

Corporate Social Responsibility: More Than Just a Bussword

Kevin Kaminyar*

The pandemic outbreak impacted the world in many ways, and the Great Resignation that followed continues to show employees want to find purpose in their work. Give employees this sense of purpose by giving one to your company by implementing a Corporate Social Responsibility program.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, The Business Roundtable made front-page news defining a corporation's purpose as having a "fundamental commitment to all of our stakeholders," committed to the "success of our companies, our communities and our country."¹ While it took much of the business world by surprise, they were simply catching up with a reality that has since become widely evident—employees want to work for, and consumers want to buy from, companies with a purpose beyond mere profit.

I understand that desire because in 2015, after years in the corporate world, I left in search of such a purpose. I started and ran my own non-profit, Embracelets Connect, working to increase literacy in Nicaragua. But still, I felt the need to do more. I was having an impact but wanted to begin something with a larger impact and, ideally, be replicable and scalable. I felt the same burning desire many employees feel today—to give back, to do something better. To combine purpose and profit so as the company grew, so too could the impact of its true purpose.

And so I designed my business, Yellow Tree Marketing, around the idea of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In short, we plant a tree for each new client, and plant another tree for each month they stay with us. The branding is in our name, in our logo, and something identifiable to all of our clients. Our partner, One Tree

Planted, keeps us and our clients informed of the growth of the trees.

Rather than becoming yet another greenwashing firm, using deceptive marketing to increase profits without changing practices or purpose, I set out to demonstrate how a company could truly and fully embody social responsibility. In building my CSR program I followed three simple steps, three steps that all companies can—and should—replicate. If companies do not follow employees' lead on taking seriously their role in society, they will be leading their employees out the door. Below I will outline the benefits to your employees and business of implementing a CSR program, and by the end hopefully will have convinced you to follow my three-step process.

*KEVIN KAMINYAR is a marketing expert, nature lover, and social activist with almost a decade of experience in marketing. His company, Yellow Tree Marketing, is dedicated to making an impact on climate change, by partnering with One Tree Planted to plant a tree for every new client and an additional tree every month the client continues to work with them. Kevin also founded Embracelets Connect, a nonprofit that provides market-based literacy education for children in Nicaragua.

PEOPLE OVER PROFIT: ELEVATE YOUR EMPLOYEES WHILE BETTERING YOUR BUSINESS

Even after the mass turnover of the Great Resignation, a further one in five workers plan to quit their jobs,² with nearly 70% of employees saying they will not work for a company that does not have a strong purpose.³ Long before the Great Resignation, I too felt this call, and built a model to ensure my company embodies such a purpose that keeps me fulfilled and, I hope, keeps my employees fulfilled as well.

Before outlining the three-step approach to choosing and implementing a CSR strategy, serious consideration must be given to the selection of the program itself. If it seems counterintuitive, or even in opposition to, the core of your business, it will have the opposite of the intended effect. Employees seeking to work for a purpose-oriented company will see through the ruse, will be less satisfied at work, and will be more likely to seek that sense of purpose (and employment) elsewhere.

Before delving into the benefits of the CSR and how to build it, the benefits to the employees must be discussed. Over two-thirds of employees will not work for a company

without a purpose, with six in 10 willing to take a pay cut to work at a purpose-oriented company.⁴ A survey of executives found that nearly nine in 10 see increased employee satisfaction at companies with a sense of purpose.⁵ In the same vein, working for a company with a sense of purpose instills the same in the employee, and as such gives rise to increased levels of engagement.⁶ By integrating a well-planned CSR program, employees will not only be more likely to stay, but in fact those who feel a sense of purpose about their life see significant health benefits. Employees' desire to find that value in their workplace has led to unprecedented levels of turnover in the labor market.⁷ In order to retain employees, companies must find a way to provide purpose beyond a paycheck.

PROACTIVE OR DISTRACTIVE?

While a well-constructed CSR program can have a beneficial impact on all aspects of the business, from customers to employees to the company's long-term growth, a poorly or deceptively designed system can have the opposite effect. Following the explosion of one of their oil wells in the Gulf in 2010, BP more than tripled its advertising budget in an effort to combat anger about the di-

saster, an action that arguably backfired by giving it more enemies in the public sphere and regulatory agencies.⁸ Similarly, after selling hundreds of thousands of "clean diesel" vehicles, Volkswagen faced billions in fines, buybacks, and stock price, not to mention reputational damage.⁹ Given employees' hesitancy to work for companies with no discernible purpose, such window dressing only further pushes employees away.

People want to buy from companies that truly integrate greater purpose into their business model. Companies pretending to do so see it backfire, but some companies still try because it can be a lot more difficult to change underlying practices and models which run counter to what society wants. Were Volkswagen to survey employees about implementing their plan to deceive regulators, it likely would have found quite low support. Conversely, had Volkswagen sought to truly and fully implement such a program, something correlating more closely to employee sentiment on the way Volkswagen impacts the world, it would have led to the benefits we see when other CSR programs are implemented.

Without taking into account employee buy-in, any CSR

program (for that matter, any new business plan you are seeking to implement) is doomed to fail. Conversely, constructing the plan with employee buy-in taken into account will lead to increased employee participation in CSR programs. This increased sense of purpose helps employees derive that purpose from their work, strengthening the employees and the business simultaneously. While some would think mandatory programs give the most benefit, such an implementation style can encounter many of the same drawbacks as deceptive or greenwashing programs.¹⁰ When implemented properly, a CSR program will encourage employee participation, which will organically strengthen inter-office cohesion, giving further rise to participation.

WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

With much of the world still struggling under the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, an already increasing understanding of the interconnectedness of the modern world became obvious and evident to all. Environmental worries already at the forefront of conscious consumers' minds have been exacerbated by research showing environmental degradation drastically increas-

ing the likelihood of future pandemics.¹¹ Coupled with the decline of employee satisfaction and the continued turnover exemplified by the Great Resignation, a CSR program centering sustainability or environmental concerns can do wonders for building a sense of purpose. Importantly, as we do at Yellow Tree Marketing, tackling the problem in a realistic way goes great lengths to easing its adaptation. I do not pretend that we will single-handedly alleviate the environmental concerns of our communities, but we are focusing on doing our part.

In addition, the impact of the pandemic exacerbated a decline in social cohesion, especially among the most vulnerable groups.¹² A well-constructed CSR program, as mentioned above, helps bring those at the company together and gives those employees something to go out with into their communities. While some see the rise of remote work as a drawback, it can be the opposite effect—enabling your company to positively impact a wide number of communities through employees spread around the country, even around the globe.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE? TOO GOOD TO NOT DO

If these benefits seem ideal-

istic, there are a few simple ways a well-implemented CSR program can increase employee buy-in, creating a self-strengthening program. Employees who fully buy-in will see tangible benefits, leading to broader participation among the employee base. Such increased acceptance will strengthen the CSR program itself, leading to greater impact, thereby strengthening the employees' sense of purpose with regards to the CSR program and strengthening the brand association with the program in question.

Just as a well-implemented CSR program can benefit the community in which your business and your employees operate, they provide more immediate and tangible benefits to your employees. Large majorities of employees want to participate in programs which integrate trainings when these trainings give employees the opportunity to strengthen existing or learn new skills. If you truly integrate the CSR program into your business practice and run these trainings as part of normal business operations, interest rises to 71%.¹³ Among participants in such upskilling at work, 71% again feel increased work satisfaction, meaning a properly implemented CSR program can increase employee retention.

Having established that a

well-implemented CSR program provides benefits to the employees and the business, now we must address how to select and implement a program that will maximize that employee buy-in, and therefore maximize the impact. First, and most importantly, the selection of initiative cannot go against the company's underlying business. If the purpose runs contrary to the company, consumers will lose trust.¹⁴ Employees being asked to implement and believe in such counterintuitive programming will lose trust even more so, and rather than benefiting your employees, it will push them away. The simple act of including employees in the selection process will increase believability and buy-in. Furthermore, choosing a program that comes as close as possible to dovetailing with preexisting business purposes and practices makes the rest come a lot easier.

Once a program has been selected, the benefits to employees come naturally. Planning and implementing a marketing campaign around the launch of your CSR program represents the first opportunity to upskill employees. Those with marketing backgrounds can be empowered to strengthen their own skills while teaching them to co-workers from other

departments. Participants from elsewhere in the organization simultaneously learn new and valuable skills while contributing to the growth of the CSR program. Perhaps most importantly, this simple step in the process strengthens connections beyond those co-workers one traditionally sees on a daily basis, increasing the sense of community within the company. Here, again, it all comes back to program selection. A CSR program combining employee interest with preexisting company purpose will make the implementation of such a marketing program develop much more naturally.

Lastly, once the program has been adopted, use the momentum created by its creation and initial marketing program to launch an inaugural campaign. A fundraising program provides the same benefits and opportunities mentioned above in the marketing campaign. Tying your event to a community service project will increase visibility of the CSR program and strengthen its association with the company brand within the company and the community.

Centering employee input to the selection and creation of a CSR program increases employee buy-in and the opportunity to upskill never ends. From event planning and community

outreach to fundraising and marketing, a well-designed CSR program organically creates countless opportunities for employee upskilling and strengthening a sense of community within the company and between the company and the community around it. As the CSR grows, the opportunities for employees will as well, the benefits from the program will strengthen the day-to-day operations of the company and, most importantly, the purpose and impact of the CSR program will take on a strength and life of its own.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Hopefully by now I have convinced you of the benefits of a well-thought-out CSR program. Now I will outline the three simple steps I designed to guide the creation and implementation of my program at Yellow Tree Marketing. When I chose to branch out and start the company in early 2022, it was with a desire to go beyond creating a company that could have a positive impact on the planet. I wanted to design a system that others could readily and easily adapt to their own companies. My long-time interest in the environment led me to choose the idea of planting trees as central to our CSR. However central to that selection, and central to the implementation of any CSR pro-

gram, is realistic goals. I hope my company grows with the trees we plant to have a truly massive impact, but I know that Yellow Tree Marketing alone cannot save the environment. But by demonstrating to others the true benefits of a CSR program and providing the following framework, I hope to encourage enough companies to take seriously their role as members and leaders of their communities in tackling such seemingly intractable problems.

Step One: Less Is More

First, and while following the above steps with regards to employee buy-in and something which dovetails with your existing brand identity, pick an initiative that is **simple, concrete, and impactful**. Grandiosity can be the enemy of the good, and so rather than seeking to single-handedly reverse climate change, I settled on planting trees. The link between the program and its purpose is obvious, and while this act will be small and simple at the beginning, as we at Yellow Tree Marketing continue, the program has an impact that can (and literally will) grow over time.

Step Two: Teamwork Makes the Dreamwork

Second, choose **the right plan and the right people** to

help you execute that plan. Every time we get a new client, we plant a tree. And after every month they stay with us, we plant another tree. Such simplicity helps keep the program easily understood and identified, by employees, customers, and community members alike. Sign up? Tree. Every month after that? Tree. Do not make it more complicated than it has to be. Related to that, finding the right people is of utmost importance. Part of social responsibility is the desire to see positive change and the best way to do that is not reinventing the wheel, so we partnered with One Tree Planted. They plant all of the trees and keep our company and customers updated on their growth. Again, following this simple guideline eases the implementation of the program while increasing its impact. Our clients understand the purpose behind what we do, and part of our identity is that purpose. They can easily communicate that purpose to others who might want to be involved, and by finding the right partner we made this as easy as possible.

Step Three: Always Be Closing

Last, but certainly not least, **use your brand as a call to greater action**. If grandiosity is the enemy of the good, complacency is the enemy of

excellence. Do not create a program and sit back proudly. Truly integrating the purpose and goals of the CSR program are essential to maximizing its success. I have mentioned specific ways above that can be done, but apply all the energy and business savvy to think of new and innovative ways to grow your program. In the long-term, the brand and CSR program will be identified with each other, and investment in either is an investment in both. Our purpose is in our name, it is in our logo, it is part of the first conversation we have with a new client. While this increases our brand identity with our purpose, it also increases awareness of the viability of CSR programs.

DO NOT MISS THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

Ever since TOMS Shoes captured the market with their One-for-One model, it has been replicated to sell everything from books and backpacks to water and watches. What has set these companies apart was their commitment to giving back—from TOMS shoe drops to We Watch planting trees for each timepiece sold (a model after my own heart). The brand and the business were inextricably linked with the betterment. The key to that success, however, cannot be easily replicated. TOMS burst

onto the scene capitalizing on a developing trend, the emergence of the conscious consumer.

By giving your company a purpose, one so closely tied with its branding, with its work, you do the same for your employees—you give them purpose. While some have a passion for shoe design or watch construction, most derive their sense of belonging, of purpose, from working towards something greater. A glance over history shows the power of the boycott and the transformation of the marketplace that has occurred since the rise of conscious consumerism demonstrates a new way of wielding that same power. Consumers have realized the power they can have on the greater good. It is time for companies to follow suit. Consumers increasingly want a company that aligns with their values.¹⁵ With spending on CSR programs approaching \$20 billion among Fortune 500 companies alone, the message has been heard loud and clear.¹⁶ But rather than chasing after customers, companies must truly embrace the responsibility they share.

We are all people on this planet, all together in one big community. The pandemic demonstrated how much something almost a world

away can impact us all and how much we all rely on each other, on close and distant members of our community. By relying on and strengthening that sense of community, companies must take seriously our role as community members, and therefore we have an obligation to act on issues negatively impacting our communities. Companies must take seriously their roles as leaders in this emerging way of doing business—to benefit not only the shareholders, but the stakeholders.

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

When it comes to overcoming the problems we collectively face, altruism is not the only answer. I left the nonprofit sector to find a solution and lead by example. I have outlined the real, tangible benefits to employees from implementing a CSR Program. These benefits extend beyond the employee, benefiting the workplace, the company, and the surrounding community. If taken seriously, implementation can reverse the Great Resignation, increase employee well-being, and begin to make meaningful progress on some of the intractable issues we face.

NOTES:

¹ [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/business/business-roundtable-ceos-corporations.html)

[08/19/business/business-roundtable-ceos-corporations.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/business/business-roundtable-ceos-corporations.html).

² <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/06/the-great-resignation-is-not-over/>.

³ <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/corporate-social-responsibility-statistics>.

⁴ https://www.porternovelli.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/02_Porter-Novelli-Tracker-Wave-X-Employee-Perspectives-on-Responsible-Leadership-During-Crisis.pdf.

⁵ https://assets.ey.com/content/dam/ey-sites/ey-com/en_gl/topics/digital/ey-the-business-case-for-purpose.pdf.

⁶ <https://businessagility.institute/learn/whitepaper-employee-engagement/275>.

⁷ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/igniting-individual-purpose-in-times-of-crisis?cid=other-eml-nsi-mip-mck&hlid=10e5a1e24f5b40a4954023913171cf05&hctky=10048743&hdpid=c7533413-0bda-4b1d-8c5a-d4d66a414da3>.

⁸ <https://www.chron.com/business/energy/article/BP-spent-almost-100-million-on-ads-after-spill-1694105.php>.

⁹ <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/21/9365667/volkswagen-clean-diesel-recall-passenger-cars>.

¹⁰ <https://jcsr.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40991-019-0044-9>.

¹¹ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2022/04/220428085820.htm>.

¹² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14616696.2020.1833067>.

¹³ <https://www.gallup.com/analyses/354374/the-american-upskilling-study.aspx>.

¹⁴ <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/10946-greenwashing.html>.

¹⁵ https://www.porternovelli.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/02_Porter-Novelli-Tracker-Wave-X-Employee-Perspectives-on-Responsible-Leadership-During-Crisis.pdf.

¹⁶ <https://hbr.org/2018/01/stop-talking-about-how-csr-helps-your-bottom-line#:~:text=Today%2C%20Fortune%20Global%20500%20firms,for%20a%20attracting%20and%20motivating%20e>

employees.