

CHAPTER 5

How Sustainability Is Changing Traditional Functions of Business

Sustainability has quantifiable impacts on the general public's willingness to buy from, invest in, and work for a given company—all things that directly impact corporate success.

The Reputation Institute relies on data to make the case. Their 2018 Global CR RepTrak 100 global survey, which is based on more than 230,000 ratings, found:

Globally, corporate social responsibility (CSR) drives 40 percent of corporate reputation. Companies that excel in CSR receive massive levels of support, with over 90 percent of the general public willing to purchase their products or over 80 percent willing to give the company the benefit-of-the-doubt in a time of corporate crisis.¹

The bottom line for businesses is that companies with an excellent reputation perform better and are insulated against failure.

The Power of Purpose—What You Make Is Not What You Do

Public interest in corporate responsibility is unusually high: The September 2019 issue of *Fortune* article “A New Purpose for the Corporation”

¹Reputation Institute. 2018. “Corporate Social Responsibility—Align Perception with Reality.” <https://insights.reputationinstitute.com/blog-ri/corporate-social-responsibility-align-perception-with-reality>. (accessed October 5, 2019)

featured the results of a survey that found that nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of American adults agree that public companies should be “mission driven” as well as focused on shareholders and customers. The research found that many Americans (64 percent) say that a company’s “primary purpose” should include “making the world better” and many also say it should include “making money for shareholders.”

The power of purpose comes through talking to people like Henk Campher, vice president of corporate marketing and head of #giveahoot for Hootsuite. Henk remembers when sustainability started out, more than 20 years ago, with the model of minimizing negative impacts (do less harm). By contrast, “At Salesforce from day one it has been all about how the company can maximize the positive impacts.”

He quotes the CEO, Marc Benioff: “The Business of Business is to Improve the State of the World.”

It’s a pretty unique setup. How does a B2B CRM company beat Tesla as the most innovative company? They do it by allowing employees to completely be themselves. If you’re distracted by not being you, you can’t be brave and innovative.

Describing the well-known situation several years ago, when the head of HR confronted the CEO with the fact that the organization did not offer pay parity for men and women, his response was incredulous, but he didn’t deny it. He asked for the data, stating “if it is true, bring me the data so we can fix it.” When it was revealed that it would cost \$3,000,000 to bring the company back in line, “Nobody blinked. It’s just what they needed to do.” Henk explains that because of its growth by acquisition, the company has had to check every year to make sure that they’re still living their values.

According to the chief ethical use officer “That’s the culture. It’s open to challenge. It makes it difficult sometimes. Sometimes there’s no answer because no one else has done it. We set up an office for ethical use. How do we know our products are improving the state of the world?”

For Henk the challenges that he sees, and the progress he has seen made, continue to ignite his passion, even after 20 years working in sustainability:

This isn't about advancing myself, it is about being part of something that's advancing the world. I cannot live in a world where a kid dies every 3 seconds from a preventable disease, or where climate change is going to choke our future. But I can live in a world where I am working to help fix those things. I've managed to marry my passion for changing the world and my skill at story-telling. I was just lucky to be able to marry those two.²

As with the discussion in Chapter 1, we can quantify *the business benefits* of being a purpose-driven organization.

Attracting, Hiring, Retaining, and Engaging Employees

57 percent of the general public are willing to work for a company with an excellent reputation—Reputation Institute, 2018³

Typically, baby boomers favored workplaces that offered stability and high pay. Research shows that new, younger workers entering the workforce today want something different. Millennials will make up 75 percent of the workforce by 2025 and they are looking for socially responsible employers. They want purpose and their paycheck to be aligned 100 percent of their time. Cone Communications' Millennial Employee Engagement Study (2016) showed that more than three-quarters (76 percent) are using corporate values as a screen when they seek employment.⁴

Writing in *Talent Economy*, Peggy Pelosi explains:

For businesses that want to stay competitive in the hiring market, the first thing to know is that millennials are not looking for the

²H. Campher. September 12, 2019. Interview with the author.

³Reputation Institute. 2018. "Companies with an Excellent Reputation Perform Better and Are Insulated Against Failure." <https://www.reputationinstitute.com/solutions>, (accessed October 5, 2019).

⁴Cone Communications. 2016. "Millennial Employee Engagement Study." https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56b4a7472b8dde3df5b7013f/t/5819e8b303596e3016ca0d9c/1478092981243/2016+Cone+Communications+Millennial+Employee+Engagement+Study_Press+Release+and+Fact+Sheet.pdf

same things from their employers that the boomers were. That means your organization will have to evolve and innovate in order to stay relevant, attract quality employees and retain top performers in the new millennial marketplace.⁵

The Cone study also found that:

- 75 percent of millennials would take a job for a *lower salary* if it meant working for a socially responsible company.
- 64 percent of millennials say that they will not take a job if a potential employer does not have strong corporate responsibility practices.

A company makes certain products and/or services. They may be diversified or specialized, but they also need to remember that what they *make* is not the same as what they *do*. The products and services themselves have no intrinsic value; their value lies in their impact of peoples' lives—both intended and unintended. Like the classic example of the three masons (see box), it is important to help employees to remember why what they are doing matters to people every day. The value that they bring to their task is far more than the ability to bring home a paycheck. Knowing how what you make impacts peoples' lives is the core of defining your corporate responsibility—knowing how people who use your goods or services benefit from your products and maximizing that positive impact.

It is hard for anyone to get truly excited about the number of linear feet of wallboard being produced or the tons of aggregates being crushed, but when the focus shifts to how those things are used in real life it become more inspiring for any worker when the company mission is linked to the fact that they

are building the homes where we will raise our children, the hospitals where they will be born, the schools where they will be

⁵P. Pelosi. 2019. "Millennials Want Workplaces with Social Purpose. How Does Your Company Measure Up?" <https://www.chieflearningofficer.com/2018/02/20/millennials-want-workplaces-social-purpose-company-measure/>, (accessed August 9, 2019).

educated, the offices where they will work, the houses of worship where they may one day get married and start a family of their own ... and the roads that they'll use to get to those places.

Suddenly the mission of the organization becomes more than production figures—it becomes “Materials for Building Our World,” which became Lafarge’s company tagline for several years.

Social purpose organizations are not immune from losing sight of the bigger picture. The National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA)

The Three Masons

A man came across three masons who were working at chipping chunks of granite from large blocks. The first seemed unhappy at his job, chipping away and frequently looking at his watch. When the man asked what he was doing, the first mason responded: “I’m hammering this rock.”

The second mason, seemingly more interested in his work, was hammering diligently and when asked what it was that he was doing, answered, “I’m molding this block of rock so that it can be used to construct a wall.”

The third mason was working carefully, taking time to stand back and evaluate his work. He chipped off small pieces until he was satisfied that it was the best he could do. When he was questioned about his work he proudly stated, “I am building a cathedral!”

owns and administers the Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS). A total of 190 million people are enrolled in plans that report HEDIS results. The organization’s mission was summed up as “measuring the quality of healthcare.” Not only was this hardly unique (many other organizations made the same claim) it was also only an accurate summation of what the organization made; an annual report showed how more and more plans were adopting more and more services to score higher on their rankings (that were published annually in *U.S. News & World Report*).

The “bigger” picture was an increasing number of health plans offering an increasing number of services that were linked to improved health

outcomes. Applying this principle, the organization adopted a new tagline “measuring quality, improving health care,” which more accurately captures the impact of what the organization does for the lives of 190 million people. This remains the organization’s tagline more than a decade after the change was first suggested.

Sometimes a direct linkage to the sustainability program can be made. For Lafarge, the tagline “Materials for Building our World” inspired “Building a Better World.” For Sodexo “Making Every Day a Better Day” begat the “Better Tomorrow Plan” (which initially was in a speech: “if we are truly making every day a better day then we are also making every tomorrow a better tomorrow”). In this way, the sustainability program became an outgrowth of the social purpose of the organization and helped drive that social purpose home to prospective employees as well as existing employees, communities, and, of course, customers.

Campher touches on this benefit as well: “One of the reasons we do it, is people. In a highly competitive market, how do you get the best minds? You attract them because we appeal to their values.”

It is important to engage employees based on what is important to them. The Washington DC region is notorious for its traffic congestion. The 2016 State of the Commute Survey conducted by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG) found that 43 percent of survey respondents reported changing jobs or residence due to their commutes, and 63 percent made commuting the only factor considered in their decision whether to accept a job.⁶

WGL, a Washington DC-based energy company, allows employees to work from home 1, 2, or 3 days per week (depending on their role, job requirements, etc.) as part of their “Reduce the Commute” program. The program was recognized by the Washington DC District Department of Transportation with the 2019 Telework Employer Ambassador Award from goDCgo for the company’s data-driven telework program.⁷ After

⁶MWCOG. 2016. “Commuter Connections: State of the Commute Survey.” https://www.mwco.org/assets/1/28/Item__5_-_2016_SOC_Draft_Technical_Report_092016.pdf, (accessed September 12, 2019).

⁷goDCgo. 2019. “Employer Ambassador Awards.” <http://info.godcgo.com/ambassadorawardswinners>, (accessed August 22, 2019).

many years of reporting miles avoided (not traveled) and the associated cost (for gasoline) and environmental savings (CO₂e),* participation in the program had stagnated. It was rejuvenated by adding two questions to the employee survey: (1) How much time do you save? and (2) How important is this program to you?

The results demonstrated that, thanks to the local congestion, the average employee who worked from home once a week saved the equivalent of more than a week and a half of extra annual leave (vacation). The second question revealed that employees who participated value the program above 9 on a scale of 1 to 10. Surprisingly, the importance did not correlate to distance of commute or to the gender of the employee. The Talent Acquisition Team added that fact to their conversations with all prospective employees (to help attract, hire, and retain employees) so the sustainability effort that (also) has prevented 57,000 trips, avoided driving 1,560,000 miles, and saved more than 70,000 gallons of fuel and avoided 618 CO₂e since 2010 is also helping make the company a more attractive employer.

Michel Landel, CEO of the Sodexo Group, described that organization's commitment to improving the quality of life of its employees as a driver of both customer and shareholder satisfaction in "The Myth of Shareholder Value" in *Forbes* in 2015:

It's not a sustainable model ... for a company to serve its customers, it needs to engage its people, not destroy labor. Companies have a role in society. We can't ignore the world we live in. We have to make sure employees have a decent life.⁸

That sense of accountability to employees is not unique. While most corporate structures are built like a pyramid, narrowing down to the "top" management, Ted Balfe, president and CEO of Lafarge Construction

*CO₂e reductions from WGL's telework program were not included or claimed as part of the company's overall greenhouse gas emissions reductions results as they were outside the company's operational control (Scope 3).

⁸P. Dwyer. 2015. "The Myth of Shareholder Value," *Bloomberg*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2015-05-11/shareholder-value-isn-t-the-only-way-to-run-a-successful-company>, (accessed August 28, 2019).

Materials, was known for physically turning the organization chart upside-down to illustrate that the fate of more than a thousand employees (and their families) rested on the decisions of a few people. “Make a mistake, and you may be gone,” he would say. “But if I make a mistake, hundreds of people, and their families, pay the price.” Far from arrogance, he was saying this to reinforce the sense of responsibility and accountability he felt for the people who had placed their trust in him and his leadership team.

All corporate leaders ought to have this awareness reinforced occasionally and, better yet, to extend it beyond their employees, customers, and shareholders to include all their stakeholders. For example, applying the same thinking to relationships with suppliers (through giving them business and sharing best practices) a company has access to better supplies and materials from which to make its products or deliver its services. Engaging in environmentally damaging practices can impact the health and well-being of everyone in the community and, in the case of climate change, the entire world.

Bertrand Collomb understood this well and put it succinctly:

Trust for any economic player will be based on the perception that it is useful for society, that its economic success is a plus for the common good, and that its success can be achieved without abusing people, inside and outside the organization, and without being unethical.⁹

Discussion Questions

1. Apply the concept “what you make is not what you do” to a sample business or organization. How does their current messaging align with this?
2. How would you improve their messaging to be more purpose-based?
3. Can you apply the same principle to yourself? What impact are you—or do you hope—to make? On whom?

⁹S. Rangan, October, 2015. *Performance and Progress: Essays on Capitalism, Business, and Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, p. 471). <https://www.amazon.com/Performance-Progress-Capitalism-Business-Society/dp/0198744285>.

Earning Passionate Customers

Each time they make a purchasing decision customers choose to support or punish a set of established economic, political, social, and faith paradigms. While some people find themselves limited in their choices due to economic necessity or geography, many have the power to choose. Ultimately consumers must face the decision—are they willing to pay more, travel further, or even do without something in order to reward companies (and systems) that share our values or do they turn a blind eye and remain passively complicit?

Increasingly customers are aware that every time they spend money, they are effectively casting a vote for the kind of world they want. Shelton Group’s research into consumer attitudes and behaviors applies here as well. “Consumers want to buy from companies that have environmental and social purpose. They see these things as inter-related, just as the sustainable development goals do,” says Shelton.¹⁰ Corporate structures may separate social and environmental efforts, but she points out that “that’s the way everyone is looking at it, other than corporate America, that it is all one.”

This points out that the very nature of sustainability is to link social, environmental, and governance issues together, whereas corporate structures tend to compartmentalize them. Customers who view the company do not care where or how those things are managed, as long as they are managed and managed well.

In 2018 Shelton Group released the results of the research in *Social Purpose Is the New Black*. They found:

Consumers believe companies should take a stand—and they’ll support that stand with their purchases; 64 percent of those who said it is “extremely important” for a company to take a stand on a social issue said they were “very likely” to purchase a product based on that commitment.

- Hellmann’s mayonnaise supports the production of cage-free eggs, a key ingredient in its product.
- The TOMS One for One program matches each pair of shoes bought with the donation of shoes to a child in need.

¹⁰S. Shelton. August 7, 2019. Interview by the author.

- Stella Artois has been supporting clean drinking water for people in the developing world since 2015 and asking consumers to “Buy a Lady a Drink” through their chalice purchase promotion.

Shelton explains the importance of linking to causes that make sense from a business standpoint:

These companies started with their core business and identified a social purpose that made sense for them. This doesn't mean companies can't or shouldn't get involved in a variety of causes, but it's much more likely consumers will remember your brand's cause if it relates to your primary product or service. So, that's where you should focus your storytelling and marketing efforts.

Other examples of strategic giving that link back to the organization's core mission are Lafarge's partnership with Habitat for Humanity International and Sodexo's creation of its own STOP Hunger not-for-profit and International Food Waste Coalition. No one will question a construction materials company donating construction materials (and labor) to help build homes for those in the community, nor a food service company understanding the importance and value of having enough to eat.

In fact, in the Shelton study, more than half of the people who could name a brand that had improved in their minds because of a social stand it had taken said it was because the brand “took a stand on an issue that aligns with products and services they offer.” Slightly *fewer* recalled brands that supported one of the respondent's personal favorite causes.¹¹ This seems to indicate that the connection between the cause and the core business is the strongest when the cause and the business purpose are seen as a natural alignment.

Out of 30 percent of those who named a brand that had improved in their minds because of the social stand it took,

¹¹Shelton Group. 2018. “Social Purpose Is the New Black.” <https://storage.googleapis.com/shelton-group/Pulse%20Reports/Brands%20%26%20Stand%20-%20Final%20Report%202018.pdf>, (accessed August 12, 2019).

- 16 percent said it was because the brand “took a stand on an issue that aligns with products and services they offer.”
- 13 percent said it was because they “found out they support one of my favorite causes.”
- 11 percent said it was because the brand “took a stand on a current social issue.”

Shelton further explained that “the most meaningful stances are those that make the deliberate decision to walk away from money for a purpose, whether it is environmental or social.” Examples of this include CVS walking away from \$2 billion in revenue by refusing to sell cigarettes, companies that forgo participation in “Black Friday” sales events, and Chick-fil-A’s policy to close on Sundays.

Of this actions, perhaps nothing represents aligning and rebranding with social purpose more than CVS’ decision. Not only did the company stop selling tobacco products, it rebranded itself as CVS Health. Beyond the initial public relations and social media frenzy, the company was rewarded with higher sales and stock price. Those trends have continued, according to *Cigarettes Out. Health In. An analysis of the rebrand of CVS Health*, a 2015 Arthur W. Page Society Case Study.¹²

This is not surprising, as we saw earlier in the Monks and Lajoux research (see section “Attracting Investment Capital” in Chapter 2), corporate reputation is an integral driver of shareholder value. While shareholders may have initially been concerned about the lost revenue, customers rewarded the company standing behind its values and, thus, revenues did not suffer. In this way, taking a stand on a social value that links to the business helps to reduce risk.

In July 2019 *Forbes* reported on a study that offered similar results and insights.¹³ Accenture found that a brand’s purpose, and the trust that accompanies it, influences purchasing decisions. They’re basing those

¹²CVSHealth.2015. “CigarettesOut.HealthIn.AnanalysisoftherebrandofCVSHealth.” <https://communication.depaul.edu/about/news-and-events/2015/Documents/ArthurPageSocietyAwards15/PageCVSStudy15.pdf>, (accessed August 12, 2019).

¹³J. Fromm. 2019. “Brands Still Matter, If They’re Fueled by Purpose.” <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jefffromm/2019/07/11/brands-still-matter-if-theyre-fueled-by-purpose/#3486eeba3b0a>, (accessed August 12, 2019).

decisions on how brands operate in the real world. The article quotes Ivan Pollard, chief marketing officer at General Mills. “Numerous studies demonstrate over 60 percent of Millennials say, for example, that ‘it is essential that a brand shares and promotes the values I care about.’” But, he cautions, it is not about marketing or messaging:

In today’s world, a brand telling its consumers its purpose is not very effective. With the pervasive transparency of today, to win a consumer’s trust a brand should be what it says it is, do what it believes it should and only then will other people say what its purpose might be.

Purpose is the driver of authenticity and trust. Without a meaningful purpose, brands will struggle for relevancy and, thereby, lose opportunities for increased share in an ever more competitive environment.

Investors That Are True Stakeholders

Short-term investors are more interested in making money, and less in the long-term viability of the company. In many ways, they mark a distinction between shareholders and stakeholders. If they are not investing over the long term (as employees, customers, suppliers, and communities are) then it is fair to say that they are not stakeholders at all. Companies should then do well by focusing on those who “buy and hold” as well as the other stakeholder groups mentioned above.

Indeed, the long term investment strategy in companies one believes in has long been the model espoused by Warren Buffett, one of the most successful investors of all time. The focus on maximizing short-term (i.e., quarterly) returns tends to create “bubbles” as we have seen in everything from tulip bulbs in the 1600’s to the housing market in the early 2000’s (where flippers bought/updated/sold in record numbers) followed by crashes. Increasingly investors are again recognizing the wisdom of taking the longer view, based on the stark lessons of the Great Recession of 2008.

The Long-Term Approach: Building a Legacy

What would inspire a 176-year-old whisky maker to launch a project and to sponsor a 3-day meeting of marine biologists from around the world

dedicated to the preservation and cultivation of the Native European Flat Oyster?

Louise Schiavone, journalist and senior lecturer at Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School in Washington, DC and Baltimore, Maryland, caught up with Peter Nelson, operations director for the Glenmorangie Company (part of the wine and spirits group of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton S.A.), at the 3-day Native Oyster Restoration Alliance conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. He told a conference of professionals from government, science, business, and academia:

quite bluntly, we decided that water and the ocean are a really good thing for us. We want to do things outside of making whisky that improve our reputation or improve our sustainability. Number one thing is profit: you have to make money.

She went on to interview Dan Laffoley, principal advisor on marine science and conservation for the Global Marine and Polar Program for the Switzerland-based International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN),

If you look at certain parts of the drinks sector, they invest in a different way against time. Glenmorangie invests over a considerable period of time because that's how long it takes to make the product. Their customer base is faithful to them. They buy the latest special releases. So, you've got a very time-based commitment which matches well with trying to do what they're doing with oyster reefs.

The point of the Glenmorangie story, Laffoley told Schiavone, is this:

You can talk the talk. And we see the FTSE 100 has the "Green Awards," which I'm sure has considerable value as a beacon for what industry should be doing. But in the middle of this you actually want to have real things happening in real places. That's what's exciting about the Glenmorangie model: the fact that you do have real things happening in real places that are groundbreaking.¹⁴

¹⁴L. Schiavone. September 13, 2019. "The Time Has Come to Talk About Oysters," *LA Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-time-has-come-to-talk-about-oysters/>

Indeed, The Glenmorangie Company is doing something no other whisky company is doing in Scotland. Its inception, to be clear, was motivated by the need to comply with the changing landscape of environmental regulations and, also, to appeal to emerging green-minded younger consumers to give them the final incentives, as it were, to spend a little extra on premium Scotch whisky. “When I talk about sustainability, I’m not really talking about the planet or what’s to become of it,” said Nelson at the conference. “We need to be sustainable because we believe we’ll be making more whisky into the future, providing employment, providing pleasure to people, and creating profit.”

Note how this incorporates the idea of “what you make is not what you do”—the focus is not on increasing the number of bottles or barrels but rather on pleasure (presumably from the whisky itself) and also employment opportunities as well as generating a profit for the owners.

Discussion Questions

1. Have the values of an organization influenced your decision to purchase or not?
2. Do you look for responsible products or is it the overall company that matters more?
3. How should management “test” their stands with their own employee base? Should they? What should they do if a percentage of their employees disagree with the company stand?

From Storytelling to Engagement

The role of communications department has dramatically and irrevocably changed in recent years. The instant-information age has not only changed the ways in which information is shared, it has exponentially increased the amount of information that people both need and receive. In media relations, the news cycle has expanded to 24 hours; and the increasing prevalence and importance of nontraditional social media (and the increasing influence of bloggers and citizen-journalists) have required more than a change in tactics.

These changes in the world around us have fundamentally changed—increased—stakeholder expectations and, as a result, traditional communications functions are being redefined as well. Organizations that wish to communicate with credibility are moving from “spin” and toward “transparency,” inviting and hosting the conversation that increasingly must be more open about their aspirations and their efforts to achieve them—sometimes even acknowledging their shortcomings. In this way, companies shift their focus to actions and a higher degree of transparency with stakeholders than ever before.

This is why the connection between sustainability programs and corporate communications efforts is more than a philosophical one. Because of the strong and increasing importance that employees, customers, clients, and communities place on the environmental, social, and economic impacts an organization has, many of the duties traditionally assigned to a company’s communications department to build internal buy-in (organizational culture and employee engagement) and reputational capital (external, community, and public relations) can best be accomplished by maximizing the effective development, implementation, management, and communication of sustainability efforts across a company.

Companies often focus on telling “their story” and wanting people to know it. “We want to be a loved brand” is the charge that marketers and communicators hear every day. If people only understood who we are, the logic goes, they would appreciate us more.

There are some fundamental lessons from the dating world that they need to consider if they want to build a sustainable relationship and not just engage in a series of one-night stands (transactions).

First, like a person, a business cannot, will not, and should not aspire to be loved by everyone.

- Do they want customers to love them for the amazing experience the business gives them?
- Do they want regulators to love their honorable compliance with the rules established for their industry or business?
- Do they want your suppliers to love them for their generous and flexible terms and conditions?

What happens when doing one directly conflicts with another and the business must choose? For example, if suppliers are unable to provide what is needed to give the customer that “amazing” experience?

In short, trying too hard to be loved by everyone will earn you the respect of no one.

Another lesson is that if you want to be loved, you need to love yourself first.

The key to passionate customer loyalty often lies with employees. Make sure that they love the business and its values and put that into visible expression every day in front of every customer. Make that your story.

A long-term relationship requires commitment. People need to fall in love with enduring attributes, not the temporary or illusory.

Communications departments that are tasked with putting a good face on things in order to get people to love your brand, marketers or business development people who promise the stars and the moon (without worrying about whether the business can deliver on its promises) are trying to make people fall in love with who you wish you were, or who you want to be. That’s not the same thing as who you are.

The last thing, and perhaps the most important of all, is to really focus on having a relationship with them. This is where storytelling can only go so far. Just like a date with a new interest or a long-term partner, each interaction is comprised of give-and-take, of sharing ideas, and not simply telling the other about their day.

Storytelling is a common brand engagement strategy because, when done well, it connects users to an organization emotionally.

The “invitation to a conversation” strategy drives engagement to a distinctly higher level.

That is why some companies are shifting from telling “their story” to the real value of using their story as an invitation to a conversation. Increasingly people are not interested in just hearing (or reading) a company story, they want to interact. When they post on a company page (or website like Yelp), tweet or (even) write a letter, they *expect* a real response, not a form letter. They want and expect their concerns to be addressed.

Asbury Senior Living retirement community understands that people have strong perceptions about retirement communities and that baby boomers, in particular, more often are “aging in place” and only seeking

a community when they need care. People are often reluctant to leave the homes that they have known and move somewhere that they associate with the skilled nursing care and institutional settings where they may have seen their parents spend their final years.

In 2011 Asbury launched a promotional campaign for their HealthAbility program featuring senior residents snow tubing, competing in the Senior Olympics, and even skydiving. The idea, recalls Mike Solomon, a VP of Marketing who has spent years creating experiential brands, was more than simply telling their story:

The campaign was really ahead of its time because, by showing seniors living their best lives, were able to start conversations about aging and retirement living. Rather than seeing it as a showcase for what we offered, people responded by opening up and telling us their “bucket lists” of what they always wanted to do.

“By voluntarily contributing their wants and dreams through a personal story, customers were actually inserting themselves into Asbury’s brand promise. The upside benefit to Asbury is its customers were helping to define the its brand, keeping it rich and continually relevant,” explains Solomon.¹⁵

In the case of digital media, unlike people who tend to act more politely in public, the knowledge that the conversation is taking place where others are privy to what is being said—by both parties—often makes it more uncomfortable for the business. That is why many will respond with a request to “reach out to us directly” and sharing their contact information.

Other companies will answer complaints and questions in the public forum, recognizing and appreciating that those online, public interactions are part of a business story; and can actually help define a business.

Fast food company Wendy’s is known for engaging and doing so with a bit of humor (but never at customers’ expense). When two other companies engaged in a friendly banter about who was selling more over a particular holiday weekend, Wendy’s chimed in asking why they were arguing which

¹⁵M. Solomon. 2019. Correspondence with the author.

of them was the “second best” sandwich. It was clever, a bit cheeky, and showed that the company has a sense of humor. People now tweet @wendys hoping to get a response. At the same time, when a customer does report an issue, they are quick to respond: “Oh no! Please DM us the restaurant location and your phone # so we can make this right. Thanks!”

As a result, the company has a reputation for, almost obviously, being responsive to people.

JetBlue does not just respond to everything, they prioritize responding to tweets where they’d be contributing value. They do not use response rate on Twitter so employees are not pressured to hit a goal by sending quick responses to every single tweet that comes in.

In the blog article “Delighting People in 140 Characters: An Inside Look at JetBlue’s Customer Service Success” Laurie Meacham of their digital team is quoted:

We want our employees to engage smartly, and for the conversations to be organic and natural. We look for opportunities to add value and connect with our customers, not just respond to every single mention that comes our way.¹⁶

People who witness your interactions also get an impression based on those interactions. And that becomes part of your story. Even a simple interaction, like an overheard conversation, makes an impression.

Twitter User: Hey @JetBlue can I DM a question about upcoming travel?! Thanks!

@JetBlue: Hi! You sure can! What’s going on?

Twitter User: Sent you over that DM

@JetBlue: Thanks for following up with us. Give us a few minutes and we’ll respond to your DM.

Twitter User: Thanks for being a compassionate and caring airline!
September 4, 2019

¹⁶L. Kolowich. 2014. “Delighting People in 140 Characters: An Inside Look at JetBlue’s Customer Service Success,” *Hubspot*. <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/jetblue-customer-service-twitter>, (accessed September 4, 2019).

Discussion Questions

1. Does the analogy of building a personal relationship compared to transactional interactions hold true for businesses in your experience?
2. Have you ever felt disappointed by an interaction with a company representative? Was it because they seemed more interested in what they wanted from the interaction than meeting your needs?
3. Are businesses prepared to have “real” conversations? Do they empower their employees to do so?
4. Have you ever been surprised by how a company responded to you (or an interaction you witnessed online)? Was it positive or negative for their reputation?

Thought Leadership to Collaborative Cocreation

The first problem with so many people focusing on “thought leadership” is the myriad of people (and organizations) who confer the title on themselves—rather than understanding that, to be a thought leader, one must be considered such by others.

But the bigger problem with the concept is that it focuses too much on the individual and fails to recognize, appreciate, and encourage the concept of “collaborative cocreation,” where more than one person comes together to create something greater than they could have alone.

History is full of examples where great philosophers, artists, and scientists worked together or inspired each other (either collaboratively or competitively): Michelangelo, already a revered master, was challenged anew by the upstart Raphael; and Sir Isaac Newton stated, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.”¹⁷

Eli Whitney did not invent the cotton gin. Versions of it had been around for years. What he did was improve the design, but it is worth noting that others were working on improvements at the same time; and one, John Barclay, was even granted a patent on his slightly different version.

¹⁷https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton.

Alexander Bell was racing against advancements by Thomas Edison when he invented the first working telephone, although Elisha Grey also filed a patent on the same day (he lost his claim in court).

As for Edison, not only did he collaborate—for a time—with Nikola Tesla, he actually in no way invented the incandescent lightbulb. He did find a superior material for the filament, but again that breakthrough was not in isolation.

Gottlieb Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach together designed the first four-wheel automobile with a four-stroke engine, but others, including Benz and Peugeot, were also coming close. Prior to that, several versions (with fewer wheels and different power sources) were already on the scene.

And then there's Orville and Wilbur Wright—the first to fly a heavier-than-air machine. But their efforts started by going back all the way to the drawings of Leonardo DaVinci and built extensively on Otto Liliental's work with gliders. The Wrights deserve credit for what they did—they solved the issue of stability by changing the shape of the wings while turning the rudder (something they observed from birds in flight) — but again, by working together, they were a team.

The point is simply this: The *uber*-focus on individual achievement misses the important point that collaboration and even competition between people often provides the spark and the impetus for transformational change. Today, in the 21st century, we have the unique opportunity afforded by the Internet for like-minded people to work together despite geographic distances, time zone changes, and even languages. While people around the world are trying to come up with great thoughts on their own, there may be someone, half a world away (or across the street) who can offer the missing piece of the puzzle that will turn their idea into a workable solution. Instead of Florence being the nexus for the new Renaissance, it can and likely will be the virtual world.

With issues such as climate change, hunger, poverty, and human rights, do we not owe it to ourselves to work on these issues together?

Discussion Questions

1. Do you prefer to work individually or as a team?
2. Who has inspired you and your thinking?
3. Have you ever had a truly original idea? Was it based on something you heard, read, or saw?

