

1] INTRODUCTION

At our BSSECCIC Roundtables we have spent the last few months discussing how to create a positive environment for social economy growth, however without people, businesses and the public sector understanding what the sector does, its business model, and the social value we create, we are forever on the back foot. We get questions like so are you a charity? What is 'not for profit?', How does your business work? How do you make money? Do you get paid or are you a volunteer? How are you a business? How good are we at explaining what we do and why we do it?

Within the West Midlands Combined Authorities Social Economy Framework [Growing the Social Economy in the WMCA Area - BSSEC](#), it describes the importance of 'communication' and messaging to enable social economy growth however the concept of strategic branding seems to be little understood and often marketing and branding reverts to organisational messaging. It also identifies that as a sector we fail to take full account of the importance of corporate branding and when devising our marketing plans fail to include it.

If you Google 'communicating' social enterprise – there are mostly articles and approaches regarding communicating your social value, nothing broadly about strategic branding for our area of work. There are also lots of definitions, but clearly definitions aren't enough because people don't get it and this is a real problem for us. What we are seeking is for people to understand that buying from social economy organisations generates social good not just monetary profit. That we are in essence 'non extractive' businesses contributing to solving social, economic and environmental problems. the term social economy can also be just as mystifying. Who does it include? What does it really mean? Are all of the organisations, businesses?

We need to ask ourselves 'who's role is it to help people and businesses to understand the social economy and social enterprise? – probably everyone in the sector? We suggest that leadership should come from intermediary organisations local and national, and the public sector. This is despite the fact that social economy organisations report that often public sector officers still don't understand the sector.

This is such an important topic as its key to unlocking market opportunities for the sector, enabling the social businesses to create greater social value, and have increased impact.

2] THE CHALLENGE

How does the West Midlands Combined Authority region communicate the value of trading with the social economy?

To answer the question above it is important to understand the operating context for social economy organisations and the challenges of helping people to understand the sector.

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- The social economy is not really seen as being part of the 'economy', confirmed by our Government policy location not within the Business Central Government department, DEIS, but in the Office for Civil Society and Youth Directorate and the content to our work can be found in Department for Digital, Culture and Media and Sport. We are not really seen as part of business despite the considerable turnovers we generate!
- The turnover for the social economy is believed to be 0.9% [2021] of GDP – about £20 billion annually. Social services alone are worth £3.5 billion. The sector employs over a million people annually and the value of formal volunteering was £23.9 billion in 2016, so considerably more now.
- If people don't understand what we are or do, they can't buy from us and therefore it's harder to grow.
- Calculating and describing social value in a comparable way continues to be challenging to the sector which means it's much harder for the Public Sector and other agencies to recognise the value created in the social economy.
- Those buying from us think we are cheaper because we create social value – this is a misconception. Often the costs are greater for social economy organisations as they are smaller, as majority of the organisations are SME's and have less capacity to bulk buy or they think their services should be subsidised.
- There is little understanding of our business models: that trading SE's are operating as a business, not grant dependent, needing to be in profit to invest, capacity build staff and be sustainable through buildings, longer contracts and research and development – the same as any business.
- There is little understanding of the social value created in the social economy. It can be very difficult to quantify impact as often organisations are contributing to solving a very small part of a very large problem. How do we solve societies problems?

3] WHO SHOULD WE BE COMMUNICATING WITH?

It is important to understand who we should be communicating with and think about different approaches to reach the target groups we need to influence. Consideration needs to be given to capacity of both those being influenced and those doing the influencing to provide and receive the information. There has been success by focusing on public sector policy makers and purchasers as this provides the most effective way of influencing to have impact.

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Target Audiences
National Government Departments
Local Government and other public service organisations [NHS, Fire, Police etc]
Corporates and Banks
Private sector and SME's
Social economy sector itself
The public and local residents'
Universities and education establishments

Anyone who can buy from the sector, help the sector and create a positive business environment. Commissioning and procurement staff across both the public, private and third sectors are a key audience as are their Boards who can also influence their buying approaches through company policies and procedures.

4] EXAMPLES OF STRATEGIC BRANDING APPROACHES

- i. Scotland has been seen for many years as a leader in social economy activity, policy and capacity building. Over 20 years ago their social enterprise network [which has taken many forms over this time] developed a series of approaches to help politicians and the Scottish Government to understand the sector. It was a campaign to unlock barriers to sector development including resources and procurement opportunities. This was a long-term approach which included visits and trips for senior staff, local and national politician's which in turn influenced the operating environment. Many say Scotland is different but in this context this is an approach that can be taken anywhere. Specifically international trips were made to the Social Enterprise World Forum [SEWF], where politicians were invited to speak, take part in group visits over a few days with social entrepreneurs and immerse themselves in the sector. The impact was a better understanding of the social enterprise sector, changes in policy, unlocking of resources. This approach continues today.
- ii. SEWF – anyone sector, stakeholders and politician's and international corporates [SEWF 2023 - SEWF \(sewfonline.com\)](https://www.sewfonline.com) . SEWF describes itself as providing an 'annual flagship event which brings together thousands of social enterprise leaders, policymakers and purpose-led people with one goal: to raise awareness of social enterprise as an expanding global mechanism for social change. Each year, we move around the world, working with a different co-host to bring you challenging, topical programmes featuring local, national and international expertise.' SEWF with each conference seeks to influence the development of social enterprise in that locality, working with local partners and aiming to have a lasting impact by catapulting local work in their development. They work with Politian's and local champions.

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- iii. Buy Social Corporate Challenge an initiative developed and supported by SEUK which target corporates [Buy Social Corporate Challenge | Social Enterprise UK](#) . *The Buy Social Corporate Challenge is a simple initiative with a bold ambition: that a group of 30 high-profile, large-scale businesses can collectively spend **£1 billion** with social enterprises through their procurement by 2026.* SEUK supports the challenge through the identification of SE's, checking of legal structure and promotion of opportunities with SE's.
- iv. Social Enterprise Drive - Birmingham as a social enterprise city. The approach to promote social enterprises and encourage businesses and residents of Birmingham to get involved with the sector began 10 years ago. The focus was a social enterprise place and hot spot and seeking to increase the sustainability of the businesses in that location. Essentially it worked as a campaign with 5 calls to action which highlight how people can get involved. These were: start a social enterprise, work in a social enterprise, volunteer with a social enterprise, invest in a social enterprise and buy from a social enterprise. Engagement either face to face or online was considerable. This approach has now merged to become a WMCA initiative led by iSE CIC known as the [Social Economy Drive 23](#) [SED23].
- v. SEUK - Social Enterprise Places - Plymouth [Home - Plymouth Social Enterprise Network \(plymsocent.org.uk\)](#)

5. THOUGHTS FROM OUR SPEAKERS IAN CUTHBERT, FOVEA CIC AND ELIZABETH FORRESTER, ISE CIC.

How should we approach social economy promotion or corporate branding for the social economy?

Ian Cuthbert FOVEA CIC

The 'word' social is problematic to the broader public – it means different things to different people and is squeezed between private, corporate and charity.

We don't need an unlimited budget and the necessary communications are the same as any other sector. But we do need different messages – communication needs to concentrate on 'people'. People need to be at the centre of everything we do as people are interested in people. 'We love to know what other people are doing'. Story telling therefore becomes really important. It's a good way of getting messages across.

Key list for corporate branding communications

- People at the centre of the communication – real people and real stories
- Good visuals

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- Simple language
- Social impact guide

Need to be careful not to confuse corporate branding with individual company marketing. It is everyone's responsibility to be involved in corporate branding as those purchasing need to know what they are purchasing.

Elizabeth Forrester ISE CIC

a) ***Digbeth Social Enterprise Quarter -place based approaches to social enterprise promotion.*** Walks for politicians, private sector, public sector, procurement officers and people to experience and show case social business activity. The benefits were low cost and organisations directly benefited.

b) **Shop for Good campaign** – promoting the products and services of social enterprises and social economy organisations. The campaign was underpinned with data regarding purchasing for social enterprises, signing a pledge to buy differently and by monitoring spend before the campaign and onwards it was possible to identify the impact. There was also a database of social enterprises locally and nationally.

c) **Seeing is believing – Wates** programme of awareness raising amongst their customers and supply chain. The approach was to organise a day with a small coach or minibus provided by a social enterprise and visit a variety of social businesses that were relevant to Wates work.

d) **Birmingham's Social Enterprise City Drive** – 9 annual, weeklong, series of events all designed to promote social enterprise to the residents of Birmingham and Birmingham based businesses. The campaign had 5 calls to action, a social media campaign and good marketing. A social impact report was produced after each one.

Comments from the Roundtable

We need to start talking in the language of successful business.

We need to build better links with corporates.

Not one message for one audience, there are lots of audiences for corporate branding.
Audience is key

Are people concerned with governance? Need to stop using the term 'not for profit'. We need to use the same language. 'More than profit'

We need to lobby and influence by coming together and working together.

6] CONCLUSIONS

Approaches that can be developed within WMCA Region

- Need to consider audiences, communications and marketing planning [corporate and company]
- Across the region all social economy organisations need to develop an approach to helping residents and businesses to understand the social economy.
- Visits and tours in clusters, places and across the region to show case the sector.
- Focused sector network events – procurement/meet the buyer, commissioning \ supply chain, place based, networking and conferences.
- Newsletters and photography.
- Stories and Case studies of social economy impact.
- Use of films [A Bank Called Dave!], local story based short films, blogs and pod casts
- Competitions, plays, music, visual arts.
- Social Economy Drive [SED23] operating regionally.
- Effective use of social media.
- Posters and signage e.g. the WMCA new Cluster areas.

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