

The Rise of Cause Integration

Integrating cause into a company's corporate culture is good for business.

By Reena De Asis

For innovative businesses to create a sustainable impact, long gone are the days of just slapping a ribbon on a product for a "cause" or writing an occasional check for one's nonprofit of choice. Cause, now, goes much deeper than marketing.

Ryan Scott, founder and CEO of Causecast, in his most recent post, refers to the next stage as "cause integration." He emphasizes the main pillars of cause integration being:

- Integration with marketing (commonly referred to as cause marketing)
- Integration with the workforce (employee engagement programs around volunteering and giving)
- Integration with business operations (CSR and Social Enterprises)

Cause integration is not cause marketing. Cause integration is about incorporating cause into a company's ethos and the programs they implement as a means to that end. Usually inspired by the founder or championed by the CEO, cause becomes fundamental to how an organization conducts its business. It's a convergence at the intersection of cause and business, because doing good is good for business. Nobel Prize winning economist, Milton Friedman expressed this when he wrote, "there is one, and only one, social responsibility of business: to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engage in open and free competition without deception or fraud." Cause integration is strategically incorporating business objectives and the mission of an organization with its charitable goals and programs.

Integration with marketing

Joe Waters, a leading expert on cause marketing and social media for nonprofits expresses there is no better example of cause marketing than Product RED, which has built a top philanthropic brand through its partnerships with Gap, Starbucks and Nike.

Waters defines cause marketing as a partnership between a nonprofit and a for-profit entity for mutual benefit. Cause marketing also offers causes valuable branding and visibility. Yet cause marketing is just one component of cause integration. What about incorporating an employee volunteer program?

Integration with the workforce

Chris Hahn's Best Practices in Employee Volunteerism observes, "employee volunteerism offers a tangible way for businesses to become more personally invested in tackling social problems, to strengthen employee skills and morale, and to cultivate a more positive and productive business environment."

According to the State of Corporate Citizenship in the United States 2009, "Despite the tough economy in 2009, support for employee volunteering remained strong with 83 percent of executives of large companies re-affirming their support." For example, Target team members volunteered 430,000 community service hours in 2010. Target team members have also improved more than 3,000 K-12 school libraries. Leading-edge companies care about addressing social issues and encourage their workforce to take action.

Integration with business operations

Furthermore, cause integrated business strategy is the rationale of how an organization creates, delivers and captures value. For instance, the One for One movement is a shift from the traditional ways of doing business (i.e., TOMS Shoes, Smarty Pants, Bodoblankets.com, etc.). It's important to function beyond the short-term profit motive and pay greater attention to the impact on the social economy and collaborate with organizations working to improve communities to make a positive impact in the world.

Cause integration

Visionary leaders need to ask themselves, how can global challenges be met with innovative, original and important solutions? How can they incorporate cause into their corporate culture? For example, NextStep Recycling implements a three-part mission by providing technology and training to children and adults who have barriers to employment and education, while protecting the environment and community from hazardous waste. They educate disadvantaged Oregonians by providing refurbished computers that allow access to technology and the Internet, provide skill-training opportunities to those who are considered unemployable and recycle computer hardware and other electronics, keeping hazardous waste out of the soil and environment. By providing participants the opportunity to learn about the power of technology and the impact waste technology has on our society, NextStep seeks to assist human and community development. By creating a network of people and organizations, NextStep also seeks to enhance participants' impact on issues of local concern.

Lastly, Harvard business professor, James E. Austin's research reveals that the more effective collaborations are characterized by clear purpose, mission congruency, high and mutually balanced value creation, effective communication and deep reciprocal commitment. In *Marketing's Role in Cross-Sector Collaboration*, he proposes three cross-sector collaboration continuum stages: philanthropic, transactional and integrative. Cause integration is essentially the integrative stage, where "collaborations evolve into strategic alliances that involve deep mission mesh, strategy synchronization, and values compatibility."

Now is the time to engage and be part of the long-term solution where businesses integrate with the nonprofit sector. These worlds don't have to be exclusive; a mutually beneficial relationship is well within reach.