

Press release

RISE AND FALL OF CONSUMER INTEREST IN ETHICAL BUSINESS
British public interest in ethical business issues remains mainstream despite decline from 2007 peak

Today sees the release of a wide-ranging research study examining British public attitudes to social, environmental and ethical (SEE) issues relating to business and consumption.

The research was conducted by Ipsos MORI for business labelling organisation SEE What You Are Buying Into. Comparative studies were carried out in 2005, 2007 and 2009. Key findings include:-

- 56% of people are currently prepared to pay a little extra for products which meet higher ethical standards (compared to 63% in 2005 and 68% in 2007).
- 71% think that it's difficult to know which products meet such standards. Further, people remain sceptical of business motives: 73% of people believe that many companies pretend to be ethical just to sell more products.
- Given the choice, 53% would only work for a company which was both ethical and environmentally responsible (compared to 64% in 2005 and 66% in 2007).
- Breakdowns by age, sex, social class and geographical region show significant variation. For example, while men are more prepared to pay extra for ethical products, women place more importance on working for a responsible company.

Michael Solomon, director of SEE What You Are Buying Into, comments: "Given intense pressure on household budgets and soaring unemployment, it is little surprise that people are less ready to consider social, environmental and ethical (SEE) issues when spending money or seeking employment. However, we were surprised by the general decline in public interest in SEE issues since 2007, which cannot be explained away by the recession alone.

"In recent years, we have witnessed the mainstreaming of CR (corporate responsibility), organic and fair trade, and the emergence of new endeavours such as carbon offsetting. But the majority of people still find it difficult to decide which products or companies are genuinely ethical and which labels to trust. I think this is due to a combination of factors, such as deep suspicion of business' motives and an overload of often contradictory claims and information. Given that the Fairtrade Mark will soon adorn Kit Kats, made by Nestlé, reportedly the most boycotted company in the UK, perhaps consumers can be forgiven for being unsure."

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Technical Note: Ipsos MORI conducted face-to-face surveys among a nationally representative quota sample of 983 adults aged 15+ at 155 sampling points throughout Great Britain. Interviews were conducted from 11th-17th September 2009. Data have been weighted to match the profile of the population by sex, age, social grade, region, working status, housing tenure and ethnicity. (The 2005 research was conducted from 13th May-19th May 2005 with a quota sample of 910. The 2007 research was conducted from 31st August-6th September 2007 with a quota sample of 969.)

The SEE What You Are Buying Into labelling scheme identifies businesses that are honest and open on a range of social, environmental, and ethical (SEE) issues. It harnesses consumer influence as a means to promote business transparency and accountability and drive up standards of SEE practice. SEE What You Are Buying Into will unveil its first 100 participating businesses and formally launch in early 2010.

Of the fifteen businesses that commented on the research results (see pages 24 and 25 of the report), the majority are available for further comment.