

Maximizing the Impact of Community Outreach Programs

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Today, more companies are recognizing not only the need to be connected to communities in which they operate, but also that this commitment takes much more than just writing a check. A study released by the Committee to Encourage Corporate Philanthropy (CECP) reports that giving programs are being revised to reflect a new emphasis on business and social impact. Programs that are designed to engage management, foster employee retention, build and strengthen relationships and enhance brand awareness are proving to be valuable assets. Consequently, companies are being more strategic and innovative in their philanthropic approaches.

Where to start?

A company should begin by taking a close look at its current community outreach programs and evaluate how these activities relate to its overall mission and corporate culture. Do the programs engage customers and inspire employees? Is the company supporting several charitable organizations with minimal impact or has it developed a single partnership that allows for creating unique collaborative opportunities for employees and customers while fulfilling social responsibilities and enhancing the brand?

After analyzing current and historic outreach, the next step is to gain a clear perception of the core values of the company ... what managers and stakeholders see as the purpose and position the company holds in its community. Do employees and managers want to have a stake in improving the community in which they live and work? How best can your company achieve that objective?

It may be that the company and its employees have a strong interest in education, the arts or child welfare. Once the company has identified these interest areas, it can better develop a plan that efficiently directs funding, time and talent to organizations that share the company's values.

Now is the time to develop a strategic approach to evaluating opportunities. Key questions to ask include:

- How might the opportunity impact the company's financial objectives?
- How will it impact employees? Will they be engaged and inspired? Will morale improve? Does it enhance recruitment?
- How will the outreach activity be perceived among customers?
- Will the activity increase the company's visibility among its various audiences?

Special care should be taken to create long-term relationships within the community, both with the nonprofit organization(s) that the company chooses to support and with its extended community of stakeholders.

Take the example of a Florida dairy for which Curley & Pynn crafted a statewide community relations strategy. With several branches throughout the state, corporate giving was not coordinated, and usually amounted to \$50 for this Little League event, \$100 for a table at that luncheon, etc. Because it was uncoordinated, the company had no way of reviewing potential giving opportunities for effectiveness, and was unable to target its involvement to have the greatest impact both on the community and on the company's bottom line.

Curley & Pynn embarked on a research project in which it contacted community leaders (mayors, city and county commissioners, chamber and business leaders, etc.) to determine what they believed to be the greatest needs in their communities. In each community, one charitable organization stood out ... the Boys & Girls Clubs. Armed with this information, Curley & Pynn helped the dairy establish long-term relationships with the Clubs to provide funding and volunteer manpower. By doing so, the company served a community need while also building its reputation with the leaders in the communities in which it does business.

Once a company has identified a community outreach project, care must be taken to develop a communications strategy that fully supports the program. The CECP study states that companies have realized considerable positive press and consumer approval as a result of using public relations and marketing tactics to communicate about philanthropic outreach. Carefully planned and executed internal and external communications strategies serve to maximize the impact on both the community's needs and the company's business objectives.

Large corporations have long recognized the value of creating a signature program that is designed to galvanize its customers. In many cases, major marketing initiatives have been built around community support programs. One such program is American Express' *The Members Project*, which engages card members through an Internet site to share and vote for project ideas that would make a positive impact on the world and will ultimately result in up to \$5 million being donated to one project.

With a little creativity, smaller companies can also develop signature community outreach programs that bring customers and employees together for a common purpose. Curley & Pynn created such a program for an electric utility company. For nearly a decade, utility customers paid extremely low electric bills due to a long-term contract that locked in fuel costs. New contract negotiations reflected record high oil prices resulting in consumer rate increases of more than 30 percent.

Following research that revealed both a higher than average customer satisfaction ranking, and a genuine employee concern for customers, a signature program was designed to educate and engage the community by completing energy efficient improvements on the homes of low-income residents. The program led to a major re-branding of the utility's conservation program and was successful in galvanizing a local community to take action.

It's important to be aware that a combination of savvy consumers and instant communication is leading to intensive scrutiny of companies' objectives in calling attention to philanthropic endeavors. For instance, while more companies appear to be embracing green incentives, a new term, *greenwashing*, is being used to describe those activities utilizing marketing and public relations tactics to portray a company as environmentally sensitive – even when the company either provides unsustainable products or services, or is not fully embracing a green environment. Care should be taken to not overstate the company's activities in regard to community outreach of any kind.

Regardless, there are ample opportunities for companies of all sizes to make a positive impact on their communities while realizing business-related benefits.