

# Enterprise with Attitude:

Anita Roddick,  
Great Dame of British Business

 transforming business

by Peter S Heslam



Peter Heslam

**Dame Anita Roddick, who died recently, will be remembered as the most successful female entrepreneur in British history. Peter Heslam argues that she should also be remembered for the way she brought spirituality, ethics and enterprise together to transform business and, through business, to transform the world.**

**W**hen Anita Roddick founded the Body Shop in 1976, there was nothing remarkable about hippy-like lefties dreaming of a new order. But no one knew that this particular eco-warrior, in pursuing her dream, would build a multi-million dollar global brand with a dominant high street presence.

The distinctives of her business are well-known. None of her products, from peppermint foot lotion to coconut body butter, had been tested on animals. And they were sold in containers that customers could recycle by getting them refilled.

Roddick's tireless campaigning is also legendary. She encouraged shop workers to join demonstrations and she used window displays to publicise campaigns against economic injustice. She was particularly vocal against the purported evils of big business and took a prominent role in the anti-globalization activism of the pre 9/11 years.

What is less well known, and overlooked in all the newspaper obituaries, was her lively spirituality, which was her key driving force. This is reflected in the title of her autobiography, *Body and Soul*, but she articulated it at greater length in another of her best-sellers, *Business as Unusual*.

There she argues that, because business has surpassed the church and the state in power and influence, it should assume moral leadership in society. This would involve shifting its emphasis on material things to an emphasis on the human spirit. Companies of the future, she argues, will be those that connect with people's sense of meaning and purpose, rather than those that imbibe the right management 'science'.

Business, Roddick claims, must respect and support communities and families, safeguard the environment, encourage education and health care in low income countries, value the work of women and respect human rights. Companies need to ask what is

the point of profit, and to measure success in terms of human development, rather than profit alone. To do so, they need to recapture a sense of 'reverence' – an attitude (not necessarily dependent on organised religion) which regards life as sacred and awe-inspiring.

To exemplify this, Roddick turned to the great Quaker industrialists of the Victorian era. Of course their spirituality was nurtured by their religious commitments and affiliations. But of key significance for Roddick is that their spirituality inspired them to combine business acumen with moral responsibility. Endowing libraries, schools and hospitals, they understood that commercial success relies on a cohesive society of healthy, well-educated people.

Business schools should therefore build morality and spirituality into their programmes, nurturing 'the productivity of the human *soul*' and the integration of personal and economic values. As work is an opportunity for personal

growth, future managers need to be able to provide a context in which the spirits of employees can expand and transform: 'My vision, my hope, is simply this: that many business leaders will come to see a primary role of business as incubators of the human spirit'.

Corporate social responsibility, for Roddick, was one way in which such incubation could be achieved. But she was clear that this has to be integral to business, rather than an add-on. It is business' *reason* to operate, rather than its *licence* to operate. She writes: 'We wanted to be utterly honest about the products we sold and the benefits they could offer. We wanted to challenge the cosmetics industry. We wanted to incorporate social and environmental change in everything we do'.

There were, however, inconsistencies. She called for a boycott of China whilst the Body Shop imported Chinese products, she sold her stake in the Body Shop to L'Oréal, the cosmetics giant that sanctioned animal testing, and although she claimed to adhere to the Catholic faith of her upbringing, she was generally dismissive of Christianity. Despite her emphasis on social virtues, she could also be prickly and abrasive, particularly when debating with those she regarded as belonging to the 'business as usual' brigade. One of the latter, the leader of a large multinational corporation, confided in me after a particularly bruising encounter that he would never again agree to share a speaking platform with her!

But such inconsistencies do not belie her greatness. Moreover, being a gadfly was intentional, to provoke positive change. As such she embodied her brand - principled, outspoken and daring. In common with other great entrepreneurs, she deliberately provided an alternative that would disrupt conventional ways of doing business.

Even her sell-out to L'Oréal should be regarded in this light; it was a 'Trojan Horse' strategy designed to transform L'Oréal from the inside. And there is some evidence that it worked. Not only did the company's CEO,



Anita Roddick with her Dame Commander Medal at Buckingham Palace in 2003

Jean-Paul Agon, declare her influence on L'Oréal to be a 'tremendous force for good', but one Body Shop area manager recently wrote:

*I had the enormous pleasure of meeting Anita last year. She shared with us the detail behind her sale of Body Shop to L'Oréal. Her passion and commitment for changing the world remained as strong as ever and was shared with a gentle*

*infectiousness that gave us an insight into a future world without poverty. She had been working closely with L'Oréal to establish community trade links with farmers and women's co-operatives and believed passionately that their influence would pave the way for others to follow. Animal testing by L'Oréal is now a part of their past. How many of us we will leave this sort of legacy behind us?*

The importance Roddick attached to leaving a good legacy appears to have intensified following her discovery in 2004 that she had Hepatitis C: 'I live with a sharp sense of my own mortality, which in many ways makes life more vivid and immediate. It makes me even more determined to just get on with things.' Her words reflect something she said at the announcement of the L'Oréal takeover: 'You never get remembered by what you do in business; you get remembered for what you do for civil society.'

It is well known that a Great Dane's bark is far worse than its bite. The same is true of this Great Dame. 'Many of us talk about kindness at great length', she once wrote, 'but don't do anything. Our kindness has to be fierce.... It is not satisfied unless human rights and social justice are present.' Roddick has left the world with a model not only of an enterprising attitude but of how attitude can be enterprised. She showed how to do business with attitude, in both senses, for the sake of a better world. ■

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