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Unilever South Africa: Contextual leadership of culture for inclusive growth

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The morning of December 5, 2017 was stifling hot in Johannesburg. Tony Mun-Gavin, business unit head for Personal Care for Unilever South Africa, shifted uncomfortably in the plastic seat of a minibus taxi as he and his team ventured into the heart of Soweto. Unilever South Africa was part of Unilever Pty. Ltd. (Unilever), one of the world’s largest fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies. Unilever South Africa had over 3,500 employees in two corporate offices in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, and Johannesburg, Gauteng. For three consecutive years, Unilever South Africa had been voted South Africa’s top employer by the South African Top Employer Institute. The immersion that day of the team into the environments of their customers (to give team members a real-life experience of these environments) was intended to increase Unilever’s Personal Care team’s understanding of their consumers’ contexts and to reinforce the company’s revised positioning of the Lux brand.

Despite the heat, sweat, and nauseating scents from the waste outside, the team members looked excited as they gazed at the blur of passing buildings. As in any evolving township, tin shacks were overshadowed by the two-storey houses of neighbours. The day’s immersion would take the team to both wealthy and poor inhabitants of Soweto. Mun-Gavin was curious about the juxtapositions within the vast township on the outskirts of Johannesburg. He considered his dilemma: the 90-year-old Unilever personal care brand Lux had always been glamorous—an aspirational brand with celebrity appeal. But this no longer seamlessly aligned with the company’s overall agenda, which placed sustainability at the heart of every brand within the Unilever stable. With this in mind, the organization strove to decentralize corporate social responsibility (CSR) and make it a compulsory objective for every brand manager. As a result, the team had worked tirelessly to reposition the brand by celebrating the various roles filled by women of the 21st century. After all these years, would the repositioning work?

As Mun-Gavin recognized the distinct smells of wood fires and cooking cabbage, he wondered how many of his colleagues had been exposed to these smells. Unilever’s vast product range often meant that the end users of products were different from those working on the marketing campaigns. The company expected all of its employees, including brand managers, to develop a holistic understanding of the people who used its products and the way they lived by regularly interacting with consumers in their homes.

The team passed a Lux billboard, sun-bleached and peeling, and Mun-Gavin gave a sigh of frustration. This was not the impression he wanted this aspirational brand to give to the Sowetan community. He remembered crafting the product’s philosophy, which spoke to luxury and aspiration. The intention had been to bring the best of beauty to women across the world. Zola Bebe, Lux brand manager in South Africa, and Sphe Mjadu, Unilever’s public relations manager, had both worked tirelessly to ensure that every contact with consumers was consistent in portraying a sense of beauty and women’s empowerment. This team had debated the factors that would make Lux both aspirational and inclusive. After many conversations with consumers, they knew the brand was appealing; however, as a brand that always sponsored beauty pageants, it advocated superficial beauty. Therein was the deep disconnect for Unilever: the organization could not position a superficial brand with no moral appeal and remain true to its overarching vision of empowering women. Mun-Gavin thought of the Dove team, who had managed to create an authentic brand proposition with natural beauty at its very core. Dove easily lent itself to an empowering and sustainable proposition, advocating natural beauty. Lux, on the other hand, had always represented the beauty of the exterior.

Mun-Gavin again considered his dilemma. While Unilever was invested in driving a sustainability agenda, it made no apologies for being a for-profit organization. However, Mun-Gavin fully believed in the best of both worlds: his fastest growing brands were those with solid CSR at their cores. It was imperative for him to discover, maintain, and drive a similar objective for Lux—a beauty brand invested in women and well-being.

Background to Unilever’s mission

Unilever founder, William Lever,[[1]](#endnote-1) a member of the English nobility, set Unilever’s lifelong intention in the 1890s with Sunlight, a brand that aimed to make cleanliness and hygiene commonplace while lessening the work of women. Lever was a businessperson, not a philanthropist, but as a result of having witnessed the poor hygiene conditions of factory workers, he developed a mission to make a difference in the living conditions of the poor. Almost 130 years later, Unilever was firmly positioned as one of the world’s largest FMCG companies and had become a common household name, with over 400 brands in food, refreshments, laundry, and personal care. Unilever brands were used by over 2 billion people daily.[[2]](#endnote-2) The company operated in over 190 countries in Europe, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. It was headquartered in London, United Kingdom.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In 2007, Unilever made what was then considered a risky decision: to shift its focus from America and Europe and actively move projects, people, and other resources to the developing world.[[4]](#endnote-4) Unilever had identified key opportunities in emerging markets and had since seen results, with growth in emerging markets of 7.1 per cent in fiscal year (FY) 2015 and more than half (58 per cent) of the company’s turnover coming from these markets. Unilever had also identified key health and wellness opportunities in its food and beverage businesses, taking the reduction of fats and salts in these products seriously in response to the changing preferences of its consumers. Due to increased consumer interest and purchasing power, the personal care industry had grown rapidly, specifically the skin and hair care segments, which were projected to own 9.04 per cent of this market by 2024. In 2017, Unilever had an 8.84-per-cent market share in skin and hair care.[[5]](#endnote-5) With brands to suit varying consumer needs and price points, Unilever was well positioned to take advantage of this trend.

Unilever’s global chief executive officer (CEO), Paul Polman, was inspired by Unilever’s founder after spending an evening in Lever’s rooftop bed as part of a total immersion into his new role in 2009.[[6]](#endnote-6) This experience, coupled with a vision to demonstrate to the world that corporates can be profitable and create value for fellow human beings and the environment,[[7]](#endnote-7) encouraged Polman to launch a sustainable living plan for the second time in the company’s 120-year history, echoing Lever’s initial pledge to create a virtuous company. The plan was dedicated to doing capitalism responsibly, reducing Unilever’s environmental impact, and positively increasing its social impact. The mission had proved successful, with a GlobeScan sustainability survey ranking Unilever first—by far—in initiating sustainable change and driving positive impact in 2016 (see Exhibit 1).

Polman had boldly stated that there was no business case for enduring poverty and runaway climate change.[[8]](#endnote-8) Unilever was fully committed to making sustainable living commonplace while delivering on a workable business case. The company continued to grow responsibly, with reported revenues of €52,713 million[[9]](#endnote-9) for FY2016, a decrease of only 1 per cent over FY2015. In FY2016, the company’s operating margin was 14.8 per cent, compared to an operating margin of 14.1 per cent in FY2015. In FY2016, the company recorded a net margin of 9.8 per cent, compared to a net margin of 9.2 per cent in FY2015. Overall the organization’s financial results reflected positive growth for FY2016 (see Exhibit 2).

Unilever’s growth was intertwined with the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, which had three primary goals:[[10]](#endnote-10) help more than a billion people improve their health and well-being, halve the environmental footprint of products, and enhance the livelihoods of people across the value chain. Unilever’s end-to-end sustainability agenda included the sourcing of raw materials to delivering the final products to retailers’ shelves. It included the responsible distribution of some of South Africans’ favourite household product names as well as the marketing campaigns that supported these iconic brands. Unilever partnered with others, including suppliers, the government, non-governmental organizations, and other businesses to deliver on its Unilever Sustainable Living Plan and face some of the world’s great challenges. Brands that fulfilled powerful sustainability initiatives were some of Unilever’s best. For example, Lifebuoy had evolved to become the world’s bestselling and most trusted germ-protection soap.

Unilever’s competitors offered different perspectives: German skincare multinational Beiersdorf AG put skincare at the forefront of the strategy outlined in its “Blue Agenda,” which combined agility (based on its smaller size) with innovation and world-class advertising to position the organization as number one in skin care.[[11]](#endnote-11) L’Oréal Group was the world leader in beauty and had a CSR commitment to share beauty with all by innovating, producing, living, and developing sustainably while enabling both communities and suppliers to thrive sustainably.[[12]](#endnote-12) The Proctor & Gamble Company had committed to a sustainability agenda centred on climate, waste, and water that enabled consumers to make more responsible choices.[[13]](#endnote-13) Other competitors included the Colgate-Palmolive Company, Johnson & Johnson, Danone, and Nestlé.

Diversity in the Unilever South Africa Personal Care team

Diversity within Unilever meant that some of Mun-Gavin’s colleagues had grown up in townships very similar to Soweto, while others had had vastly different childhoods, with plastic toys instead of wooden ones, and a reduced sense of community. In contrast, children who thrived within informal settlements unapologetically shouted “*Makhi*” (neighbour) to gain the attention of well-loved neighbours in a bid for sugar or some other home commodity that seemed to belong to any hungry child. While some of Mun-Gavin’s team eased into familiarity, others pulled faces at the unfamiliar sights and sounds.

Mun-Gavin was proud of his team; Unilever’s leadership had worked hard to galvanize a culture of inclusive growth among all employees. He had led the initiative with passion, believing that it was the responsibility of all citizens to invest in sustainability. To Mun-Gavin, this was about adding value and harnessing core values, and he had deliberately attracted employees who wanted to do both. The team had proven its commitment by putting the consumer at the core of its campaign; team members had listened intently to the many voices of women across South Africa to create the new Lux identity. This day’s immersion was simply another example of the team’s unwavering drive to fully understand the people they chose to serve.

The pursuit of personal mastery

Finally, the taxi jolted to a halt, and the team stumbled out into the blistering midday sun. The streets were dusty, and Mun-Gavin reflected on the importance of Unilever’s focus on reducing water use: water continued to be a scarce resource across the continent, and its value was increasingly emphasized, given the recent drought across the South African landscape. Mun-Gavin noticed his own thirst, but swiftly put it out of his mind. He considered his privileged upbringing in South Africa: he had a successful father, educated as a chartered accountant, and a creative mother, an artist. It was no surprise that Mun-Gavin had pursued a career in marketing, the natural merger of his parents’ talents and a meeting place between art and science. Over the years, his wife had been his primary mentor. As a psychologist, she was perfectly positioned to discuss the drivers of human behaviour, values, and insights. Mun-Gavin considered her contribution priceless in his understanding of marketing; her teachings were, after all, the cornerstone of marketing acumen.

However, Mun-Gavin’s decision to remain at Unilever for close to 20 years was based on more than the simple merging of industry and interest. Given his education at the London School of Economics, there was no doubt that he had had his fair share of opportunity. His choice to remain loyal to Unilever was deeply rooted in his own and the company’s values. Both Mun-Gavin’s love for business and his desire to do good were met by this organization. He had a genuine heart and a love for people and making a difference, and these values aligned with Unilever’s purpose at both the organizational and the brand level. The organization and brand purposes fit neatly with his own values as an individual.

Mun-Gavin’s passion for making a difference was influenced by his time spent abroad. Shortly after Nelson Mandela’s release, Mun-Gavin headed to London, where he realized just how small and sheltered his world had been. His time abroad immersed him in his first tangible experience of the difference between the wealthy and the poor, as he actively experienced a country where there was not much poverty and hardship. When he returned to the post-apartheid South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu called the “Rainbow Nation,”[[14]](#endnote-14) he had a firm belief that Africa was different. He considered how the immersion that day offered similar insights for his team. There was great discrepancy in South Africa’s wealth distribution. The top 10 per cent of earners in the country held 65 per cent of the total wealth and roughly 90 per cent of its total assets.[[15]](#endnote-15) In Soweto, contrasts were obvious, as the insatiable African sun beat down on bleached laundry and tin roofs as well as solid brick structures that looked somewhat misplaced among their tin compatriots. Hand-painted decals stained shopkeepers’ walls, advertising many of the brands Mun-Gavin and his team were familiar with: Sunlight, OMO, and Shield. In Soweto, the corner *spaza* (convenience store)*,* with its convenient location and neighbourly appeal, rivalled South Africa’s leading retailer, Shoprite.[[16]](#endnote-16)

As Mun-Gavin’s designer sneakers scuffed the dusty roads of Soweto, he was again reminded that Africa was different, and he believed in his purpose to contribute to inclusive growth. He considered it his responsibility to make a difference, and Unilever, his brands, and his team offered him a vehicle to do exactly that at scale. As part of their immersion, Mun-Gavin and his team entered the home of a young woman, Bongiwe. Despite its small size, the home was impeccably neat. They were offered seats on a torn leather couch; the television was on, but the picture was snowy, making it impossible to make out the channel. Mun-Gavin could hear vernacular and cursed under his breath that all of his world-class education had never taught him an African language. South Africa’s first black president, Nelson Mandela, was famous for his quotes and had said that language was a window to the soul. Their hostess was shy but hospitable, boasting a wide smile and flawless teeth. The white of her teeth was exaggerated by her dark skin, slightly pigmented by the unforgiving sun. She poured Joko tea into odd cups and offered everyone sugar, unapologetically launching three teaspoons into her own cup.

Bebe led the conversation on authentic beauty in South Africa. She started by talking about the new Lux positioning and asked Bongiwe what this meant to her. It took a while for Bongiwe to warm up, but Bebe’s contagious laughter and sincerity added a magic to the room, sweeter than the Joko tea that they were all sipping steadily. They listened to Bongiwe charming them as she spoke to her many faces—her ability to be both homemaker and breadwinner, both nurturing mother and strict disciplinarian—and of how she was able to celebrate her femininity and embrace her strong-willed independence. Bongiwe was not married, but like so many other young South African women, she was the official mother to two children and surrogate mother to another five.

As Bebe and Bongiwe continued to talk about the many opportunities and challenges facing South African women today, Mun-Gavin reflected on the new Lux positioning that was once again being reinforced by Bongiwe: women really were much more than just their exterior beauty. The brand had chosen three celebrities to act as advocates for Lux: musicians Lira, Moneoa, and Nhlanhla, from the group Mafikizolo. While these three women were aspirational models and musicians, they were also much more; each had her own unique story that had crafted her identity. Mun-Gavin recalled the tragic story about the death of Nhlanhla’s five-year-old daughter in a car accident in 2009,[[17]](#endnote-17) positioning her as a real woman with true tragedy as well as success. Lira had recently been in the news for her debt-free decade—using money to live a full life as opposed to constantly paying off excessive commitments.[[18]](#endnote-18) Moneoa had overcome heartbreak and embraced her new feminine physique, and was a top talent in South Africa’s music and acting industry.[[19]](#endnote-19) Mun-Gavin’s fingers inconspicuously drummed to the beat of these three musicians’ new anthem, created in collaboration with Lux’s new initiative to marvel at the multifaceted beauty of women[[20]](#endnote-20)—women like Bongiwe, who did not have wealth but were generous with the little that they had. Bongiwe revealed that her role as community mother meant that she informally nursed children with HIV/AIDS whose own parents had either abandoned them or passed away. In South Africa, over 2.3 million children had been orphaned by HIV and AIDS.[[21]](#endnote-21) Bongiwe was just one example of many dedicated women who wanted to make a difference by doing good in the community. She let out a river of loud laughter, and Mun-Gavin was more convinced than ever that, while the Lux brand was always going to be primarily about external beauty, it could also recognize the incredibly empowering narrative behind every woman—a story as rich, full, and alive as a woman’s celebrated femininity.

The business case for driving a sustainability agenda

Lux was only one example of Unilever’s many brands dedicated to a sustainability initiative. In fact, the organization was determined that all of its brands invest in this agenda. Part of this mandate included the decentralization of the CSR function, which made it every brand manager’s responsibility to drive brand awareness and robust brand campaigns aligned with sustainability. In South Africa, the fastest growing brands with robust sustainable living plans were Lifebuoy, Dove, and Vaseline. These were some of the brands associated with a Department of Education campaign targeting more than 15,000 schools over the following three years to educate children on health, hygiene, and self-esteem. With enhanced reach, the campaign would of course subtly drive brand awareness, but the main objective was to influence the education of scholars across the country.

Dove was another proud example of a Unilever brand that prioritized what was right; it was one of the only brands in the world to position authentic beauty in all shapes and forms at the heart of every campaign. Brand advocates who were real women, not models or celebrities, were used in many of the campaigns. The brand celebrated the beauty of diversity and was dedicated to driving female self-esteem. In South Africa, Dove had run a self-esteem program for three years, reaching over 300,000 high-school girls. The brand was sincerely committed to making a difference in the lives and minds of women and girls. However, like any brand in the spotlight, it did not always get it right. In October 2017, the brand was criticized for a seemingly racist campaign.[[22]](#endnote-22) True to its authentic positioning, the brand did not shy away from condemnation but rather apologized with deep regret. The brand continued to grow and was considered the most trusted brand on Mettle’s FMCG Trust Index in 2017.[[23]](#endnote-23) Unilever’s Personal Care team proved that there could be an optimum point where capitalism and humanism met. The Lux brand had reinvented itself through a deep understanding of the market; unpacking subtle narratives, the brand had been re-shaped and re-crafted to celebrate that women were more than just superficial beauty.

Moving forward

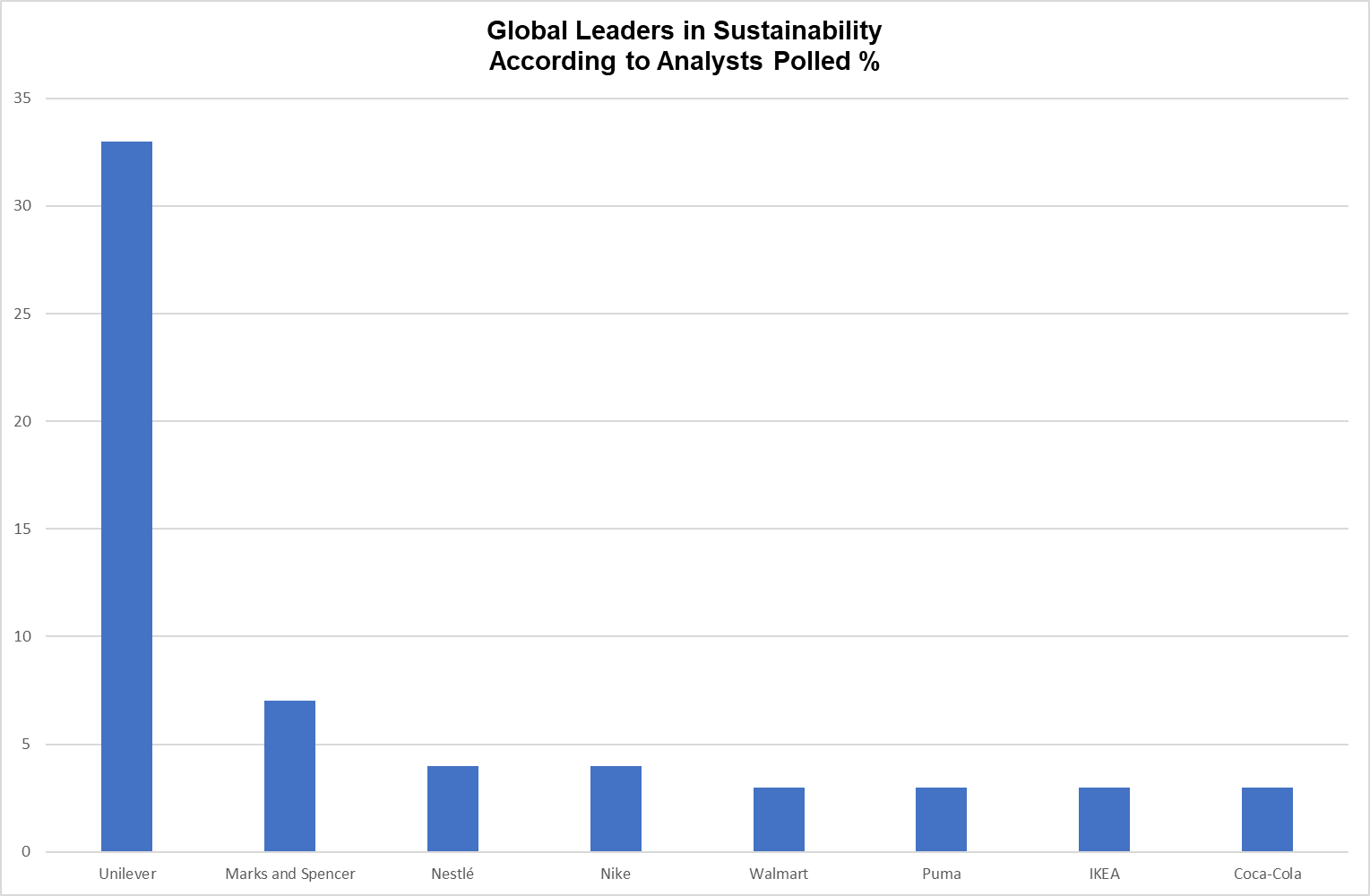
Mun-Gavin reconsidered his dilemma. Dove had naturally lent itself to celebrating women’s natural beauty, while Lux had always claimed success by being a celebrity’s first-choice brand. Bebe’s conversation with Bongiwe had reinforced his belief that the team was on the right track—that women wanted to be admired for their many faces and ability to play many roles with sincerity and results, while still feeling and looking their best.

Mun-Gavin was excited about actively driving this agenda, but acknowledged the need to be both inclusive and contextual. It was essential that he consider how the brand would be perceived across the varying contexts of the African continent. He needed to listen and hear the varying nuances from the diverse target market and ensure that the brand was penetrating the unique purchase barriers. It was important to consider all potential threats. For example, would existing users of the brand feel uninspired by the lack of glitz and glamour? The company would need to maintain the Lux glamour while inserting a new, more natural, and intense energy. Lux was different from Dove, yet both were able to celebrate the essence of femininity.

Mun-Gavin considered what it meant to be a contextual leader. All his experiences to date had helped shape his leadership style, providing him with agility and compassion while delivering results. South Africa, with all its colour and diversity, had equipped him with the necessary skills to be inclusive in his approach to business and brands. However, like all bold and successful leaders, Mun-Gavin knew that there was always an opportunity to learn something new. Lessons await in the most mysterious and unpredictable places, like the neat shack with lace curtains within a local community and with tea as warm and sweet as the soul who had prepared it. He was considering what else to initiate to ensure that his new team members would gain an even deeper understanding of the dynamics of their South African marketplace, their company’s values, and the requirements for a true sustainability-inclusive growth culture.

As the sky turned deep purple and yellow, the minibus taxi sped away from Soweto. Soon, the moody sky contrasted with vibrant city lights like igniting fireflies, suggesting the day’s work was not yet done. Johannesburg was known as the African city that did not sleep, and nowhere was this more apparent than in the area of Sandton, the very heart of Africa’s economic hub. The minibus taxi driver sped along the potholed streets to the drop-off before racing back to familiar township roads to a *shebeen* (a local township pub, originally started illegally in the apartheid era, when black Africans were barred from bars)[[24]](#endnote-24) for a first sip of sweet beer. Mun-Gavin reflected on the success of the day as he looked forward to the sunset that announced the drawing of the curtains on another day in Africa.

EXHIBIT 1: SUSTAINABILITY COMPARISON



Source: Created by authors based on *The 2017 Sustainability Leaders: Celebrating 20 Years of Leadership*, GlobeScan and SustainAbility, 2017, accessed April 4, 2018, https://globescan.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/GSS-Leaders-2017-Survey-Report.pdf/.

EXHIBIT 2: Unilever FINANCIAL STATEMENTs, 2012–2016 (in € millions)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** |
| Total Revenue | 51,324.00 | 49,797.00 | 48,436.00 | 53,272.00 | 52,713.00 |
| Gross Profit | 20,794.00 | 20,732.00 | 20,049.00 | 25,822.00 | 25,730.00 |
| Operating Profit | 6,977.00 | 7,517.00 | 7,980.00 | 7,575.00 | 7,801.00 |
| Net Income | 4,368.00 | 4,842.00 | 5,171.00 | 4,909.00 | 5,184.00 |
| **Balance Sheet** | | | | | |
| Total Current Assets | 12,147.00 | 12,122.00 | 12,347.00 | 12,686.00 | 13,884.00 |
| Total Current Liabilities | 15,815.00 | 17,382.00 | 19,642.00 | 20,019.00 | 20,556.00 |
| Total Equity | 15,392.00 | 14,344.00 | 13,651.00 | 15,439.00 | 16,354.00 |
| Total Common Shares Outstanding | 2,831.79 | 2,840.01 | 2,836.75 | 2,838.85 | 2,839.69 |
| **Cash Flow** | | | | | |
| Cash from Operating Activities | 6,836.00 | 6,294.00 | 5,543.00 | 7,330.00 | 7,047.00 |
| Cash from Investing Activities | −755.00 | −1,161.00 | −341.00 | −3,539.00 | −3,188.00 |
| Cash from Financing Activities | −6,622.00 | −5,390.00 | −5,190.00 | −3,032.00 | −3,073.00 |
| Net Change in Cash | −761.00 | −173.00 | −134.00 | 218.00 | 1,070.00 |

Note: € = EUR = euro; €1.00 = US$1.14 on March 31, 2016.

Source: Created by authors based on company documents.

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