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## **SOCIAL MARKETING IN CREATING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF COMPANIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

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### **Abstract**

The new marketing environment of companies, based on integrated approach in holistic marketing, is targeted at value creation. One of its segments relates to socially responsible marketing, termed social marketing by Philip Kotler in the 1970s, which encompasses comprehension of broader interests (both internal and external), and also the ethical, environmental, legal and social aspects of marketing activities and programs. Their aim is to enhance the environment for all consumers and companies. Thus, the causes and consequences of marketing are extended beyond companies and consumers, to society as a whole. Balancing the social and ethical aspects of companies marketing practices is often faced with conflicting criteria of company profit as opposed to satisfying consumers' and general public's wishes and interests.

In such a context, apart from consumer knowledge, the changes in responsibility to consumers are targeted to understanding, whereby social marketing tends to infiltrate into

all aspects of business activities relevant to contemporary companies, and are manifested in providing the competitive advantage of companies.

The aim of this research concentrates on examining priorities and the importance of the determinants of socially responsible target marketing relevant to the competitive advantage of companies and consumer expectations in a transition environment such as the Republic of Serbia.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, social marketing, image, consumer, competition

**JEL Classification:** M31, M30, M14

## **INTRODUCTION**

Under the modern-day conditions, one of most important aspects of socially responsible marketing is sustainable development. Until recently, the priority for companies was their economic sustainability, which is manifested in profits; social and environmental sustainability, however, gain importance along with it. The problem of sustainable development has been gaining significance after the era of traditional (mass) marketing (based on the marketing mix instruments) in relationship marketing, which is based on relationship management, interactions and networking in the so-called holistic marketing. Besides relationship marketing (with customers, partners, marketing channels and other stakeholders), it also includes integrated marketing (marketing instruments integrated into marketing mix), internal marketing (industrial relations on all in-company levels), socially responsible marketing (ethics, law, public, environment, etc), and social marketing, where the latter plays an increasingly important role in achieving competitive advantages among companies. The result of such marketing relations is establishment of unique marketing assets, i.e. marketing network. Companies build marketing networks with their consumers and supporting stakeholders, with whom they build and realize mutually profitable relations.

The competition, which until recently existed among the companies, now occurs among networks, and the effects emerge in companies which have successfully developed relations among established marketing networks.

It is a fact that the corporate social responsibility as a new management paradigm is still not a clearly defined, sufficiently researched, operationalised and measured phenomenon. However, the sustainable development can be identified with corporate social responsibility. It is a business concept referring to voluntary integration into a company's own business, development and maintenance of relations with partners and concern for the social and ecological aspects of the company's own actions.

The goal of this paper is focused on examining the extent to which social marketing is present in domestic companies, whether it strengthens the competitive advantage of the company and its products among the consumers and the environment, i.e. whether it contributes to developing and maintaining the company's positive image (i.e. its communication goal) and profit (i.e. its economic goal).

The hypothesis that this article aims to confirm by combining the scientific methods of desk research and experience-based method is:

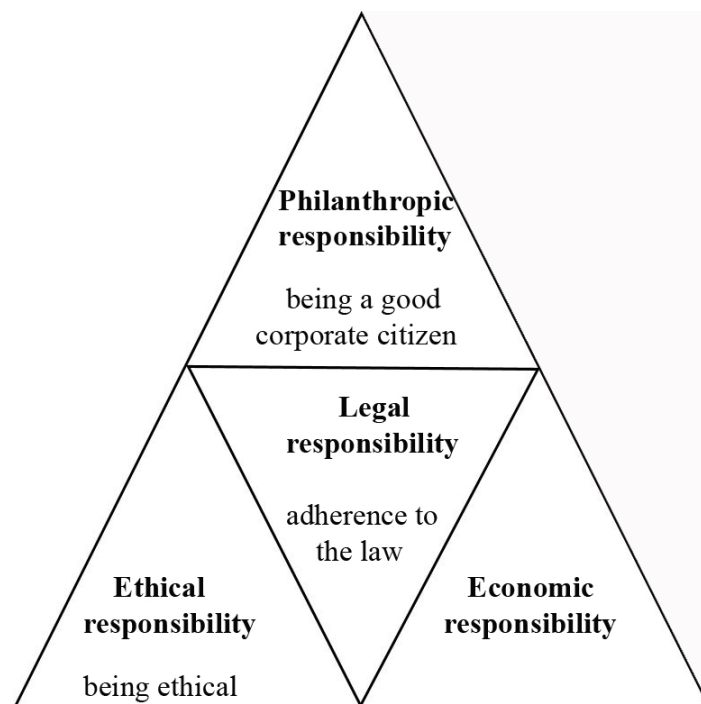
H<sub>0</sub>: The application of social marketing contributes to the growth in companies' competitive advantage and positive image.

## Literature review

Corporate social responsibility is a concept according to which companies that adopt it voluntarily and in multiple ways contribute to a better healthier and more progressive society in the broadest sense of the word, as well as preserving a clean environment. Being a socially responsible corporation does not merely mean meeting legal obligations; it also implies exceeding mandatory obligations, towards meeting the communal needs, investing in care for a healthy, progressive and modern society environment and finally developing relations with all social categories.

At the same time, corporate social responsibility is one of the key solutions to sustainable development, representing an active contribution to harmonising relations between the business sector as the key holder and generator of development on the one hand, and society at large on the other, whose needs must not be neglected. The concept of corporate social responsibility graphically represented as a pyramid (Subotić, 2009, p. 49) is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** The corporate social responsibility pyramid



The reasons for a growing need for applying corporate social responsibility can be found in the perception of the company's fundamental goals, i.e. production and delivery of products and services meeting the demands of the market, and thus gaining the highest possible profit for its stakeholders (Karaibrahimoglu, 2010, p. 383)

One of the first interpretations of what corporate responsibility means in reality is given by Milton Friedman (1970, p. 32), who argues that there is a sole type of corporate social responsibility, which is to use resource and conduct activities in such a way as to achieve maximum profit growth for a maximum possible period of time, within defined legal rules of market competition – free competition without breaking laws and fraud.

Various authors, with their differing views of corporate social responsibility (CSR) highlight the following (Souto, 2009, p. 39):

- CSR implies the participation of different actors – individuals and/or institutions – named stakeholders;
- CSR has implications to business strategy and decision making in companies;
- CSR is driven by international initiatives by different institutions;
- CSR must be shaped and adapted to the technological, cultural, social, corporate and environmental particularities of each enterprise, geographic area and each country.
- CSR is applicable in all types of organisations, regardless of their size or ownership structure.

Social marketing stems from corporate social responsibility. Actually, research into social marketing conducted so far and described in literature are associated with terms and notions viewed differently by different authors. The reason for this is the understanding of modern-day holistic marketing of its four segments, including socially responsible marketing (Kotler & Keller, 2006, p. 18), which is complex and inseparable from others. In other words, holistic marketing includes socially responsible marketing and the understanding of the broader interests of ethical code, environmental context, legal and social context of marketing activities and programmes. The cause and consequences of marketing extend beyond the company and consumers to society at large. Social responsibility also implies that marketers must carefully consider the role they have and can have in terms of social welfare.

Such an approach highlighted the need for a new term that would extend the concept of marketing, and Kotler (Kotler & Keller, 2006, p. 22) termed this concept "social marketing", whereby he advocated the idea of establishing the needs, wishes and interests of target markets, and meeting these needs more effectively and efficiently than competitor, safeguarding and advancing the welfare of consumer and society at large. The marketer's task is to consider the social and ethical aspect of marketing practice through balancing the frequently conflicting criteria of corporate profit, consumer satisfaction and public interest. The concept of social marketing includes the following types: corporate social marketing, cause marketing or cause-related marketing, philanthropy, corporate community involvement, and socially responsible business practices.

In another approach, Kotler and his co-authors (Kotler, Vong, Sonders & Armstrong, 2007, p. 191-195) identify business activities aimed at socially responsible marketing in consumer-driven marketing, commitment marketing, innovation-based marketing, value-driven marketing, and social marketing.

Serbian academic and professional literature (Subotić, 2009, p. 34) argues that corporate social responsibility has undergone four historical periods in its development:

- the profit maximisation period – the longest period, from the industrial revolution to the 1930s, with maximum profit in the forefront
- the trust based management period – emerged in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, and is associated for corporate concern for the employees, consumers and society as long as the owners' interests are protected
- the activism period begins in the early 1960s, and is characterised by asking questions about employment opportunities, environmental protection consumerism etc.
- the social sensitivity period – the highest degree of social responsibility and sensitivity to the community's needs, the point being that companies develop a decision making

process anticipating the environment's response and appreciating social and communal values.

Economic literature identifies numerous benefits drawn by companies from applying corporate social responsibility (Souto, 2009, p. 40):

- building a positive image and reputation resulting in increasing consumer trust, increased revenue, business partners and investors
- growth in the company's competitiveness;
- improving the quality of the company's value change;
- improving working climate, thus increasing employee permanence, motivation and productivity;
- reducing legal conflicts on complying with regulatory requirements;
- improving relationships with the local community;
- positive environmental impact; etc.

It is certainly clear that effective application of corporate social responsibility, including social marketing contributes to a company's growing value and social reputation. A company's consumer value and value for prospects is one of corporate marketing objectives. The current economic crisis and preceding financial scandals in highly developed mature economies only intensified the interest of scholars and practitioners in researching the needs and effects of applying corporate social responsibility.

### **The scope of the social marketing issue**

Social marketing is a global phenomenon which has been present latently for a long time, and explicitly since the last decade. It is a complex phenomenon which manifests itself differently in various environments, and in multiple aspects as well. Social marketing is associated with companies' obligations and their decisions made in order to increase their positive environmental impact and reduce their negative effects on consumers and society. It is becoming increasingly apparent that it is of far greater importance for a company to survive and achieve competitive advantages, to operate in a socially responsible manner in the long run, instead of focusing on short-term operations directed by costs.

In pursuit of this goal, the companies must keep track of changes and trends in societal values in their particular milieu. Therefore, for example, food producers tend to produce and market healthy food because of the consumers' rising concern for their health. Companies cannot satisfy the needs of all consumer segments. Furthermore, in an effort to satisfy the wants and needs of a particular consumer segment, companies may disappoint others. The society is comprised of highly differentiated segments of people and therefore it is very hard, if not impossible, to determine what the society as a whole wants. Besides that, with a multitude of society's diverse demands, there emerges a problem of establishing balance between supply and production costs on one side, and fabrication and packaging which meet the demands for preserving the environment on the other. The problem also appears in companies' efforts to estimate customers' willingness to pay the price for the product which includes information acquisition costs.

The expressions *ethics* and *social responsibility* are often equated in marketing. Ethics, however, is a segment of social marketing, since it refers to individual's moral evaluations and their views on what is right and what is wrong in a particular situations regarding decision making or action. Social responsibility refers to the overall consequences of marketing decisions to society. As stated above, social responsibility is a corporate

endeavour to increase its positive effect on society. Social responsibility concerns the overall consequences of marketing decisions on society. Therefore, both operate in parallel, for a company that builds and supports the corporate culture based on socially acceptable ethical philosophies and individuals who act ethically is likely to make decisions with a positive impact on society.<sup>1</sup> Social marketing faces many problems; from consumer movements (the main social concerns being: the right to safety, the right to information, the right to choice and the right to be heard), to relations in community (the issue of equality, safety and health, challenged members, education and general welfare) and green marketing (preserving the environment and combating water, soil and air pollution) and companies' philanthropic activities (positive attitude towards employees, consumers, suppliers, distributors, competitors and other organizations and institutions in society).

### **STRATEGIES FOR SOLVING SOCIAL MARKETING ISSUES**

In the application of strategies, socially responsible marketing requires the implementation of activities from three types of behaviour: legal, ethical and socially responsible. Legal – operations and conduct based on regulations and adherence to all relevant laws. Ethical – the company builds a tradition of ethical behaviour and forms the employees' responsibility to follow legal and ethical guidelines. Socially responsible behaviour is based on involving social conscience in dealing with the consumers and other stakeholders of interest. These actions of a company are a basis on which the consumer makes a decision the purchase decision-making process. They are the fundamental elements that shape the reputation of the company and its products.

The business practice raises complex dilemmas on how to resolve the emerging issues in relations between the company and the environment. Out of a series of strategies, the most often mentioned are the four basic ones used for solving problems of social marketing. One of them is the **reaction strategy**, which implies resolving consequences caused by a problem and continuing operations as if nothing had happened in the given environment. This strategy allows the existence of unresolved circumstances or potential problems for as long as the public are unaware of them. Next is the **defence strategy**, which is based on endeavours to reduce or avoid additional obligations. This strategy often relies on lobbying for the purpose of avoiding government regulations or laws. The **adaptation strategy** is a corporate enterprise to include responsibility for its actions into its existence. Fourth, the **active strategy** is a strategy where the company assumes responsibility for its actions and responds to the charges made against it without outer influences, threats, governmental or other interventions. Companies implement this strategy in common interest.

### **SOCIAL MARKETING IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

The social marketing concept does not have a long tradition in Serbia, perhaps a decade long, since the foreign companies, the leaders in business trends on this market, started contributing to the changes in business setting prevailing in the society. The local companies are ready to rapidly adopt the innovations introduced by foreign businesses, especially in the public relations area, as reaching the general public results in the greatest overall effect.

Corporate social responsibility is perceived in Serbia as an instrument used for improving a company's reputation in the society, government, media, and especially among business partners and consumers. It is therefore perceived as one of the marketing instruments of

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<sup>1</sup> Dibb, Simkin, Pride, & Feffell: *Marketing*. Mate, Zagreb, 1995, p. 658.

social marketing. This concept still does not incorporate concerns such as improving the quality and conditions of labour (employee rights and standards, education), nor does it provide satisfactory cooperation with consumers, trade unions, suppliers and other stakeholders.

In addition, the concept of socially responsible corporate conduct is principally viewed upon as philanthropy, in the form of donations and sponsorships. It is so perceived because it builds upon the national culture and the tradition of benefaction and endowment.

The introduction and adoption of socially responsible marketing is predisposed by multiple factors, some of which are: competitive and administrative pressure, the establishment of better relations with stakeholders, consumer pressure, government's financial incentive policies, environmental protection, legislation and so on. The factors causing the underdevelopment of social responsibility concept in Serbia, according to the following survey, are: insufficient support from the government, poor understanding of the concept, development of the market economy, inadequate promotion and education on the concept, weak multisectoral communication and cooperation, and participants (stakeholders) in the concept's promotion.<sup>2</sup>

Based on a research into the importance of factors for employing socially responsible business and marketing conducted on respondents from the business sector, the factors were ranked by significance. According to the research outcomes, increasing the company's reputation was identified as the most significant reason for introducing the concept of socially responsible marketing and its implementation. The significance of particular factors included in the conducted research is given in the table below:

**Table 1:** Results of the research into factor significance

Rank	Factor	Significance
1	Increasing the company's reputation	4.22
2	Government's financial incentives	3.88
3	Environmental preservation	3.77
4	Legal duties/governmental rulings	3.55
5	Shareholder or holding company pressure	3.44
6	Local/international competitiveness	3.44
7	Superior market position	3.44
8	Attracting the best and the smartest employees	3.11
9	Fighting corruption	3.00
10	Risk management	2.77
11	Cost reduction	2.88
12	Supply chain enhancement	2.55
13	Customer requirements	2.55

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP CSR Baseline research in Serbia, Živić M., Savić M., "Baseline Study on the Social Responsibility of Serbian Companies", UNDP and the Center for Monitoring and Evaluation <http://www.cme.org.yu> (29.12.2009), page 21,22.

(taken from the Business Case Study on SCR consciousness<sup>3</sup>)

Competitiveness and expansion on the local and international market lags behind the increase in reputation, environmental protection and management requirements. This highlights the importance of competitiveness in marketing and in social marketing as one of its segments. Marketing and public relations are still the most prominent directions of the socially responsible corporate conduct. However, customer requirements are ranked relatively low, although the companies lately recognize them as increasingly important. The reason for this is the difference in interpretation of customer requirements among the respondents. Cost reduction is ranked even lower, probably because of insufficient awareness of the effects on business and cost savings.

The combination of the above mentioned factors leads to a conclusion about the existence of three issues: social, the impact of social value chain and competitiveness. The social issue is of definite importance to society, but is not caused by companies' operations or their long-term competitiveness. The impact of social value chain is under the influence of companies' activities. The social aspect of competitiveness incorporates the factors influenced by competitiveness in the external environments where companies operate.

As well as in many other countries, social responsibility in Serbia does not incorporate the unique defining features of the business ethics concept itself, as a specific domain of responsibility. It is most usually defined by the following constituents: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic, which act conjointly and shape the company's competitive position and reputation among the consumers, potential consumers and all sectors of the general public.

The still incomplete process of transition, economic crisis and its consequences manifesting themselves in all segments of the economy and peoples' lives, place Serbia among markets burdened with a series of problems: unemployment, low standard of living, and the economy evolving from the level attained at the end of the 1980's. However, even in such circumstances, introduction of social responsibility in most companies is in the process of accepting values and ethical standards which are already well established in adjacent environments (developed market economies). Building and maintaining the reputations of companies and their products is a conscious process taken seriously by the companies. Marketing activities aimed at the consumers and general public are carefully executed. Companies increasingly contribute to the community and its comprising segments and individuals as a part of operations. These activities are executed in the so-called third sector, i.e. the non-profit sector of the economy, and their influence extends to the fields of education, healthcare, social aid to the marginal population strata, supporting cultural events etc. In this perspective, local companies are willing to engage in philanthropic activities, particularly those concerning the children consumer segment, the sick and those who live on the border of subsistence minimum.

The legal aspect of domestic companies' social responsibility exists as a series of laws and acts in the process of drafting, instituting and implementation. The main problem concerns the executive bodies of certain regulations, i.e. the law clearly and unambiguously defines

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<sup>3</sup> UNDP CSR Baseline research in Serbia, Živić M., Savić M., „Baseline Study on the Social Responsibility of Serbian Companies“, UNDP and the Center for Monitoring and Evaluation <http://www.cme.org.yu> (29.12.2009), page 21,22.



specific actions and consequences; however, the regulation and self-regulation is most often left to the companies themselves.

The issues of ethical standards and business ethics reach all areas of business of every company and society. The existence of codes of conduct within the companies has become more a rule than an exception. The ethics of subsistence are directed by a series of suppositions which will ensure the reinforcement of personal integrity and civility on the market, in a variable competitive setting present in most areas of business. It is therefore necessary to ensure more space for general morality and ethical codes in business philosophy, as well as to build a sense of self-worth in a business milieu.

### **MANAGING COMPETITION IN SOCIAL MARKETING**

The application of the concept of social responsibility in Serbia progresses daily. It is a course to which the non-governmental organizations and foreign investors (companies) contribute most intensively, whereas the domestic companies are becoming increasingly aware that investing in social development (donations to the underprivileged segments of population, respecting employee rights, consumer protection, moral rules of the market) extending beyond the regulated business conduct (legislation) is becoming a powerful apparatus for increasing the company's reputation, i.e. building and maintaining a positive image, which is a communication goal for every company, and also a strong instrument for improving competitiveness.

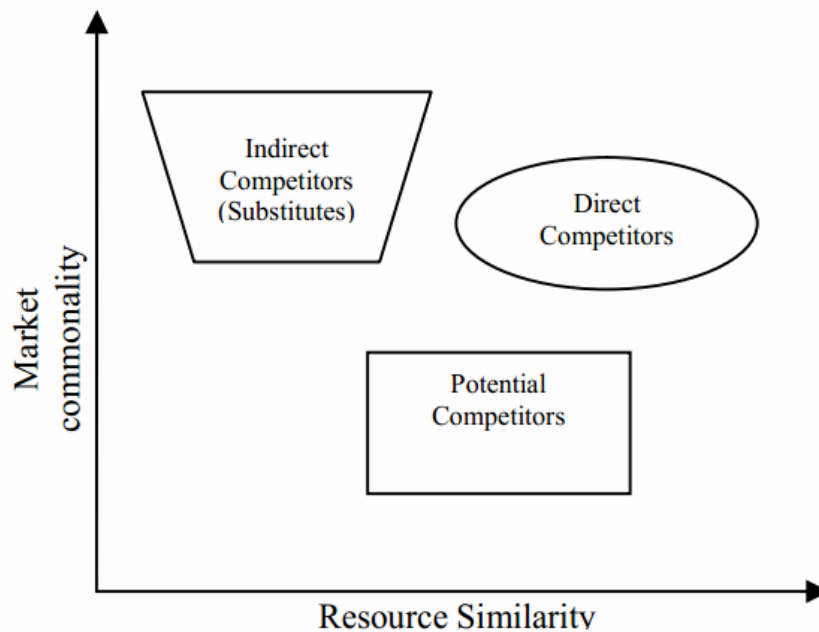
Changes in the market (among consumers, competition, in products, services and demand) require a new way of thinking and the application of innovative competitive marketing strategies. The traditional concept of competitiveness based on the market structure (product differentiation, supply concentration and barriers to entry) and company characteristics (size and sources), the later underlined necessity of researching the behaviour of strategic groups delimited according to the basic criterion of employed technology, next, the extent of vertical integration and the degree and variances in product differentiation constitute the four stages in the evolution of competitiveness. The initially employed strategies were: internal growth – developing own potentials to combine resources and make use of the organizational processes for the purpose of developing and selling final products; external – buying other companies; at present, connecting with partners (consumers, stakeholders and competitors) is used in order to build and develop relations based on trust; and time dimension – company's ability to learn based on experience, to define future courses of action, to be innovative and respond to the dynamic changes in the environment.<sup>4</sup> Today, the competition is increasingly built and maintained by the application of key competences. The application of social marketing includes identification and classification of the competition and competitive environment. Relevant relations in this context are shown in the following picture.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stanković: *Međuzavisni marketing*, Faculty of Economics, Niš, 2002, page 165

<sup>5</sup> Bergen & Peteraf: Competitor Identification and Competitor Analysis: A Broad-Based Managerial Approach, *Managerial and Decision Economics* 23, 2002, page 160.

**Figure 2:** Mapping the competitive terrain



The two dimensions used in this analysis are the level of market and market segments commonality (y-axis) and resource similarity (x-axis). The concept of market and market segments commonality requires classification of the competitors based on the extent to which they target the same or similar consumer wants or needs. The similarity of resources is associated with the level of similarity in provision and usage of all types of company's resources (capital, people, raw materials, know-how). This implies that some companies may be perceived as competitors even if they do not target the same markets or market segments, or even have the same technological platform, which makes the analysis of the competitive setting more complex and the importance of practicing social marketing even greater. Therefore, in essence, competitive advantage stands for marketing advantage, which represents the unique marketing assets of a company operating in a socially responsible manor, i.e. social marketing.

## CONCLUSION

Social Marketing is associated with the companies' obligations and decisions to increase their positive environmental impact and reduce their negative effect on the consumers and society. It is becoming increasingly apparent that it is of far greater importance for a company's survival and achievement of competitive advantage to operate in a socially responsible manner in the long run, instead of focusing on short-term cost-driven operations. Until recently, the priority for the companies was their economic sustainability, manifesting itself in profits, but along with it, social and environmental sustainability gain importance. By utilizing the concept of social responsibility, the company tends to increase its positive influence on the society as a whole and all of its segments.

Social marketing faces many problems; from consumer movements (the main social concerns being the right to safety, the right to information, the right to choice and the right to be heard), over the relations in community (the issue of equality, safety and health,

challenged members, education and general welfare) to green marketing (preserving the environment and combating water, soil and air pollution) and companies' philanthropic activities (positive attitude towards employees, consumers, suppliers, distributors, competitors and other organizations and institutions in society).

The competition that until recently prevailed among the companies now occurs among networks, and the effects emerge in companies which have successfully developed relations among established marketing networks.

### **Implications for theory and practise**

Domestic companies are becoming increasingly aware that investing in social development (donations to the marginalised population strata, respecting employee rights, consumer protection, moral rules of the market) extending beyond the regulated business conduct (i.e. legislation) is becoming a powerful apparatus for increasing the company's reputation, i.e. building and maintaining a positive image, which is a potent instrument for improving competitiveness.

In the application of strategies, socially responsible marketing requires the implementation of activities from three types of behaviour: legal, ethical and socially responsible. Today, the competition is to a greater extent built and maintained by the application of key competences.

In Serbia, the corporate social responsibility is perceived as an instrument to improve a company's reputation in the society, government, media, and especially among business partners and consumers. It is therefore perceived as one of the marketing instruments of social marketing. This concept still does not incorporate concerns such as improving the quality and conditions of labour (employee rights and standards, education), nor does it provide satisfactory cooperation with consumers, trade unions, suppliers and other stakeholders.

In Serbia, the concept of socially responsible corporate conduct is still viewed upon as philanthropy, in the form of donations and sponsorships. So it is perceived, since it builds upon the domestic culture and the tradition of benefaction and endowment. It is so perceived because it builds upon the national culture and the tradition of benefaction and endowment.

### **Contribution to science**

International marketing literature analyses and explains in detail the contemporary approach to the concepts of corporate social responsibility and marketing in social marketing. Using various terms for the essence of social responsibility and one of its segments related to marketing, marketers conceive it as adapting and conducting one of its segments related to marketing, marketers interpret it as adapting and conducting marketing activities in practice, with achieving corporate profit, consumer satisfaction and various interests of the environment, i.e. public.

The academic and professional marketing literature in Serbia is oriented to accepting and applying new marketing concepts, with appropriate adaptation to the domestic market, taking into account all the specific features of the local consumers and environment. A

growing body of research and scientific articles deal with this issue, leading to its practical implementation.

The need for corporate social responsibility and application of social marketing has become clearly defined in the Republic of Serbia over the past ten years. The practice is increasingly seeing the apparent awareness of the impact of socially responsible corporate programmes and activities, which, coupled with overall marketing activities, contribute to a positive and clear image of companies and their products and services – reputation (rated the first in the conducted research) and competitiveness (rated as the sixth at the local and international level). Positive and clear image undoubtedly contribute to a company's economic performance, i.e. profit, which further results in and influences the growth in the competitiveness of companies and their products and services. On a broader scale, implications reflect and are manifested on the image and competitiveness of the country at large.

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