

Fairtrade fortnight special: Shopping For a Better World Part 2

The first group - radically alternative companies - support fair trade, sustainable production methods, co-operation with workers, south-south linkages, consumer networks, people-to-people exchanges, mixed stakeholder and participatory ownership, profit which is not private profit and a basic philosophy which is not profit-orientated. The second, altruistic, group are conventional companies that are trying to look good. They adopt codes of conduct or advertise themselves through a connection with an international non-profit organisation and may donate a small amount of profits to help fund the charity work. Finally there are the renegades, who refuse to acknowledge the social and environmental costs of their activities and argue for the neutrality and fairness of the free market mechanism.

The interaction and relative commercial success of these different types of company are at the heart of the battle for the future market. The altruistic company is likely to adopt the language and imagery of the alternative company and confuse consumers. The renegade will likely aim to tackle both the altruistic and the alternative by using punitive and competitive pricing and sustained PR strategies. Monsanto, for instance, tried the latter and is accused of using the law to scare off campaigners.

The crucial difference between an alternative and an altruistic company is that an alternative company seeks to change the unequal relationships between primary producers and the consumers, using the brand as the means not the end. Its whole purpose is to reorganise the production chain on a fair and egalitarian basis.

The altruistic company by contrast leaves the inequalities of the production chain virtually untouched. Trade unions, NGOs, fair traders and campaigning organisations have all needed to work in varying proportions both in and against the market. To change the terms of trade in the market place is a big challenge because there are no single entities to take on or to work through.

Potentially the most successful strategy is a pincer movement between consumer campaigns and companies that illustrate alternatives. There have been some successes, albeit partial. The campaign over genetically modified food is the most dramatic. Its impact is reinforced by a growing sector of alternative, organic agricultural companies. Shell seems to have decided it could not win the argument and maybe felt that nobody bright and conscientious would want to work for it in the future. The judges who heard McDonald's appeal against the critical judgement of the McLibel judge reconfirmed the original verdict in favour of Steel and Morris on the central issues of low pay, low nutrition and misleading appeals to children. Other companies which resist the social and economic justice agenda have started to see what's coming from the campaigns and the extent to which consumers are prepared to stand up and be counted.

Certainly, a rethinking of the market is under way but how far do these campaigns and initiatives break out of the totalitarianism by which we are told there is simply one kind of market? What is a rethought market? Have the new campaigns and companies achieved anything?

The successful campaigns and actions have key features in common. They work at a level of deeper knowledge - for example a suspicion that genetic modification is intrinsically dangerous or an understanding that the market mechanism has an inbuilt limitation and cannot respect the universal need for a living wage. They aim to achieve a widespread understanding of an issue through education and argument. They counterbalance their critique with specific, 'do-able' actions. They nurture solidarity and resist the zero-sum game mentality of the global market which argues that jobs in Asia equals job losses in the UK.

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About the Author

Davinus Greeno works for the [organic food](#) and [ethical clothes](#) directory that lists 100s of Organic and Ethical Companies and we also have [Health Articles](#) for you to read or publish.