

## **Open Sourcing Sustainability:**

### **Web 2.0 Meets CSR 2.0**

***By Wayne Visser***

CSR 2.0 responsiveness goes beyond traditional partnerships and CSO effectiveness; it is also about innovative ways to collaborate. I want to flag several Web 2.0 inspired experiments in responsiveness that are opening up sustainability and responsibility solutions to the public. One is a platform called the Eco-Patent Commons, which allows companies to share their intellectual property for the common good. The Commons was launched by WBCSD and covers issues like waste, pollution, global warming and energy. 'The premise of the Commons,' says Björn Stigson, president of the WBCSD, 'is that the free sharing of these patents leads to new collaborations and innovation aimed at helping others become more eco-efficient and/or operate in a more sustainable way.'

The Eco-Patent Commons' publicly searchable database already contains over one hundred eco-friendly patents from companies like Bosch, Dow, DuPont, Fuji Xerox, Hitachi, HP, IBM, Nokia, Pitney Bowes, Ricoh, Sony and Taisei. Xerox, for example, has eleven pledged patents that cover a process that cuts the time it takes to remove toxic waste from soil and water from years to months, as well as a patent that covers technology that makes magnetic refrigeration less harmful to the environment.

Dr. John E. Kelly III, IBM Senior Vice President and Director of IBM Research, believes that 'innovation to address environmental issues will require both the application of technology as well as new models for sharing intellectual property among companies in different industries ... In addition to enabling new players to engage in protecting the environment, the free exchange of valuable intellectual property will accelerate work on the next level of environmental challenges.'

Similarly, Donal O'Connell, Director of Intellectual Property for Nokia, thinks that 'environmental issues have great potential to help us discover the next wave of innovation because they force us all to think differently about how we make, consume and recycle products.' Nokia have pledged a patent designed to help companies safely re-use old mobile phones by transforming them into new products like digital cameras, data monitoring devices or other electronic items. 'Recycling the computing power of mobile phones in this way could significantly increase the reuse of materials in the electronics industry', concludes O'Connell.

Even more significant than the individual patents that have been added is the shift in thinking that this signals among some of the largest companies in the world. It is true none of them are exactly 'giving away the family silver' – they are not opening all their patents – but they are demonstrating responsiveness on a scale never seen before. They are recognising that the global problems we face are larger than whatever individual solutions can accomplish. If we are truly going to be effective in tackling our most intractable challenges, we will need the wisdom of crowds and the collective efforts of millions of entrepreneurs.

A similar, more recent initiative is GreenXchange, a collaborative platform initially launched by Creative Commons, Nike and Best Buy. Partners include 2degrees, nGenera and Salesforce.com. The fact that Creative Commons – a non-profit organisation that previously developed licensing programs to help in sharing creative and scientific content – has branched into the environmental arena is good news, not least because it brings a sophisticated understanding of the legalities of proprietary content, yet combines this with a commitment to open-source sharing.

The main difference between the Eco-Patent Commons and GreenXchange is that companies that contribute patents to the GreenXchange will have the option of charging users a fixed annual licensing fee and can also restrict any licensing by rivals or for competitive use. In addition, even if

no annual fee is charged, patent users must register so there is a record of who is using what technology. The structure is more complex than the Eco-Patent Commons, but John Wilbanks, GreenXchange coordinator and vice president for science at Creative Commons, believes it will yield greater numbers of high-quality inventions. 'We don't depend on altruism,' says Wilbanks. 'This system helps the environment while enabling a firm to make money from patents in applications outside its core business.'

Wilbanks cites a fictional example for illustration purposes: Nike's air-bag patent for cushioning shoes is crucial to its core shoe business, but may have environmental benefits in other industries — perhaps in prolonging the useful life of tyres. GreenXchange could enable Nike to license the air-bag technology selectively to noncompeting companies.' Although this example may be speculative, Nike's commitment to the concept is not. According to Kelly Lauber, a global director in Nike's Sustainable Business and Innovation Lab, by sharing its water-based adhesive technology and working with footwear makers, average levels of environmentally harmful solvents used by Nike's suppliers decreased significantly.

Nike has issued a GreenXchange booklet in which it lays out the challenge: Will the pursuit of sustainability create the new Google? The new Nike? The new disruptive view of business models, markets, profits and consumers? The answer is almost certainly yes. The conclusion is that 'it's time to dust off the research, the assets, the knowledge, the innovation you've developed on sustainability. Imagine the impact it could have if we gifted it to the world.'

Whether it is the Eco-Patent Commons or GreenXchange or some other platform for open-sourcing sustainability and responsibility that eventually prospers and becomes the new collaborative standard, the genie is out of the bottle. The idea is out there that, when it comes to technologies, processes, products and services that have potentially life-saving or earth-saving impacts, there is a moral obligation to share these with humanity. No doubt these collaborative platforms have started in the environmental space because, as was the case with reporting, green issues are easier to quantify and design solutions for. But we can expect them to spread rapidly to the social space as well. And as they do, they will shine a spotlight on those companies that are truly embracing the CSR 2.0 principle of responsiveness.

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