

Promoting Sustainability in the Surf Skate and Snow Industry

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Surfdome is the largest distributor of surf skate and snow products in the world. It currently purchases products from over 700 brands globally. For some of these brands Surfdome is the most significant purchaser and as such have the potential to influence the way that these businesses operate. As the research has progressed so the profile of Surfdome as a business that is innovating towards sustainability particularly with regard to the company's commitment to reduce and even remove Polyurethane packaging from its operations has increased. This has resulted in Surfdome being highlighted as a case study for good practice in the recent World Business Council for Sustainable Development report *The Business Case for Reducing Ocean Waste (2017)*. The report highlights how Surfdome has gone from very little recognition to now being one of the top fourteen companies tackling ocean waste. 'The retailer's sustainability efforts generated a highly positive impact in terms of public relations as well, and saw 2/3 of its social media traffic generated from its sustainability strategy - a demonstrable competitive advantage' (WBCSD 2017:18). There is then a clear and steep trajectory in Surfdomes ability to not only embed sustainability within its own operations but also create the visibility of these changes that acts as a business exemplar.

This survey is designed to address a number of issues in relation to sustainability throughout the surf skate and snow industry

Methodology

The research took the form of a survey that provides a baseline to explore brands sustainability trajectory, how they understood the environment and what their priorities are in this area. The survey questions were adapted from an earlier survey designed to explore perceptions of sustainability, the environment and subsequent actions (Borne 2010). The underlying aim of the research was to gain a broad sectoral baseline of sustainability understanding and motivations. Brands were informed prior to the surveys release themselves and a press release was sent out via Surfdome to raise the awareness of the research more generally. Surf specific publications highlighted the research, including *Boardsport Source (2017)* as well as more general organisational exposure, for example *Climate Action (2017)* which works in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme. The survey was dispatched individually via email to over 384 brands on the 8th of November 2017. The cut off date for the survey was dispatched via email on the 15th December and we were expecting a significant response rate from the brands involved. Overall, 46 brands responded which was 12 percent of the overall group. Whilst a higher response rate was expected the response rate still provides a significant insight into the sectors understanding and response to sustainability.

Business sustainability engagement

The research explored brands understanding of and engagement with sustainability as a concept. Initially brands were asked if they were concerned about sustainability related issues and overwhelmingly brands indicated that they were. Brands also believed that sustainability referred to the environment, economy and society. Brands were also asked is they implemented any sustainability related strategies. This included environmental management, corporate social responsibility, Co2 reporting, fair trade monitoring and labour conditions. Most of the brands said

they monitored labour condition and had a corporate responsibility plan. Only some of the brands monitored their CO2. Barriers to implementing sustainability included financial, infrastructure, knowledge and education and technology. Financial constraints were considered to be the most significant barrier to sustainability followed by education and knowledge. The majority of brands indicated that if it was financially viable they would implement sustainability measures.

Risk

Individual and organisations perception of and feelings of threat from risk is identified as an important component of engagement with sustainability. Brands indicated that they were concerned by issues such as climate change, plastic pollution, biodiversity loss and ocean acidification. However, a reduced number of brands indicated that they actually had policies in place to deal with these risks.

Responsibility

Another important variable in exploring engagement with sustainability and taking action to mitigate and adapt to the risks associated with sustainability is responsibility assignment. The research demonstrated that industry and business was highly responsible for driving sustainability solutions. Brands also indicated that government had an important role to play in creating sustainability solutions. To a lesser extent brands considered NGOs and charitable organisations responsible for driving sustainability solutions.

Social Sustainability

This included suppliers labour conditions the impact on local communities where products are manufactured and produced as well as the efficiency of the businesses supply chain. More than 70 percent of all respondents indicated that they were concerned about all of these issues. 86 percent indicated that labour conditions were a concern, 80 percent were concerned with the efficiency of the supply chain and 70 percent were concerned with the impact on local communities. A subsequent question also asked if brands were aware of the concept of modern day slavery 96 percent indicated that they were.

Business model Innovation

The research sought to explore brands awareness of and willingness to develop innovative business models. Most brands said that they were aware of the term sustainable business, similarly a significant proportion of brands percent said that they were aware of the term fair trade business and carbon neutral business. Over half of the brands said that they were aware of the term zero landfill business. Broader concepts such as the circular economy a full systems approach and negative externalities were also highlighted

The Brand

Bertilsson and Rennstam (2017) argue that brands innately believe that branding is a positive activity but that inevitably only a partial picture of the business can be represented within a brand. The research therefore addressed the activity of branding itself. Respondents were asked if they felt branding was a positive activity for sustainability. The majority of respondents indicated branding as a positive activity for sustainability. Most brands said that their branding practices was representative of their business operations. A smaller proportion of brands indicated that their branding practices represented only a small proportion of their business activities. Similarly a

smaller, though not insignificant proportion of brands indicated that they actively sought to highlight some aspects of their business over others.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates how a single company has created the space for embedding sustainability within its operational framework as well as providing a model that could be adopted by the broader surfing industry. Moreover the research provides insights into broader industry understanding and receptiveness to sustainability through alternative business models.

References

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Author Bio

Dr Gregory Borne is a Senior lecturer in Social Science at Plymouth Marjon University. He is the author/editor of the Books Sustainable Stoke: Transitions to Sustainability in the Surfing World; Sustainable Surfing and Surfing and Sustainability. Gregory is also the founder and director of the Plymouth Sustainability and Surfing Research Group