

GETTING BETTER AT WHAT WE WANT TO DO

Why does Shared Interest produce social accounts?

David Parker explains following an interview with Tracy Mitchell, leader of the social reporting team

Each year we devote a large amount of staff time to collecting and analysing data which is published in a long report posted to our website and which, we suspect, very few people ever read.

Why do we produce social accounts? Because the many benefits amply reward the investment in time and effort. Social reporting helps us get better at doing what we really want to do - changing lives. And each year we do it the process is easier and more effective.

Shared Interest is a social enterprise. Our members are more interested in the social impact of their investments than in the financial returns. We can only improve the social impact we have if we fully understand it.

One reason for conducting social accounting and audit is to 'prove' that your organisation does good. Individual members of Shared Interest have not, so far, demanded such proof, but as membership grows some might, especially as we start to attract more corporate support.

Our social accounts also have a promotional value. Although few people read the whole report, a summary is included in our Annual Review which is sent to all members, potential members, customers and anyone else who is interested in our work. The fact that we produce social accounts and have them independently audited identifies us as a responsible and open enterprise. Shared Interest's social accounts have helped the organisation to win a series of awards for transparent reporting. It is also likely that the evidence of our social impact contributed to winning the Queen's Award for Enterprise: Sustainable Development 2008.

The main benefit of keeping social accounts is that it improves the performance and development of the business. Much of the development work we are doing now - increasing our customer base, improving our assessment of economic

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impact, developing the producer training programme, expanding our regional presence, and further improving our communication with customers - was flagged up as recommendations in previous social accounts.

Now that we are well into the fourth year of social reporting

almost all the procedures for collecting and recording data (eg, feedback from customers, details of business travel, interactions with other fair trade organisations etc) are embedded in our day-to-day business operations. Less and less information is being collected just for use in the social accounts.

Shared Interest is working with other UK organisations involved in fair trade including the Fairtrade Foundation, Traidcraft, Cafédirect, Twin, Oxfam and Comic Relief to develop agreed ways of measuring social impact. One of the aims is that all the organisations will collect and compile their data in the same form and share it with each other. One benefit of this common approach should be that producer groups do not get asked the same questions again and again.

Social auditing and analysing social return on investment are rising rapidly up the UK political agenda. It is becoming

increasingly necessary for social enterprises and charities to demonstrate that they really do deliver social benefits.

The Social Audit Network, the UK's leading social reporting organisation, has just published a research report on social accounting in Britain. Shared Interest was identified in a case study as one of the few social enterprises that is publishing independently audited social accounts every year. Once again Shared Interest is among the leaders of a new way of doing business.

Download Shared Interest's 2007 social accounts from www.shared-interest.com/files/soc_ac_07_final.pdf



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