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It's all about good business ethics, not a CSR smokescreen

From Mr Michael Littlechild.

Sir, Gillian Tett (“When making shampoo becomes a service to society”, February 4) steers a sensible line in her remarks about the role of corporate social responsibility in salving the corporate conscience.

I am more sceptical, however, about her premise that what we are witnessing is the relentless rise of CSR. It is true that few people hold any more to Milton Friedman’s belief that the only social responsibility of business is to make money – at least not publicly. But I don’t think either that the overriding concern of business should be to worry about wider social challenges.

Businesses should be held responsible primarily for their products and the way they make them. Conscience-stricken consumers do not want their shampoo to harm either the environment or their health. They also care that the manufacturer and its suppliers don’t pay bribes, have paid decent living wages to employees who work in safe conditions and have not polluted rivers (even if the government of the country doesn’t care).

For me this adds up to good business ethics rather than social responsibility. Consumers are no longer fooled by a philanthropic smokescreen which masks some of the more dirty tricks of business. What we are witnessing is the rise of business ethics rather than the growing strategic importance of CSR.

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