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THE RHETORIC OF
BUSINESS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
IN NEW ZEALAND

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
Management and Communication
Massey University
Palmerston North
New Zealand

Robyn Jane Walker
2003



23 September 2003

CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that the research carried out for the Doctoral thesis entitled *The Rhetoric of Business Social Responsibility in New Zealand* in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Massey University, New Zealand is my own work and that thesis material has not been used in part or in whole for any other qualification.

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23 September 2003

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on how business social responsibility is constituted and enacted in New Zealand. It comprises a case study of Hubbard Foods Limited, using rhetorical analysis to examine the business texts related to the company, many of which are produced by and about owner-manager Dick Hubbard, a key exponent of business social responsibility.

Three distinctive approaches to rhetorical analysis are used in this study: role analysis, dramatism and cultural analysis. Role analysis examines how business social responsibility is constituted through the central communication tool of Hubbard Foods Limited, *Clipboard*. Application of Beason's (1991) framework enables exploration of how Hubbard attempts to persuade others, through the written text, of his own credibility and his vision of business social responsibility. Dramatistic analysis (Burke, 1969a) examines text as drama, focusing on a company event – a staff trip from New Zealand to Samoa. Analysis of the drama reveals how staff members are cast as co-actors engaging in a public enactment of business social responsibility. Cultural analysis is used to compare and contrast the narratives of Dick Hubbard and counter agent Roger Kerr, Executive Director of the New Zealand Business Roundtable. Points of compatibility between Hubbard and Kerr are apparent in both the basic assumptions upon which their positions are founded and in the images and archetypes they draw upon to legitimise their claims about business social responsibility. In particular, analysis reveals that both actors draw upon religious imagery.

Rhetorical analysis of Hubbard Foods Limited business text extends current conceptions of business social responsibility in a number of ways. The findings suggest a blurring of the business and society distinction, as Hubbard's rhetoric constitutes business as part of society. Analysis of textual strategies reveal aspects of the transactive process associated with business social responsibility, highlighting the importance of managers' personal moral engagement with the implications and consequences of their business decisions, thus challenging contemporary tendencies to objectify social responsibility. The case study of Hubbard Foods Limited serves to draw attention to the centrality of trust to conceptions of business social responsibility and to the way Hubbard humanises the idea.

The thesis proposes a 'definition' of business social responsibility in New Zealand whereby it is characterized as a process of negotiation that accommodates inconsistencies and contradictions. It identifies implications of this finding for managers and for business and society research. Finally, it urges business and society researchers to acknowledge the value of interpretive approaches to complement and enrich the current scholarship.

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