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## THE USE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SHAPING THE IMAGE AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF DAIRY ENTERPRISES IN POLAND®

Zastosowanie społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu w kształtowaniu  
 wizerunku i przewagi konkurencyjnej przedsiębiorstw mleczarskich  
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*CSR (corporate social responsibility), i.e. corporate social responsibility is understood as the concept of enterprise management, consisting of conscious and sustainable action. Currently, issues related to the use of CSR is the subject of many studies and analyzes, because nowadays corporate social responsibility is an important factor in shaping the image and competitive advantage on the market. The aim of the article was to analyze and evaluate the application of the concept of corporate social responsibility in dairy enterprises in Poland in shaping the image and competitive advantage. The article's literature was used to define the concept of CSR and social responsibility reports published by leading dairy enterprises in Poland. The article uses simple descriptive and cause-and-effect methods. Based on the analyzes carried out, it was found that CSR has a global dimension, and the benefits it brings to enterprises, employees, the local community and the environment are significant. There was a positive perception among Polish society of dairy enterprises that implemented CSR activities, which contributes to increasing the stability of these enterprises. The article is a voice in the discussion on showing opportunities and creating competitive advantages in the aspect of social innovations and changing business models.*

**Key words:** corporate social responsibility, milk market, competitiveness, image.

*CSR (corporate social responsibility), czyli społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu rozumiana jest jako koncepcja zarządzania przedsiębiorstwem, polegająca na świadomym i zrównoważonym działaniu. Obecnie zagadnienia związane z zastosowaniem CSR jest przedmiotem wielu badań i analiz, gdyż współcześnie społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu jest ważnym czynnikiem w kształtowaniu wizerunku oraz przewagi konkurencyjnej na rynku. Celem artykułu była analiza i ocena zastosowania koncepcji społecznej odpowiedzialności w przedsiębiorstwach mleczarskich w Polsce w kształtowaniu wizerunku i przewagi konkurencyjnej. W opracowaniu artykułu wykorzystano literaturę przedmiotu, która posłużyła do zdefiniowania koncepcji CSR oraz raporty społecznej odpowiedzialności opublikowane przez przodujące przedsiębiorstwa mleczarskie w Polsce. W artykule zastosowano proste metody opisowe i przyczynowo-skutkowe. Na podstawie przeprowadzonych analiz stwierdzono, że CSR ma wymiar globalny, a korzyści, które niesie dla przedsiębiorstw, pracowników, społeczności lokalnej oraz środowiska są znaczące. Zaobserwowano pozytywne postrzeżenie wśród społeczeństwa polskich przedsiębiorstw mleczarskich, które wdrożyły działania CSR, co przyczynia się do zwiększenia stabilności funkcjonowania tych przedsiębiorstw. Artykuł stanowi głos w dyskusji w zakresie pokazywania możliwości i tworzenia przewag konkurencyjnych w aspekcie innowacji społecznych i zmieniających się modeli biznesowych.*

**Słowa kluczowe:** społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu, rynek mleka, konkurencyjność, wizerunek.

### INTRODUCTION

Issues of corporate social responsibility – CSR (ang. *Corporate Social Responsibility*) aroused interest from the very beginning of the establishment of the first enterprises that applied relevant provisions and rules in this respect. The first definitions of the concept of corporate social responsibility

appeared at the end of the 19th century. The mainstream corporate social responsibility has remained unchanged for decades, placing the main emphasis in business operations on caring for self-interest, while combining it with simultaneous attention to ensuring benefits for its stakeholders. Modern enterprises are obliged to comply with the principles

consistent with corporate social responsibility, and their prestige and credibility are subject to evaluation and criticism of the society. Society requires companies to apply generally accepted norms and rules of conduct in their activities and puts pressure to properly implement their commitments. To this end, enterprises use appropriate codes of conduct, conduct their activities in a transparent manner and often employ employees responsible for performing such tasks in specialized organizational units [4].

Poland's accession to the structures of the European Union meant that Polish enterprises, including the dairy industry, belong to the single European market, which is characterized by increased competition for acquiring a customer for whom products of the highest quality and safe for health are key [5, 10]. Poland's accession to the European Union has contributed to carrying out adaptation activities in the food industry, including the dairy industry to meet EU requirements. Actions taken mainly concerned the modernization of technology, adaptation of hygiene and veterinary standards, as well as requirements in the field of improving animal welfare and environmental protection. All these activities were undertaken to build a competitive advantage of enterprises by improving the quality of health-safe products [10]. One of such tools in building competitive advantage of enterprises may also be the use of corporate social responsibility, which is currently the subject of many studies and analyzes, and its application contributes to improving the company's image.

The dairy industry is one of the industries in the food industry that uses the CSR tool. The dairy industry is one of the basic divisions of the domestic agri-food sector. In Poland, milk is one of the most important agricultural products – it has the highest share (16.3% in 2015) in agricultural commodity production [7, 10]. The Polish dairy industry is a permanent source of income for people working in this sector and guarantees food for a significant number of farms [6, 7].

**The aim of the article was to analyze and evaluate the application of the concept of corporate social responsibility in dairy enterprises in Poland in shaping the image and competitive advantage. As part of the research, the importance of corporate social responsibility as the development potential and competitive advantage of dairy industry plants in Poland was determined.**

## CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN DEFINITION

CSR is an acronym for the words Corporate Social Responsibility. In recent years, the concept of CSR has become the subject of research and analysis by economists, but also lawyers, political scientists and business ethics. The concept of CSR is characterized by interdisciplinarity, which indicates the necessity to integrate and combine knowledge in various fields of science and business practice [3].

The idea of CSR is based on the concept of sustainable development created in the United States and Western Europe at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, according to which it is believed that in economic development, apart from the economic aspect, the social and ecological aspect are also important [3]. According to Bogdanienko, "social commitment allows striving to maintain a balance between the economic,

ecological and social aspects in the enterprise's operations, which can contribute to achieving sustainable development goals such as protecting natural resources and maintaining the stability of ecosystems, with all positive effects in the form of improvement the state of human health and the improvement of overall safety and well-being"[2].

In terms of definition, the concept of social responsibility has no strict definition. As part of the review of the definition of the concept of corporate social responsibility, it was found that their mainstream concerns social sciences, in particular economics, sociology and philosophy. For the purposes of the presented study, the most suitable and suited to the agri-food sector were selected. In institutional terms, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development CSR defines as a continuous commitment of the company that contributes to economic development, while improving the quality of life of employees, their families and society "[4, 14]. In accordance with ISO 26000, CSR is defined as the organization's responsibility for the impact of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behavior that:

- contributes to sustainable development, including the health and well-being of society;
- takes into account the expectations of stakeholders (individuals or groups who are interested in the decisions or activities of the organization);
- compliant with applicable law and consistent with international standards of conduct;
- it is integrated with the organization's activities and practiced in activities undertaken within its sphere of influence [11].

Contemporary CSR strategies are built at different levels: company, region, country, supranational communities, and their goal is to take on such challenges as: climate change, environmental degradation, social exclusion, poverty [4, 8]. Currently, there is no specific definition that would explain exactly what corporate social responsibility is. One of the most current CSR terms is the Rybak task, where it states that as part of corporate social responsibility, "management is required to choose such decisions and actions that contribute to both caring for self-interest and protecting and multiplying social well-being" [4, 12].

CSR does not apply only to large companies, as the *corporate* name might indicate, but also to small and medium-sized enterprises. CSR has a universal dimension, where sustainable development plays a key role [3]. Problems that are dealt with by corporate social responsibility are considered from a legal, economic and ecological point of view. In turn, when considering the food industry as a branch of the agri-food sector, it is necessary to emphasize the legitimacy of implementing the principles of corporate social responsibility in the dairy industry, which faces the challenge of satisfying the needs of consumers who, due to their health conditions, such as lactose intolerance, cannot consume dairy products. Consumers are increasingly interested in consuming healthy products, produced in conditions accepted by the society, usually including pro-ecological and pro-environmental measures. Manufacturers of dairy products more and more often react to changes in trends applicable to consumed food,

respect the standards in force in the production of so-called healthy products, care for the environment and try to implement and apply more modern CSR management strategies. Many of them, like Danone and Mlekovita, implement social projects focused on meeting CSR principles in a long-term manner, which should result in the right dimension of their effectiveness in the future. The concept of corporate social responsibility is positively received by producers operating in the food industry, who believe that by using it they increase the image of the company, as well as contribute to creating a positive image of the company and strengthening their economic position [1, 4].

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research material mainly included literature on the subject, which contributed to the definition of the concept of corporate social responsibility, as well as reports on corporate social responsibility published by leading dairy enterprises in Poland, which allowed to determine the impact of implemented CSR strategies on shaping the competitive advantage and image of dairy enterprises belonging to “TOP 10” lists, such as MLEKOVITA, Mlekpol, Polmlek, Lacpol, Spomlek, Sierpc, Koło, and Gostyń. As part of the article, the following research problem was demonstrated: CSR activities are positively correlated with economic results and export activity in dairy enterprises. When presenting the test results, the descriptive and cause-effect methods were used, including tables and drawings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Poland, the leaders in the dairy industry are enterprises located mainly in Podlasie, which include Mlekovita (based in Wysokie Mazowieckie), Mlekpol (with headquarters in Grajewo) and Okręgowa Spółdzielnia Mleczarska Piątnica. Other major dairy enterprises located throughout Poland include: Polmlek, Lacpol, Spomlek, Sierpc, OSM Koło, OSM Gostyń and companies with foreign capital such as: Danone and Hochland. The dynamic development of Podlasie dairy industry has been observed for a long time. An example is, among others, a significant number of cheeses included in the list of traditional products of the Ministry of Agriculture. Swiss type Hajnowo curd, cheese from Wizajno and homemade “Koryciński” cheese. Podlasie dairy companies also offer numerous product innovations, e.g. Mlekpol offers dairy products without lactose, and Mlekovita, which offers over 800 products, is the only company producing ice cream on an industrial scale in Podlasie. In 2015 alone, 116 new products were launched [13].

In recent years, it can be seen that the strategy of corporate social responsibility is gaining

importance in the food market, including the dairy industry. The leader in Poland in implementing CSR tools in the dairy industry is Danone, in which the first corporate social responsibility activities were introduced in the early 1990s. Mlekovita, on the other hand, has become a leader on the milk market since 2014, which owes its strong position to having 19 production dairy companies throughout Poland. Figure 1 below presents the ranking of the 10 largest producers in the dairy industry in Poland in 2009–2017 (at the bottom of the figure the position of the given company in the ranking in the figure is marked).

The figure shows the positions of the 10 largest dairy enterprises in Poland in 2009–2017 depending on the marketing trends. Based on Figure 1, it can be concluded that in 2017 the leading dairy enterprises in Poland were in order, Mlekovita, then Polmlek, Mlekpol, OSM Łowicz, Lacpol, OSM Piątnica, Spomlek, OSM Koło, Lactalis, OSM Gostyń. It would seem that dairy companies without foreign capital that compete with leading major dairy companies, such as Danone, Dr. Oetker or Hochland, may go bankrupt. However, since 2004, after Poland’s accession to the EU structure, the cooperative of dairy enterprises has proved to be a global phenomenon, and dairy enterprises with foreign capital began to lose recognition of customers, which deteriorated their financial results. Some dairy companies began to lose their profitability, therefore some of them were taken over by Mlekovita, Mlekpol and Polmlek, whose total revenues could already exceed PLN 10 billion [13, 28].

One of the key aspects that dynamically evolved after Poland’s accession to the EU structures in the dairy industry is the concept of corporate social responsibility. The aspect of social responsibility is decisive in the food market. The leader in the introduction and development of the concept of corporate social responsibility in the Polish dairy industry is Danone, which used the first CSR tools in Poland in 1992 [13, 16]. The Danone Group was founded in 1973 from the merger of BSN (manufacturer of glass packaging and beverages) and Geravis Danone (food producer). It has been operating under its current name since 1994. During over 30 years of operation,

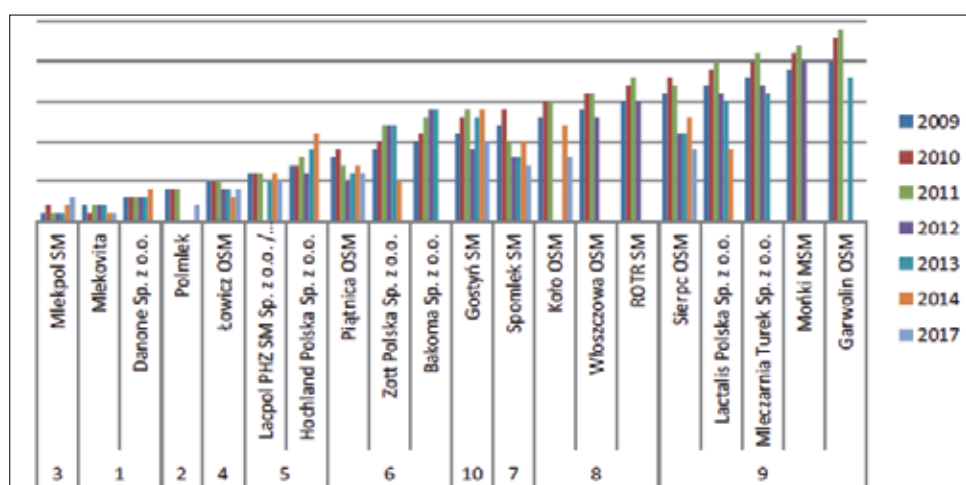


Fig. 1. The 10 largest producers in the dairy industry in Poland in 2009–2017.

Rys. 1. 10 największych producentów w branży mleczarskiej w Polsce w latach 2009–2017.

Source: Based on [13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28]

Źródło: Na podstawie: [13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28]

it has become one of the largest food companies in the world. Danone products have been available on the Polish market since 1990. Initially, they were only imported, but at the end of 1992 it was decided to start production in Poland, in a Warsaw factory – in rented halls of Zakład Mleczarski Wola, which was bought two years later. In 1995, Danone was enriched with another factory – in Bieruń, Silesia. The company's range includes products intended for children, the elderly, as well as brands that bring health benefits to people with digestive problems or elevated cholesterol. All products manufactured in factories in Poland are made exclusively from Polish milk. Danone's suppliers ensure the highest quality milk, which guarantees the safety of products made from it [18]. Corporate social responsibility of Danone is an inseparable element of its functioning on the market, achieving business goals and building value [18]. This strategy is closely integrated with the business development strategy, which assumes being the most caring brand chosen by consumers every day, a reliable, trustworthy and responsible company that cares about health, people and the environment. Its main goal is to build consumer loyalty and increase sales. As part of it, the Danone Sustainable Development Plan 2012–2016 was developed and implemented, in which offering products meeting the diverse needs of consumers, supporting proper nutrition, promoting an active lifestyle and combating child malnutrition were adopted as priorities. Its implementation means that the company engages employees in building responsible business, raises standards of cooperation with suppliers and customers, cares for natural resources and sustainable agriculture [9]. As part of the concept of sustainable development and CSR, Danone has implemented the following activities in its enterprises:

- packaging innovations that have enabled the use of packaging that does not pollute the environment,
- innovations in animal nutrition with appropriate feeds, noting the harmful effects of methane,

- care for employee development, creating a friendly organizational culture,
- regular payments to farmers, assistance in the development of suppliers,
- responsible transport, e.g. wall-to-wall factory, for Actimel products, packaging is produced next to the yogurt production site; planning transport routes in such a way as to reduce the number of kilometers driven, thus optimizing the loading of goods,
- promoting a culture of sales and consumption, building lasting business relationships,
- promoting knowledge about the proper storage of products, placing products on the market in response to diagnosed nutritional and health needs of Poles,
- introducing functional products such as: Danonki, Danacol, Activia, Actimel, i.e. nutrients to have a beneficial effect on the body,
- launching the “Share your meal” campaign – combating malnutrition of children in Poland,
- the emergence of a new trend in innovation – the “Milky Start” cereal product created in cooperation with the Mother and Child Institute, Lubella and Biedronka;
- measurable and documented results of water and energy consumption reduction creating a new environmental strategy [16].

On the example of Danone, which applied the concept of CSR to an advanced extent, in accordance with OECD guidelines, many Polish leading dairy enterprises began to apply the CSR concept in their own enterprise. However, in most cases dairy enterprises implemented CSR tools in the philanthropic and marketing aspect, departing from the strategic model of the concept of corporate social responsibility. The degree of implementation of the CSR concept in the dominant Polish dairy enterprises is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Approach to the aspect of corporate social responsibility among the top 10 dairy enterprises in Poland**

**Tabela 1. Podejście do aspektu społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu wśród 10 najważniejszych przedsiębiorstw mleczarskich w Polsce**

Place in the 2017 ranking	Dairy plant	CSR section on the website	The person responsible for CSR	CSR policy	Mission and values	Social report	CSR products – market	CSR environment / development	CSR employees	CSR Society	Certificates and awards
1.	Mlekovita SM										
2.	Mlekpól SM										
3.	Danone Sp. z o.o.										
4.	Polmlek										
5.	Lacpól PHZ SM Sp. z o.o.										
6.	Piątnica OSM										
7.	Spomlek OSM										
8.	Koło OSM										
9.	Sierpc OSM										
10.	Gostyń SM										

**Source:** Based on [13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28]

**Źródło:** Na podstawie [13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28]



Based on Table 1, it can be concluded that of the 10 dominant dairy enterprises in Poland, only Danone informs the consumer about the use of CSR practices using developed social reports and placing information on its own website (Table 1). Despite the fact that all of the surveyed dairy enterprises declare the use of the CSR concept in their enterprises, this does not change the fact that most of them focus mainly on offering the highest quality products, while CSR is still perceived in marketing terms. This does not mean, however, that dominant Polish companies in the dairy industry do not use CSR tools to improve the image and financial situation of the company. This is evidenced by the actions taken by the indicated enterprises in improving product quality, introducing innovations, applying actions aimed at caring for the natural environment and promoting a healthy lifestyle among consumers [13].

The introduction of CSR practices in dairy enterprises indicated in Table 1 has contributed to improving their image among consumers, improving their position, increasing their competitive advantage on the domestic and foreign market, and increasing innovation in dairy product manufacturing practices. An example of this is, among others, the use of innovation on the new Skyr yogurt offered by OSM Piątnica, which was made according to a traditional recipe, enjoying popularity among consumers in Europe and the United States. This yogurt is high in protein and is also free from fat. The product is particularly desirable for consumers leading an active and healthy lifestyle. The cooperative from Piątnica offers its consumers four flavors, as well as natural Skyrnica [21]. An interesting idea offering rewards for farmers for high quality milk is the "Farm of the Year" competition – the flagship initiative of Spomlek Cooperative Dairy, which aims to award a modern and thriving farm. Such an initiative of Spomlek emphasizes the success of dairies in cooperation with suppliers. During the gala awards were given to cooperating farms that dynamically develop and provide the highest quality raw material [22]. In recent years, changes in the export situation of Polish dairy cooperatives can be observed. An example is SM MLEKPOL, which allocates a significant portion of production for export, sending its products to almost all countries of the world. They reach European Union countries mainly to Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom, as well as Africa and the Far East. The export offer includes long-ripening cheese, skimmed milk powder, butter and whey powder [17]. MLEKOVITA has also been successful in exporting. The value of exports, especially to Germany, accounts for over 20% of all exports. It is the largest and the most dynamically developing supported external market. In 2017, MLEKOVITA sold on the German market, among others: 2,955 tonnes of ripening hard cheese, 20,615,658 liters of UHT milk, 2,620 tonnes of powdered milk, 175 tonnes of butter. In 2018, during the Gala, which took place during the international food fair Polagra, MLEKOVITA was honored with the title of Leading Polish Food Exporter - Leading Polish Food Exporter [19].

Corporate social responsibility in the context of sustainable development is increasingly becoming applicable in the dairy industry, which, due to the growing needs of stakeholders, shapes high quality and innovation. These practices are increasingly affecting the growth of exports and determine competitive advantage in the global market [13].

## SUMMARY

The concept of corporate social responsibility is becoming more and more valuable and should be present in all areas of the company's operation. A competitive company strengthens its position on the market, and the use of the CSR concept has a positive effect on creating profits, motivating employees and is an incentive for further positive actions. Corporate social responsibility means excluding profit as the only motive for taking action. The CSR concept is often described as necessary in building a competitive advantage on the market.

Corporate social responsibility plays a dual role in the age of globalization. On the one hand, CSR is a tool to defend against the negative effects of globalization resulting from the activities of enterprises, in particular corporations. In this respect, the concept of CSR is an instrument that protects the environment and society against the dangers of this process. On the other hand, the progressing globalization has caused that modern enterprises operate in conditions of strong competition and growing pressure of consumers on actions in accordance with the principles of CSR. This fact means that only companies operating in a socially responsible manner can count on success [15]. Honest corporate social responsibility consists in renouncing any practices that are harmful to others, and not making the impression that the company cares about the environment and all stakeholders, while in reality it only seeks dividends for shareholders and board bonuses. Then CSR is nothing more than another marketing technique. Or a way of earning money for some and spending money for others.

The concept of CSR in corporate strategies allow not only to assess the progress of a given organization as socially responsible, but also to assess the position, in this case of dairy plants, in the global system. CSR is a set of activities aimed at implementing the principles of sustainable development. The article contributes to further in-depth research. Based on the analysis of the largest dairy enterprises in Poland, it was found that they implement CSR strategies to a greater or lesser extent. However, the approach of most dairy companies to CSR business models is philanthropic and marketing, but strategic and transformative approaches are also emerging. Significant changes related to CSR and the development of Polish dairy companies appeared after Poland's accession to the European Union. Since then, Polish dairy companies have been systematically becoming more competitive than existing leaders.

## PODSUMOWANIE

Koncepcja społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu zyskuje coraz bardziej na wartości i powinna być obecna we wszystkich obszarach funkcjonowania firmy. Konkurencyjna firma umacnia swoją pozycję na rynku, a stosowanie koncepcji CSR korzystnie wpływa na kreowanie zysków, motywację pracowników i jest bodźcem do dalszych pozytywnych działań. Społeczna odpowiedzialność firmy oznacza wykluczenie zysku jako jedyne go motywu do podjęcia działań. Koncepcja CSR jest często określana jako niezbędna w budowaniu przewagi konkurencyjnej na rynku.

Społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu w czasach postępującego procesu globalizacji pełni podwójną rolę. Z jednej

strony, CSR jest narzędziem obrony przed negatywnymi skutkami globalizacji wynikających z działalności przedsiębiorstw, a w szczególności korporacji. W tym zakresie koncepcja CSR jest instrumentem, który chroni środowisko i społeczeństwo przed zagrożeniami ze strony tego procesu. Z drugiej zaś strony postępująca globalizacja spowodowała, iż współczesne przedsiębiorstwa działają w warunkach silnej konkurencji oraz rosnącej presji konsumentów na działania w zgodzie z zasadami CSR. Fakt ten sprawia, iż jedynie firmy prowadzące działalność w sposób społecznie odpowiedzialny mogą liczyć na sukces [15]. Uczciwa społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu polega na wyrzekaniu się wszelkich praktyk, które są szkodliwe dla innych, a nie na robieniu wrażenia, że firma dba o otoczenie i wszystkich interesariuszy, podczas gdy tak naprawdę zabiega jedynie o dywidendy dla akcjonariuszy i bonusy dla zarządu. Wtedy CSR jest niczym więcej jak jeszcze jedną techniką marketingową, albo sposobem zarobkowania przez jednych i wydawania firmowych pieniędzy przez drugich.

Koncepcja CSR w strategiach korporacyjnych pozwala nie tylko oceniać stopień zaawansowania danej organizacji jako społecznie odpowiedzialnej, ale także ocenić pozycję (w tym przypadku zakładów mleczarskich), w systemie globalnym. CSR to zbiór działań mających na celu wdrażanie zasad zrównoważonego rozwoju. Artykuł stanowi wkład w dalsze dogłębne badania. Na podstawie dokonanej analizy największych przedsiębiorstw mleczarskich w Polsce stwierdzono, że wdrażają one strategie CSR w większym lub mniejszym stopniu. Podejście większości przedsiębiorstw mleczarskich do modeli biznesowych CSR ma charakter filantropijny i marketingowy, ale pojawiają się również strategiczne i transformacyjne podejścia. Znaczące zmiany związane z CSR i rozwojem polskich firm mleczarskich pojawiły się po przystąpieniu Polski do Unii Europejskiej. Od tego czasu polskie przedsiębiorstwa mleczarskie systematycznie stają się bardziej konkurencyjne niż dotychczasowi liderzy.

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