


Please cite the Published Version

Lever, John  (2025) Brewing Impact: Unexpected Business Lessons from Dark Woods Coffee. In: Better Business Summit 2025, 16 January 2025 - 17 January 2025, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK. (Unpublished)

Version: Presentation

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/638017/>

Usage rights:  In Copyright

Additional Information: Slides of a presentation given at Better Business Summit 2025

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)



Brewing Impact

Unexpected Business Lessons from

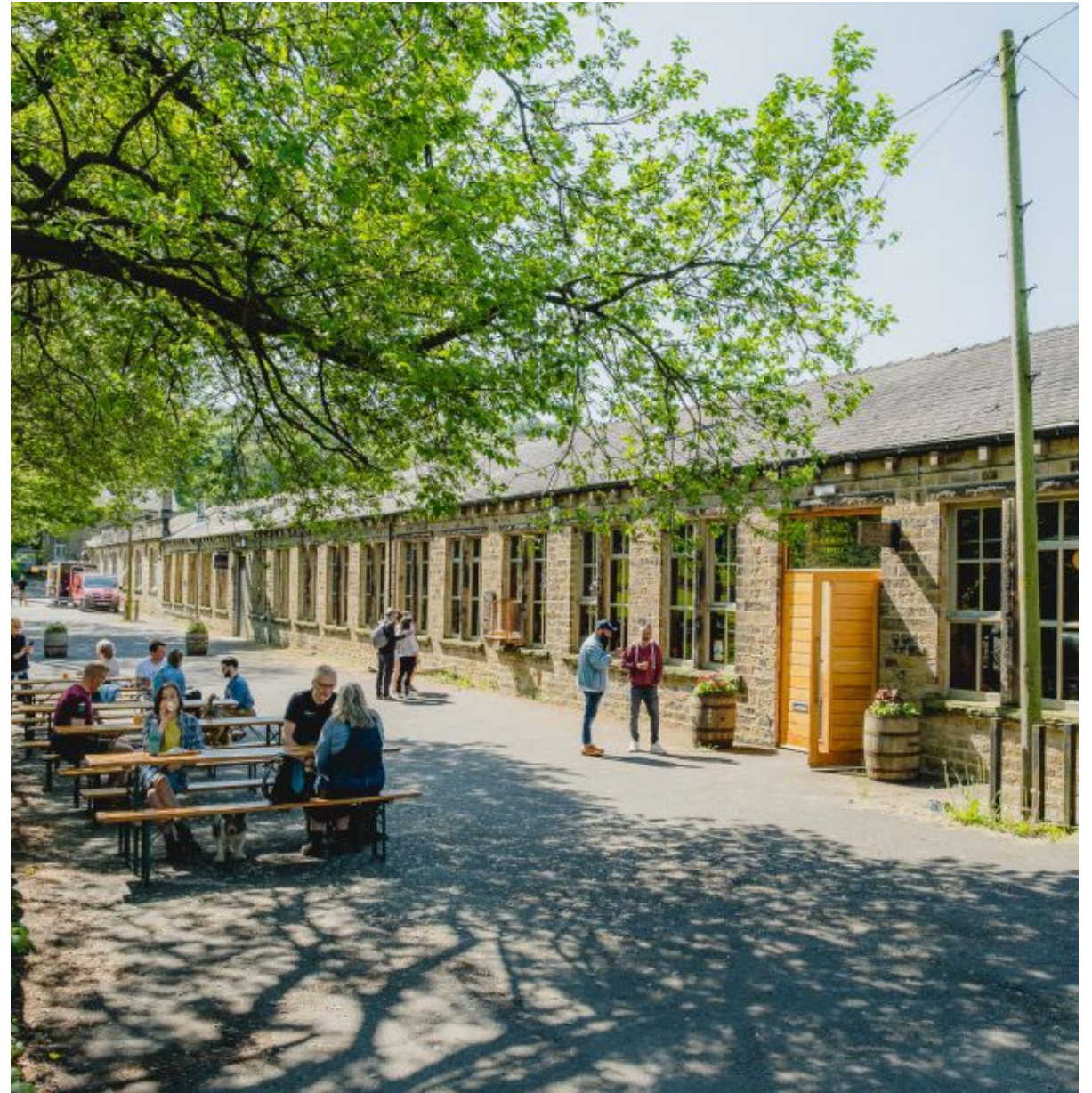
Dark Woods Coffee

Dr John Lever

*Reader, Sustainable and Resilient
Communities*



Set up a decade ago, Dark Woods is a speciality coffee roaster, Barista school, and pop-up café located in a refurbished Victorian textile mill in the West Yorkshire Pennines.



Our Buying Principles

Wherever possible, we will only source green coffee, raw materials, products and services through a values-driven approach, which takes into account economic fairness, product quality, respect, mutually supportive contracts and long-term relationships.

We require supply partners to have an ethically sound approach within their own business, from caring for their workforce, to respecting local laws and regulations and the local environment and communities in which they operate.



It is important... to know as much about the producers as we can. Who they are, how they operate, the standards they work to, the way they treat workers and their local environment. We will not knowingly buy from a producer who we think operates in a way which is harmful to their local community or environment.

Strengthening global coffee growing communities

Dark Woods' La Huella "Café de Panama" Coffees Win Three Great Taste Awards



Great Taste Awards 2024 / 22 New Awards



Building strong relationships is at the heart of everything Dark Woods do!

One of the reasons that we do so well with a lot of the awards is because we get access to stuff that other people just don't get access to. And the reason we get that is because we've worked really hard on building strong relationships and friendships actually with... a lot of producers, which means... they send us stuff that they don't send anybody else. And then we end up winning awards with it because it's so good.



Farmers' Voice Radio

For over a decade, we have been supporting millions of farmers and producers across Africa and in Latin America through our [Farmers' Voice Radio](#) projects.

Radio provides fast and accessible information to farming communities on issues as wide-ranging as climate change, crop management, governance and market prices. Often, the radio programmes created offer additional advice to listeners – such as healthcare, safety, leadership, education etc.

This unusual, grassroots approach builds knowledge, skills, livelihoods and collective confidence.

We work in a number of geographical areas and with many different producer groups. We partner with communities, businesses and corporate sponsors.

We're always looking to discover new relationships and opportunities to deliver Farmers' Voice Radio initiatives. Head over to our [dedicated website](#) to find out more!



Farmers' Voice Radio in Panama

When Pedro told us about the awful situation caused by COVID, affecting thousands of indigenous people in the Province of Chiriqui, Northern Panama, we immediately offered our support.

The Ngobe-Bugle communities (of which 90% live in situations of extreme poverty and 98% of children under 5 suffer from malnutrition) were particularly affected during lockdown, as people struggled to make ends meet, pushing many poor rural households into even greater food insecurity.

Over 40% of the indigenous population migrate with their families for work, distancing them from their traditional social safety nets and sources of information and support.

We helped create a partnership between La Huella, Culturama (a local Panama NGO) and Farmers' Voice Radio, run by UK charity, the Lorna Young Foundation. We supported a funding application to the British Embassy in Panama, and provided match funding and technical support from our team.

From October 2020 to February 2021, Culturama, with support from Farmers' Voice Radio, worked with local communities to create and broadcast weekly radio programmes, listened to by thousands of local people.

[Read more](#)



Relationship building is key to everything Dark Woods do!

Nyeri, Kenya



- ❑ 500,000 people reached
- ❑ 10,000 disease resistant coffee seedlings planted
- ❑ 705 coffee farmers joined cooperative (50% of which were women)

Oromia, Ethiopia



- ❑ 100,000 people reached
- ❑ Improved knowledge and practice on good agricultural practices & children's rights
- ❑ Increased coffee quality and environmental standards

Mt Elgon, Uganda



- ❑ 250,000 people reached
- ❑ Improved knowledge, attitudes and practices for sustainable coffee production
- ❑ Cooperative gained 221 new members & 2 new primary societies

Strengthening local communities & supply chains



Circular Economy

Home Compostable bags

In 2022, we introduced our new plastic-free home compostable 1kg bag. This has been a long-held ambition for us and is a huge step forward.



We sell more than 100,000 kilo bags of coffee each year, with the bags previously made from mixed laminate plastics, which mostly end up in refuse waste, even though technically recyclable.

Our new bags will break down in a matter of weeks in a typical garden compost. Better still, the material is manufactured for us here in Yorkshire, with huge carbon-savings, compared to our previous bags, which were manufactured in, and shipped from, the far-east.

Alongside the new home-compostable wholesale bags, we have launched a project with ten coffee shops to promote on-site composting and encourage coffee shops to think about how they can reduce and better-manage their food waste.

Our goal is to transition all our retail coffee packs to plastic-free, compostable packaging.

100k

Number of our kilo bags switched from plastic to plant-based home-compostable each year



Switching to electric vehicles

Renewable energy to reduce production costs

Protecting their local environment

Reducing commercial building energy use

Community Small Grants Programme

Recent successful applications

- litter picking
- dementia clubs
- cookers for food banks
- compasses for scout groups
- mental well-being sessions

Local Community

In 2023, we launched our Community Small Grants Programme, with the aim of providing a more transparent, accessible and equitable approach to our local giving.



Darkwoods B-Corp Report 2023/24

We allocated a budget of £10,000 and opened for applications from any grass-roots community organisation within our local area, adopting a simple application process, offering grants of £100 to £500.

In the first application round, we funded 9 local organisations for initiatives ranging from litter picks to hot meals for older people to mental wellbeing sessions.

“Thank you, Dark Woods, for enabling us to buy new kitchen equipment to help us serve more than 100 people each week with hot wholesome food.”

St Bartholomew's community church café

Over the course of the year, we ran two more application rounds, providing grants to a further 13 local community organisations.

[Read more](#)



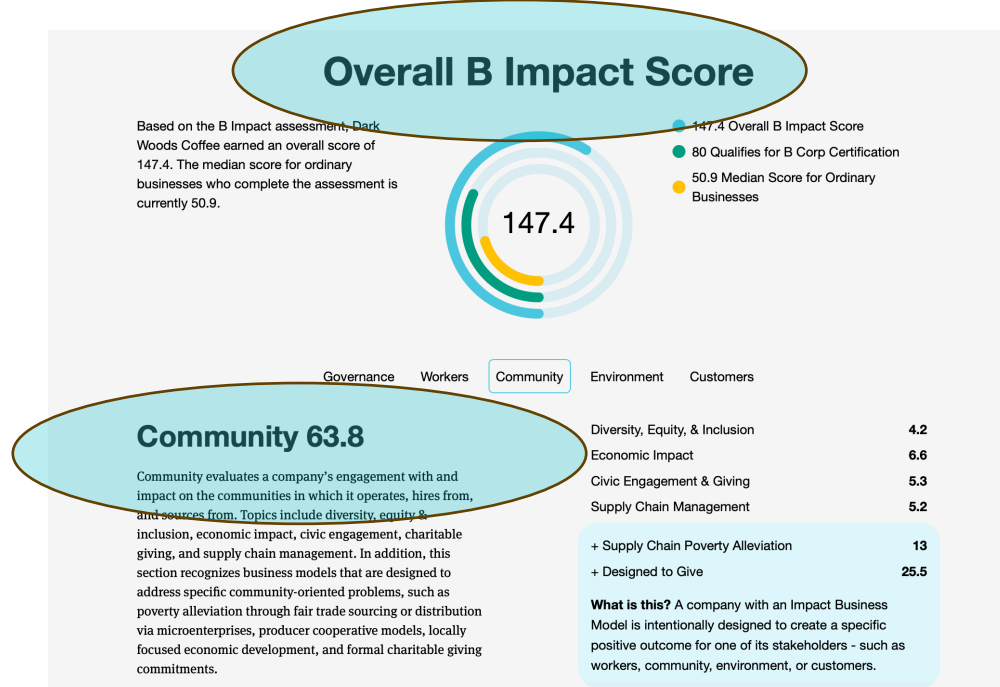
Dark Woods are now setting up a foundation to bring all their community initiatives under one roof

In 2020, Dark Woods were initially certified as a B Corp with a score of 99.6, making them one of the first certified B Corp coffee roasters in the UK.

In 2021, they achieved an unverified score of 127.4.

In 2024, Dark Woods became one of the highest scoring coffee B Corps in the world with a score of 147.4

As you can see, community constitutes the largest part of their score.

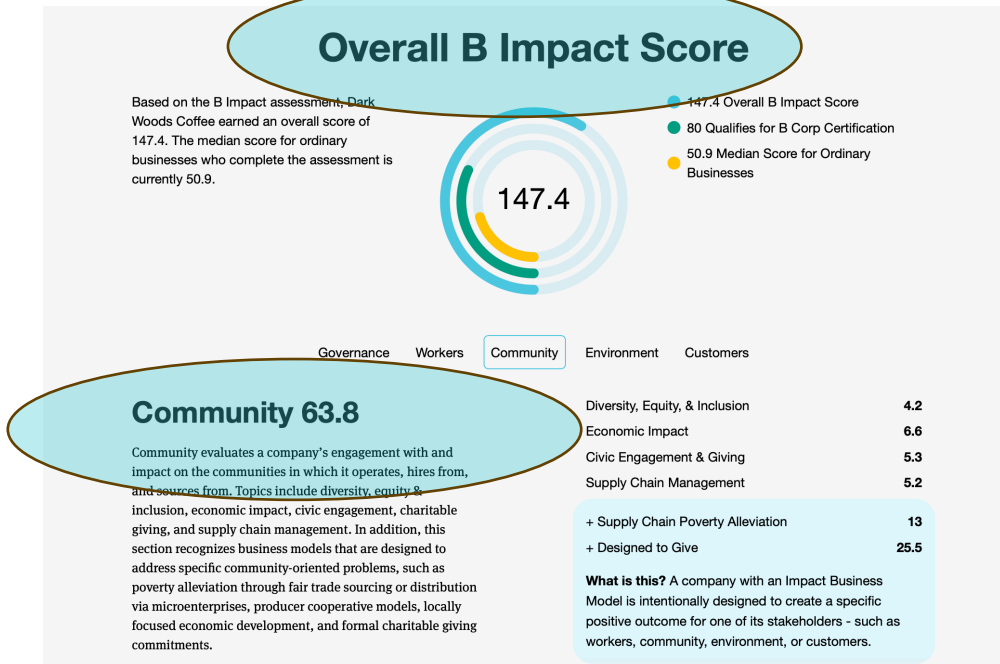


In 2020, Dark Woods were initially certified as a B Corp with a score of 99.6, making them one of the first certified B Corp coffee roasters in the UK.

In 2021, they achieved an unverified score of 127.4.

In 2024, Dark Woods became one of the highest scoring coffee B Corps in the world with a score of 147.4

As you can see, community constitutes the largest part of their score.



Certified



®

Corporation

147.4



As researchers, we were interested in what motivated an already hugely successful coffee roaster to become a certified B Corp?



Dark Woods Coffee / B Corp Score 147.4

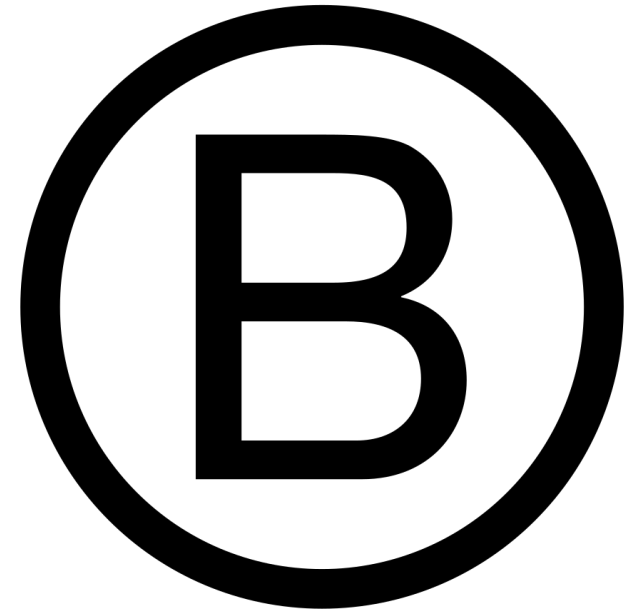


Great Taste Awards 2024 / 22 New Awards



I have no doubt that, if we focussed solely on maximising profit, we would be much wealthier than we are – we would be using cheap beans, cheap packaging and pay low wages. We would simply shout about green messaging like many others do, but focus on making as much money as we can. We didn't do that, and we still don't do that.

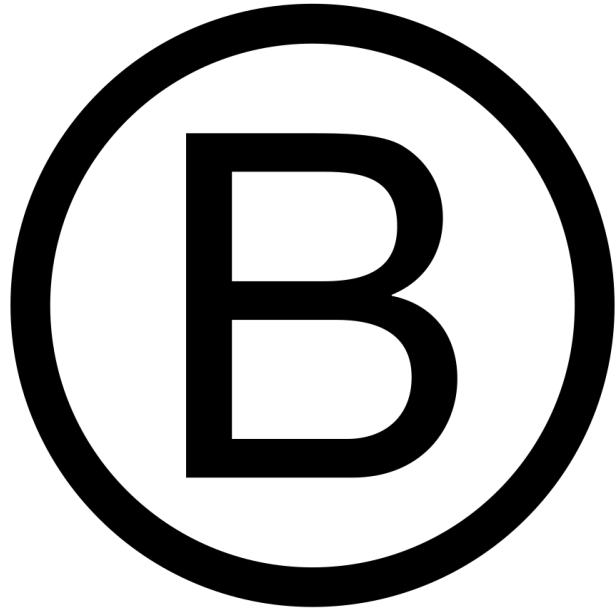
Certified



®

Corporation

Certified



®

Corporation

We have the kind of Dark Woods way of doing things, but we haven't really articulated in a couple of sentences what that means. But we look at everything we do and just say that isn't how we do things *or* that is how we do things. I couldn't tell you what that means. But it isn't just about the way we buy coffee. It's about the packaging. It's about the way we pay, it's about all kinds of things...

Impact Reporting

Throughout the process of compiling this report, we have faced a dilemma. We are required to produce an Impact Report but, as we look through our data for the year, what we have is details of output – things we have done, volunteering time, and money we have donated, rather than impact – the difference this has made in the World.



*Thank
you!*