

Using corporate social responsibility to boost a brand is risky business

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) appears in business in many ways. A small business that contributes to helping with community sports teams, or volunteering expertise on community projects might be demonstrating good CSR. A company that has moved as close to a paperless enterprise as possible can be recognized for helping change consumer behavior while conserving natural resources. It gets harder when a small business tilts toward full engagement in sustainable development, but it is possible to thrive in such a business environment. A company using CSR solely as a marketing tactic for boosting a brand to increase sales, or change an opinion is taking a risk.

When CSR is implemented with a full understanding of the notion, small businesses benefit when employees actively support an initiative that allows volunteer time during paid hours. Under these circumstances, staff support the corporate brand and become strong corporate ambassadors. When residents and other businesses see the commitment of staff and the corporation to an initiative, any support of the brand is earned and likely to be sustained through continuous involvement by the brand. The result is likely to be brand loyalty and recognition.

With loyal customers and long-term clients recognizing the brand that works within a community to build a better local economy and a healthier workforce, sales do follow. Retailers that support fundraising events and teams are prime examples of businesses that earn the business of local consumers. Professional services companies keep their clients and grow as the community prospers.

And with CSR comes trust and relationship building that alludes businesses who blatantly engage in shallow CSR. Businesses that may be challenged for insincere CSR would engage in political events during campaign cycles to garner perceived favours should their candidate win. If such brands are seen only during the few months of a campaign, their commitment to community for the years leading to the next election come into question. Startup businesses often believe that by flashing their logo at events proclaiming a green or “natural” product or service will result in immediate sales are mistaken. Brand loyalty through CSR must be earned and that takes time. Startup businesses might be well advised to use marketing tactics that demonstrate why a product or service is filling a local need or demand at a fair price.



Logos of brands that are overbearing at social activities rather than being subtly displayed may be insincere support. They tend to be screaming, “I support you, therefore you should support me – I care for you.” Really? People see through that tactic and prospects may be offended by the brand, forever. Tag lines and event messages associated with intrusive brands are usually laced with references to family, environment, and health. All tug at emotions, since the brand tries to influence a decision to buy something.

You know a brand has sincerity if it is present, quietly and consistently, supporting community events in the middle of the week in the dead of a Canadian winter. That is proper CSR and an effective marketing tactic.

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