Corporate Social Responsibility Can Actually Be a Competitive Advantage, So Where's Your CSR Program?

Here are six companies leading the way in CSR not just because it's trendy but because it's the right thing to do.

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In these politically turbulent times, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is growing in importance, putting more pressure on up-and-coming entrepreneurs to adopt a social responsibility and/or sustainability strategy to boost their visibility and competitiveness. Why are CSR strategies growing in importance? There are at least three reasons:

Corporate distrust. In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, and in light of the mega-corporations ruling our economy, Americans are less trustful of corporations. Only 36 percent of Americans polled in a 2014 Corporate Perception Indicator survey said they viewed corporations as a source of economic hope.

The message: *Publicly practicing social responsibility can be seen as a way to restore that trust.*

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Political concerns. Political polarization is at an all-time

high; and political fence-sitters are becoming fewer and farther between, while activists in social justice, environmentalism and other causes are becoming increasingly aggressive in their beliefs.

The message: *CSR serves to appease those entrenched segments.*

Competition. Of course, some CEOs and entrepreneurs are pursuing more CSR opportunities only because their competitors and contemporaries are; they don't want to be seen as inferior or out of touch.

The message: *Feeling competitive about your company's CSR can certainly be seen as a good thing.*

Six big companies leading the way

Here are examples of household-name companies practicing quality CSR programs:

1. Duracell. Duracell, known for its reliable batteries, has a PowerForward program designed to help areas hit by hurricanes, tornadoes and floods. Since 2011, the program has sent 30 deployments to distribute nearly half a million free batteries to 34,060 families in need. The fleet also provides internet access and charging stations, so families affected with power outages can connect with friends and family. Duracell PowerForward trucks are stationed to reach any U.S. destination within 24 hours.

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2. Bloomberg. Bloomberg Philanthropies is a subset of the Bloomberg media empire, focusing on improving lives in each of several categories. It pushes for environmental change, with an emphasis on clean energy development and the building of sustainable cities. It improves public health through obesity prevention, tobacco control and road safety initiatives. It

even drives change through government intervention, innovating by working with mayors nationwide.

3. Google. For many years, Google has been the top-ranked company in the world for CSR initiatives (according to the Reputation Institute), though it's recently been dethroned. Regardless of that fact, the company continues to position itself to contribute to the environment and its community more than most of its competitors do. Google also maintains a transparent workplace environment that prioritizes ethical behavior and invests in its own environmental sustainability programs.

4. Lego. Lego is one of the more surprising entries on this list, but the plastic brick-maker has a well-documented reputation for behaving ethically, conducting business fairly and operating as transparently as possible. Lego has also recently created two initiatives, Build the Change and a Sustainable Materials Center, working with the World Wildlife Fund to encourage more environmental sustainability. The company is also committed, by the end of 2030, to making its bricks from fully sustainable materials.

5. Disney. The Walt Disney Company is a major entertainment juggernaut, but it's also a powerhouse in the CSR realm. Each year, the company publishes a new CSR report, detailing its efforts in environmental stewardship, international labor standards, healthy living, sustainable and fair workplace practices and strategic philanthropy and community engagement. Some examples of its goal-focused initiatives include setting new standards for emission tolerances at theme parks and increasing the number of hours spent through its employee volunteer program, VoluntEARS.

6. Microsoft. Microsoft is another corporate giant that continues to invest in CSR. Its program is split into multiple divsions, focusing on promoting sound business principles, treating people ethically, encouraging diversity and

inclusion and safeguarding the planet with environmentally friendly practices. Most recently, its AI for Earth program has put machine learning to the task of improving our collective environmental impact.

Former CEO and major stakeholder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, is also known for co-founding the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has sought to provide more education, good health and employment opportunities worldwide and to reduce inequality in the United States.

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You don’t have to invest millions or restructure your business to do a bit of social good. In today’s era of corporate distrust and political polarization, anything you do to give back to your community or make your impact more positive will be appreciated by your audience who just may express that appreciation with their pocketbooks.

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