

CSI - red herring or social imperative?

 By [Dhatchani Christian](#)

10 Sep 2013

Anyone with their finger on the pulse of marketing would know that we are moving towards a future of generosity, caring and sustainability.

The buzzwords in marketing today are all about giving back. Brands compete to sound more sustainable than each other, they offer a percentage of proceeds to worthy causes and they share their CSI initiatives in deluges of social media posts.

But what if we said that CSI is not the saviour it's dressed up to be?

Align to your business strategy

It seems like a bizarre assertion to make. Corporate Social Investment is all about supporting communities in areas that make a positive impact - such as education or healthcare. It is quite obviously the right thing to do.

The problem with CSI, however, is that when it is not connected to the business of doing business, or not aligned to business strategy in some way, it becomes its own disconnected 'giving department', or one of marketing's responsibilities. It is seen as a separate initiative from the core business; a cost centre and a nice-to-have.

CSI also lets the C-suite off the hook without making any fundamental changes. It appeases any guilt that business leaders may feel at single-mindedly pursuing profits. It appeases any guilt that customers feel about buying products or services from a company that may have a negative overall impact on society and the environment.

Understanding your purpose

We believe that creating truly sustainable organisations is about purpose. When businesses really understand their purpose - the why that drives their actions and decisions - it becomes impossible to look at social responsibility and business as unrelated activities.

Take FNB, for example. Their brand idea of 'how can we help you?' aligns perfectly with their business intent of 'helping to create a better world', and this has pushed them to not simply make their customers' lives easier, but to inspire South Africans to help one another.

Purpose is a powerful business driver. It energises employees to perform better and it forms an emotional connection with customers that helps drive sales. It provides tangible business value, much more so than the 'feel-good factor' of CSI, and

that makes businesses more likely to commit to it.

Knowing your purpose means figuring out why the world is better off with your business in it. And that will force you to look at your business processes as a whole, and to start changing the way you do business.

So how can you start changing the conversation in your business from CSI to purpose?

- Think about ways to create social value while also creating business value. If social change is not contrasted against profit-making, it will be taken much more seriously at the boardroom table. Innovate around business models that make money or generate value for the business AND empower or employ communities - models such as Paperight, for example, or M-Pesa.
- Start with the business strategy. Why does your business exist? What are you in the business of? Answering that question will help define a core purpose. Google is in the business of making information accessible, for example. Nike is in the business of motivating people to stay active. Think beyond the products and services you offer.
- Consider the social context in which your business operates, the factors that directly impact on it, and the key strengths that it can leverage for social good. You may have a powerful distribution network that could help deliver educational material; you may have suppliers who struggle to access work. Make it relevant to your business, not some sexy cause.
- Think very long term. CSI plans are usually medium term, but the longer the time horizon, the more social investment just falls into place. If your business struggles with getting the right skills, an investment in education - such as a partnership with a university - is the right way to go. If your regional office suffers from crime, eradicating the hopelessness that leads to crime in that community would make sound business sense. How could you create jobs in that community?

Thinking purposefully is ultimately a more sustainable way to create social change than CSI is, because it does not pit social investment against profits.

A business that is truly behind a clear organisational purpose cannot separate out social investment from its day-to-day operations. Profit and purpose become mutually reinforcing, and the survival of the business depends on making a positive impact on the communities it touches. That is certain to capture the attention of the C-suite!

ABOUT DHATCHANI CHRISTIAN

Dhatchani's corporate career began at Research Surveys where she was trained in research methodology, worked across diverse products and industries, she made the leap to 'client side' and brand management at Colgate Palmolive SA. She spent time in the sales environment at Standard Bank and marketing strategy at FNB before joining Yellowwood in 2011.

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