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Occupying From The Inside

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For those who want to catalyze positive social change, events such as the Net Impact and Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) conferences provide the opportunity to engage with other like-minded individuals to share ideas on how to create social and environmental good through business.

Making an Impact From Inside Out

The Net Impact Conference, held in Portland on October 27-29, drew more than 2,600 attendees ranging from graduate students to working professionals, all united by an eagerness to learn how to overcome some of the world's toughest problems. The overarching theme of the conference is that we can, individually and collectively, make a positive difference wherever we choose to invest our efforts. Net Impact's Executive Director Liz Maw stated during her keynote, "You can take the power of business and change the world. This conference is about helping you come up with your own sustainability and impact plan. We want you to Occupy Wall Street, but from the inside."

Net Impact's mission is to mobilize a new generation to use their careers to drive transformational change in their workplaces and the world. The conference offered more than 100 panels that covered innovative solutions around social innovation, corporate impact, environmental resources, international development, etc.

"You can do well by doing good," Jen Boulden, green business entrepreneur and co-founder, Ideal Bite.

Demands for Corporations to Listen

The Occupy Wall Street movement was referenced time and time again at Net Impact, as an example of enforcing change. According to Occupy Wall Street's Website, "We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%." Part of the movement's demands is to end corporate corruption and greed. Companies need to be regulated, in particular for lobbying efforts. In fact, some companies are actively part of the solution, while others are still learning to listen.

Meanwhile, the BSR Conference was held in San Francisco November 1-4, attracted more than 1,000 top CSR and sustainability professionals from around the globe. The mission of BSR is to work with its international network of more than 250 member companies to develop sustainable business strategies and solutions through consulting, research, and cross-sector collaboration. BSR understands that the best business leaders are those who shape the future -- which means questioning assumptions and examining long-term trends.

Speaking on Hot Topics

Al Gore, former U.S. vice president and co-founder and Chairman of Generation Investment Management, delivered the opening plenary address that rallied up business owners not just to be sustainable but to learn from the Occupy Wall Street movement. Gore described the movement as "a primal scream of democracy" and energized the room with the following anthem, "Now is your time. Reform Wall Street, don't just occupy it."

Also, Aron Cramer, President and CEO of BSR as well as the co-author of Sustainable Excellence: The Future of Business in a Fast-Changing World, explained that "sustainable excellence is that no company can really succeed and achieve excellence without having a thoughtful or integrated approach to sustainability."

Featured topics at the conference included Cross-sector Partnership and Impact measurement, Putting Vision Back Into Community Strategy, Scaling for the New Local and Sustainable Engagement in a Hypertransparent World.

Bottom line

The takeaway from both the Net Impact and BSR conferences is that doing good is not only good for business, but something that many companies need to truly embrace. Eighty-three percent of U.S. consumers want more of the products, services and retailers they use to benefit causes, according to the new 2010 Cone Cause Evolution Study. Furthermore, Ofra Strauss, chairperson of the Board of Directors, Strauss Group in her keynote speech at BSR stated that, "We need to redefine the role of business in society, share values and adopt a new vocabulary...an ethical decision requires dialogue. Everyone counts and really needs to listen."

The role of business to address the world's social, economic and environmental problems is no longer simply a facade erected by public relations departments to boost the bottom dollar line. The communities at both Net Impact and BSR prove that corporate social responsibility is well on its way to being a top priority for every business and every leader. Truly, a "cause" to support that can no longer be ignored is the well-being of the 99%.