

CREATING A SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE BRAND:

WHY ALL COMPANIES NEED A CSR STRATEGY

J | CONNELLY[®]

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS IS GOOD BUSINESS

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) should be standard practice at every business. From environmental issues, human rights, ethical business practices or donating money and time directly to nonprofit organizations, it's a company's duty to contribute to the wellbeing of society.

Companies that are dedicated to a cause and make it a priority to engrain socially responsible values into the brand's culture are one step ahead. To ignore CSR is to turn a blind eye on consumers, employees, investors and more.

Implementing a CSR and sustainability plan doesn't have to be intimidating. If more business leaders adopt an all-or-something attitude, they'll understand that taking small steps towards something is better than doing nothing, no matter how minor it may seem. Over time, those small actions can add up to make a powerful impact on the business and the community.

In this guide, we'll explain why CSR should be part of every company's brand identity, how to communicate your CSR efforts and how to find opportunities to align with the right initiative.

WHY CSR SHOULD BE PART OF YOUR BRAND IDENTITY

THE SUSTAINABILITY REPORT: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Many companies issue sustainability reports to be transparent about the economic and environmental effects triggered by the everyday jobs of the business. Despite being committed to CSR, companies are still missing the mark when it comes to communicating their efforts.

MEASURE GOALS

The nature of the sustainability report warrants a strong focus on the metrics and financial data that reinforce operational decisions, strategic planning and affect the bottom line. Too many companies fail to measure their goals properly, which prevents stakeholders from understanding the overall impact. The [Global Reporting Initiative](#) and sustainability standards issued by the European Union can help provide guidance.

COMMUNICATE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

SRI is on the rise because investors have discovered that they can align with a company's mission and purpose, not just profit. Stakeholders are looking for companies that are devoted to long-term change and want to understand how they are committing to lasting sustainability. A report that can demonstrate these results will fare better in the eyes of investors.

Using CSR as a tool to differentiate your brand is getting harder to do because consumers expect companies to be socially responsible in some way.

Consider the data:

- [66%](#) of consumers would pay more on a product if it came from a sustainable brand.
- [86%](#) of millennials would take a pay cut to work at a company whose mission and values align with their own.
- [\\$1 of every \\$4](#) invested in the U.S. is done so in a socially responsible way.

Consumers Value Sustainability

A company's social purpose is one of the top factors for brand loyalty. It also informs buying decisions for consumer goods and services.

[A 2018 Nielsen report](#) compared the performance of sustainability claims in the U.S. across three packaged goods categories: coffee, chocolate and bath products. It found that products that claimed sustainable practices like fair labor, eco-friendly packaging and production, use of "clean" ingredients and more, grew twice as fast in sales.

Wealth management, legal and other firms that offer services can practice sustainability through their business' carbon footprint, workplace environment and by aligning with causes they are passionate about.

CSR Attracts Top Talent

Many employees prioritize social responsibility over monetary benefits when choosing where they want to work. CSR is more than just offering paid time off to volunteer. It means inserting sustainable values into your company's purpose. When employers offer opportunities for employees to be involved in CSR, it can result in a more engaged and fulfilled workforce. It enables employees to work towards common business goals while making a difference in the community. Emotionally invested employees are often productive employees.

Invest with Purpose

Socially responsible behavior has found its way into all facets of our lives, including where we put our money to work. Socially responsible investing (SRI) or impact investing considers environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) when seeking investment opportunities.

Companies that practice CSR appeal to likeminded investors. According to a 2018 report from [US SIF Foundation](#), investors held \$11.6 trillion in assets chosen according to ESG criteria at the beginning of 2018, up from \$8.1 trillion in 2016.

6 WAYS TO MAKE YOUR NARRATIVE STAND OUT

A good story makes you think, but a compelling story makes you feel. The same is true for corporate messaging. When communicating CSR initiatives, the goal is to pull the audience in and make them feel something. Here are six ways to do it:

1. Keep it Simple

Narratives should be straightforward and easy to follow. Don't muddy the story with too many technicalities, hard-to-understand explanations and industry speak.

2. Make it Personal

Spend more time on the "why" and less on the "what." Lead the story with why your brand is capable to tackle this issue and why you believe your initiative will make an impact. What is the motivation behind it all?

3. Embrace Conflict

A story without conflict is boring. Reveal obstacles that were overcome, or challenges faced along the way. Talking about the difficulties and how they were resolved helps make the story relatable and more credible.

4. Spill Important Details

What are the memorable details that bring your story to life? A story with a plot is more interesting than a corporate fact sheet.

5. Make it Newsworthy

Focus on what ties your story to current trends and events. Is there a local hook? Is there a human-interest angle? Perhaps there is impressive data that backs up claims or drives home the significance of the story.

6. Use Video

Video is quickly outpacing all other forms of media as the preferred way to consume information. When done right, it can be engaging, attention-grabbing and evoke emotion. Consider using video as one of the vehicles to communicate your story.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PR & CSR

Creating a CSR program for the sole purpose of publicity is inauthentic. New programs take time. Forcing it or using it for the wrong reasons cheapens the purpose and can ultimately hurt the brand. No amount of public relations will make people believe in your efforts if they only seem real on the surface.

This is not to say PR has no place in CSR.

On the contrary, it's an important tool for communicating the company's work and its progress towards positive change. It might also inspire others to follow suit. The role of PR is to ensure all stakeholders are privy to the brand's commitment to CSR. Timing and messaging are two major factors in executing a successful campaign.

Which Comes First: PR or CSR?

The CSR strategy should always come before the PR strategy to avoid the perception of your actions as only PR tactics. When PR follows at a safe distance, the results can help strengthen brand image, reputation and trust. After all, consumers expect brands to take a stand on social issues. They also expect it to be genuine.

Authenticity is First and Foremost

Leading by example is the best way to tell your story. Don't give the appearance of being an environmentally friendly company if you're not enforcing sustainable business practices that align with those claims. No one is buying it.

How to Communicate Your CSR initiatives

The degree to which organizations achieve a more positive image through socially responsible programs depends on how they engage with the public. Prepare a strategy to communicate progress, results, next steps, and if appropriate, how others can get involved.

Focus on the issue, not your company. Shine a light on the cause you're supporting when interviewing with media. Self-serving statements will give off the wrong intent. Describe how you're making a difference rather than congratulating yourself for caring.

Highlight milestones, even small ones. How you get there is half the story. Communicating monthly or even yearly accomplishments towards a bigger goal gives the brand an opportunity to stay relevant and a reason for the media to revisit the story.

Take advantage of timely news stories. A feature article isn't always in the cards. Pay attention to headlines and what's hot in the news. It may open the door for inclusion in trend pieces or opportunities to give your perspective.

The hook is more than just facts and numbers. Data is a key element, but it's not everything. Remember to keep your story relatable by giving context and presenting the issues on a human level. The narrative needs emotion if you want to grab attention.

THE BUSINESS OF DOING GOOD

CSR opportunities are limitless. Businesses have the freedom to invest in an approach that aligns with its core mission and values and is realistic based on the company's resources.

4 Things to Consider When Building a CSR Program

1. Find a Natural Fit

Find something that resonates with your values and can fit seamlessly into the business plan. A good place to start is looking at the strengths and capabilities of the business. Obvious examples include a restaurant chain aligning with hunger relief or a healthcare company dedicated to cancer research. Even if it's not a perfect fit, it shouldn't feel forced.

2. Think Ahead

Brands that are successful in the area of CSR understand the importance of supporting long-term sustainability rather than executing a one-time campaign for publicity's sake. How can you integrate the CSR mindset into all your business practices?

3. Be Realistic

The fastest way to fail is to take on too much. Successful programs take company resources into account. Starting your own nonprofit may sound like a gallant effort, but if you lack the means to implement, partner with an existing one instead. Small steps can still lead to big results.

4. Have a Communications Plan

How you engage the public dictates the effect CSR has on your brand image. CSR influences brand loyalty and attracts top talent and compatible investors. You're doing the business and the community a disservice by not celebrating your efforts.

Take a Stand

Brands have a powerful position when it comes to social issues. Why? Because consumers are watching.

There's always a risk of losing customers who don't agree with your actions or stance on a specific issue. The flip side means you could attract a new loyal customer base who aligns with your values and has more incentive to do business with you. Here are three tips to keep in mind:

1. Choose Your Battles

Choose wisely about the issues you want to be associated with and ask yourself these questions:

- Does it line up with the company's principles?
- Does it go against the beliefs of my target audience?
- Am I prepared to deal with potential backlash?

It's good to be passionate, but not at the expense of the brand.

2. Stay True to Your Beliefs

Don't back down at the first sign of opposition. A few negative tweets shouldn't deter you from your mission. It could cause your loyal followers—who are still standing by you—to question how sincere your motives are.

3. Have a Plan

When negative feedback rears its ugly head, don't wait to decide how you're going to respond. A crisis communications plan informs how you will address comments internally, with the press and on social media.

CONCLUSION

THE BUSINESS OF DOING GOOD

Businesses that have built brands synonymous with “giving back” understand that it’s more than supporting a worthwhile cause. It’s about linking CSR to the broader business platform and communicating a clear mission, with concrete and measurable goals.

To embrace the true value of CSR means brands can confidently say that they are “doing well by doing good.”

Find out how JConnelly can work together with your business to build a CSR-focused communications program. Contact **Chris Cherry**, Chief Engagement Officer at **ccherry@jconnelly.com** or call us at **973-850-7329** to learn more.