

Corporate Social Responsibility at Marriott International

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In recent years, businesses worldwide have faced mounting pressure to address pressing environmental and social challenges. Among the strategies gaining traction is the adoption of circular economy principles, which emphasise resource efficiency and waste reduction. The hotel industry, known for its resource-intensive operations, is increasingly under scrutiny for its sustainability practices. This essay explores Marriott International's integration of circular economy principles into its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy, highlighting key initiatives and industry examples.

The transition to a circular economy, which champions the reuse and recycling of materials, marks a departure from the traditional linear economic model. This shift not only diminishes environmental impact but also unlocks economic opportunities for businesses (European Union, 2023). Such a move towards sustainability resonates with the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social.

Environmental sustainability underscores the vital need to preserve natural ecosystems, curb pollution, and conserve resources to safeguard the planet's health for future generations. Economic sustainability emphasises fostering growth and development while ensuring fair resource allocation and efficiency, without jeopardising the prospects of succeeding generations. Lastly, social sustainability prioritises equity, justice, and societal well-being, ensuring universal access to necessities and opportunities for meaningful participation in society.

Building upon these principles of sustainability, the Brundtland Commission, convened by the United Nations, issued a groundbreaking report in 1987 titled 'Our Common Future'. This report introduced the concept of sustainable development to the global agenda, defining it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

This report catalysed efforts to achieve sustainable development goals at various levels, laying the foundation for global action. Subsequent initiatives, such as the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), demonstrate a growing global consensus on environmental and social issues. These initiatives, alongside agreements like the Johannesburg Declaration (2002) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015), reaffirm commitments to sustainability and environmental stewardship.

Within this broader context of sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) emerges as a framework for businesses to integrate sustainability into their operations. The principles of CSR, with roots dating back further than its formal inception by economist Howard Bowen in 1953, align with the ethos of sustainability. Integrating circular economy principles into CSR strategies allows companies to demonstrate their commitment to responsible business practices while addressing environmental, economic, and social concerns (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017:764).

Similar to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Archie Carroll developed the Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (2016) which delineated different levels of responsibility, from economic and legal obligations to ethical and philanthropic initiatives. It aids businesses to ensure their activities are not only profitable, but also ethical, legally compliant and socially responsible. CSR serves as a potent tool for enhancing a hotel's reputation and brand image (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2021). Meeting customer expectations regarding ethical operations, environmental sustainability, and community engagement is crucial for hotels aiming to maintain high satisfaction levels and attract discerning guests (Ibid).

Moreover, CSR initiatives within the hospitality sector play a crucial role in addressing longstanding challenges such as boosting employee engagement and retention (Vuong and Bui, 2023; Ghani et al., 2022).

Marriott International, a global leader in the hospitality industry, demonstrates its commitment to CSR through their 'Serve 360: Doing Good in Every Direction' platform (2024). This initiative is in alignment with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Jenns, 2023). Through the 'Serve 360' platform, Marriott sets ambitious targets aimed at creating positive impacts across a diverse range of stakeholders, including employees, communities, and the environment.

For instance, Marriott pledges 15 million hours of volunteer service by 2025 as part of its community engagement strategy. This includes efforts to support at-risk and disadvantaged children and youth, focusing on developing their skills, enhancing employability, and supporting their overall well-being (Marriott, 2024). This initiative covers thirteen of the United Nations' SDGs (United Nations, 2024a).

Another facet of Marriott's sustainability agenda, which aligns with five of the United Nations' SDGs, involves a concerted effort to mitigate its environmental impact. This initiative aims to reduce water consumption, carbon intensity, waste sent to landfill, and food waste across Marriott's portfolio (Marriott, 2024).

From its inception in 1927, an era when CSR practices were not as prevalent, Marriott distinguished itself by its founder's motto, "Take care of your staff, and the rest will take care of itself" (Marriott, 2024).

Recognising that employees are integral to the company's success, Marriott implements various initiatives to support their well-being and professional development. This holistic approach to employee care is evident through Marriott's comprehensive benefits package, which includes healthcare coverage, retirement plans, and wellness programs aimed at supporting associates' physical and mental health. During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Marriott demonstrated its commitment to employee well-being by providing health insurance for furloughed associates, ensuring they had access to essential healthcare services. Additionally, Marriott prioritises work-life balance by offering flexible work arrangements and generous parental leave policies, allowing associates to manage their personal and professional responsibilities effectively (Marriott, 2024).

Furthermore, Marriott has demonstrated a commitment to addressing social issues, including human trafficking within the hotel industry. Since 2016, the company has diligently trained over one million associates to identify and respond to signs of human trafficking, underscoring its commitment to social responsibility and community welfare (Ibid).

Hilton Worldwide. Marriott's main competitor, also prioritises its associates' well-being and professional development through their 'Travel with Purpose' platform (Hilton, 2024). Both companies consistently rank as top employers in prestigious lists such as 'Fortune's Best Companies to Work for' and the 'World's Most Admired Companies' (Singal and Rhou, 2017). By investing in their employees' success and fostering a positive work environment, both Marriott and Hilton not only enhance employee satisfaction and retention but also reinforce their position as responsible corporate citizens committed to supporting their workforce and communities (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Expanding upon CSR initiatives, addressing food waste emerges as another crucial aspect within the hospitality industry. According to UNEP's Food Waste Index Report 2024, a staggering 1.05 billion tonnes of food is wasted globally each year, with the hotel industry alone contributing 79,000 tons, 40% of which originates from the customer level (Bhajan et al., 2022).

Food waste issues persist due to various factors, including inefficient procurement processes, overproduction in food preparation, and inadequate management of food storage and leftovers (Mettler, 2023). Hotels need to adopt holistic approaches to sustainability that encompass responsible sourcing and efficient food management strategies. This may involve implementing measures such as portion control, menu optimisation, food waste tracking systems, and partnerships with food banks or local charities to redistribute surplus food to those in need, as well as educating guests (Ibid).

Collaborative efforts such as the 'Courtauld Commitment 2030', aligned with SDG targets, facilitates collaborative efforts across the entire UK food chain. 'From Farm to Fork', aims to achieve reductions in food waste, greenhouse gas emissions, and water usage from farm to fork, aligning with global environmental goals (Wrap, 2024).

Marriott International stands out as a pioneer in the hospitality industry, leading the way with innovative 'eco-conscious' initiatives. Their London Heathrow branch epitomises their commitment to sustainability, with a focus on green practices and zero-waste initiatives. Their 'Food Waste Lab' initiative breathes new life into discarded items, creating dishes from banana and watermelon skins, and crafting soaps and body scrubs from coffee grounds and citrus peels, as well as vegetable peel flour to make breads and pastries. This approach means they "not only reduce waste but also infuse dishes with added nutrients and a unique flavour profile" (Marriott, 2023).

Despite efforts made, food wastage remains a significant challenge for Marriott and the broader hotel industry, reflecting a gap in their CSR strategies. A potential avenue for ad could involve Marriott adopting initiatives similar to Hilton's Green Ramadan (Hilton, 2024).

This initiative was introduced in response to reports from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) indicating a concerning increase in food waste ranging from 25 to 50% during religious and social festivities in Muslim countries (UNEP, 2021). During Ramadan, efforts to address food wastage were heightened, examples include composting excess food, promoting plant-based options, restricting the use of single-use plastics, and implementing Winnow's AI technology to measure and manage food waste more effectively. Additionally, menus showcased UNEP Recipe of Change messages, empowering guests to make climate-smart choices.

Environmental conservation is another crucial aspect of CSR initiatives within the hotel industry. Given that tourism ranks as the world's largest industry, the preservation and management of natural and built environments emerge as paramount strategic goals for the sector's future growth and development (Edgell, 2020).

Marriott has developed a comprehensive global water strategy that tailors programs and projects to specific property attributes and locations while managing water-related risks (Marriott, 2023). For example JW Marriott Phoenix Desert Ridge Resort & Spa's replacement of grass with turf, saving approximately 1.5 million gallons of water annually (ibid). Additionally, the Le Méridien Maldives Resort & Spa received the Green Mark GOLDPLUS award for sustainability efforts, including a desalination plant that converts seawater into fresh drinking water (ibid).

Another example of Marriotts waste reduction initiative validated by the Science Based Targets (2024) involves recycling plastic, not only to mitigate environmental impacts but also to raise funds for children battling cancer (ibid). They are also actively phasing out single-use items through their 'Residential-Sized Bath Amenities Program', opting for larger pump-topped bottles for toiletries. These initiatives demonstrate how Marriott properties integrate environmental stewardship with social responsibility, while also appealing to environmentally conscious travellers.

However, Marriott is yet to boast they are diverting 99.9% of their operational waste from landfill, which is exactly what budget chain Premier Inn are doing (Whitbred, 2024).

Premier Inn actively involves guests in waste segregation efforts within their rooms, a strategy that may be well-suited for a budget chain but may not align with the expectations of guests staying at luxury brands like Marriott International.

Amidst significant shifts in corporate strategies and policies, there has been a parallel evolution in the attitudes and behaviours of everyday consumers. Numerous studies have concluded that guests are willing to pay a premium for green hotels (Nelson et al., 2021; Damigos, 2023). Figures such as Greta Thunberg (2024), and David Attenborough (2024) have sparked a global movement, advocating for greater environmental consciousness and corporate accountability. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 underscored the interconnectedness of global issues, prompting a heightened awareness of the need for sustainable practices (Vo et al, 2023). Also, there is a heightened demand for corporate accountability, as consumers seek transparency and ethical business practices from the companies they support (Martins, 2023).

Furthermore, Whelan and Kronthal-Sacco, (2019) discuss research by Harvard Business Review indicating that brands marketed as sustainable are experiencing faster growth compared to traditional competitors. Notably, a significant portion of millennials prioritises sustainability when choosing employers, with 40% selecting companies based on their sustainability performance. Additionally, 70% of millennials express a preference for staying with companies that have strong environmental reputations and policies, again highlighting the importance of sustainability in attracting and retaining talent and guests alike.

Implementing CSR practices within the hotel industry presents numerous challenges despite the evident benefits. One significant obstacle is the economic challenge linked to transitioning to sustainable practices. The initial costs of implementation may be daunting for businesses, particularly smaller enterprises with limited resources. Moreover, concerns about potential impacts on profitability and competitiveness, especially in industries with thin profit margins, may dissuade some businesses from investing in sustainability. Moreover, the lack of standardised metrics and reporting frameworks for CSR performance assessment may impede effective implementation and benchmarking efforts.

In conclusion, Corporate Social Responsibility is pivotal in advancing sustainability within the hospitality industry. Through its CSR initiatives, Marriott International demonstrates a commitment to responsible business practices and environmental stewardship, showcasing dedication to social responsibility, ethical conduct, and innovative strategies. Through CSR, hotels can significantly impact sustainability practices by addressing crucial areas, prioritising responsible sourcing, energy efficiency, waste reduction, and community engagement, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

However, implementing effective CSR policies in the hospitality sector comes with its challenges. Economic constraints, lack of standardised metrics, and resistance to change are among the hurdles that hotels may face. Overcoming these challenges requires commitment, collaboration, and innovative solutions.

Despite the challenges, the opportunities associated with CSR in the hospitality industry are substantial. CSR initiatives not only enhance a hotel's reputation and brand image but also lead to cost savings, operational efficiencies, and increased customer loyalty. Moreover, CSR aligns with the growing demand for sustainable practices among consumers and stakeholders, positioning hotels for long-term success.

Ultimately, CSR in the hotel industry is not just about mitigating environmental impact or improving operational efficiency or safeguarding reputation, it is about fostering a culture of responsibility, innovation, and positive social impact. As Marriott International and other industry leaders continue to navigate the complexities of their CSR programmes, they set a precedent for driving meaningful change and shaping a more sustainable future for the hospitality sector.

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