



The Road to Relevance

You may not think you have much in common with a celebrity, but if you're like most quick-serve business owners I know, you do. (No, it's not your good looks and charm—sorry.)

Like celebrities, you're in the public eye a lot, so you get lots of requests for help. You probably get solicitations for charitable donations or sponsorships all the time.

You might try to respond to all of them but then question if your generosity really makes you anything more than a wannabe Santa Claus. Or maybe you cherry pick a few things to get involved with but worry about disappointing people. Or perhaps you have a pet cause or personal bias, and so you use your company's charitable efforts to express your personal preferences instead of considering what's really right for the business.

Any of these approaches causes you to miss out on opportunities to build your brand through charitable efforts. Plus, you're probably wasting money or valuable resources, which doesn't make sense in any economic environment.

Today's consumer is savvier and has higher expectations of companies. Armed with tools that give them greater access to company information, people want businesses to stop "goodwashing" (just doing a few virtuous things to bolster their reputation) and start having more real impact on society.

I'd like to introduce a framework to guide your decision-making in this important area. The framework will help you engage in charitable programs that build your brand and your business. It allows you to shift your approach from obligation (something you feel you should do) to opportunity (something you want to do), and shift your decision filter from responsibility (something to do) to relevance (something to achieve.)

There are five levels of relevance; the goal is to engage in practices and programs that help your brand achieve all five.

LEVEL 1: Industry relevance. Business leaders should support the issues and platforms of their industries. As part of the food industry, we know how important it is to promote healthy eating habits and to support efforts to fight obesity. Participation in programs like the Partnership for a Healthier America and sponsorships of events with similar healthy themes are a no-brainer.

LEVEL 2: Community relevance. Equally straightforward is the importance of supporting the organizations and causes that are relevant to your local community. Generally speaking, your customers are your community members and they tend to support businesses that demonstrate loyalty to the community. I know of one local food truck that participated in a food drive held in an office building near one of its usual parking spots to demonstrate its solidarity with the employees there.

LEVEL 3: Target relevance. Your philanthropic efforts should resonate with your target audience. By supporting the things they care

about, you gain their attention, respect, and trust. So research the events that trigger your targets' charitable donations and the appeals that motivate their participation, and then align yourself with them.

Or identify the values that distinguish your target and pursue opportunities that uphold your shared values. The Ronald McDonald House charity has been around for so long in part because it speaks to values that resonate with parents.

LEVEL 4: Brand platform relevance. Align your charitable efforts with your brand identity and competitive positioning.

Doing so will reinforce your brand message and differentiation.

For instance, if your brand strategy centers on health and nutrition, consider a disease-related cause. Or if yours is a full-service concept, consider an effort that benefits local farmers and growers.

LEVEL 5: Value relevance. The highest level of relevance is achieved by generating shared value. It's based on the growing belief that generating a profit and achieving social progress are not mutually exclusive goals.


A convergence of trends, including greater exposure to the needs of customers in emerging markets, shortages in natural resources, and increasing pressure to cut costs, have led progressive companies to innovate business processes that create value for themselves and others.

Rather than simply writing checks or donating food to good causes, companies are becoming a force for positive change while enhancing their customer appeal and long-term competitiveness. Some have reconceived their products to address social issues; others have transformed their supply chains.

Walmart's fleet of fuel-efficient trucks has cut the company's fuel costs while saving thousands of tons of CO₂ emissions. Campbell's developed a low-cost, nutritionally fortified soup product that sells for a reduced price to people who live in undeveloped regions. These are just a couple of examples of companies that are doing well by doing good.

It's difficult to achieve Level 5 relevance with a single program. So it's best to develop a portfolio of activities and initiatives that together fulfill these objectives. But take care not to spread your efforts too thinly. It's better to do a few things well than a lot of things just OK. Start with the basics, and then expand from there.

The important point is to set your priorities strategically and then to stick with them. The biggest impacts come from long-term partnerships and sustained efforts—that's the case for both brands and the needs and opportunities they serve.

Business author and guru Jim Collins speaks about "Level 5 Leaders," saying they're "rare and unstoppable." The same could be true about Level 5 Relevance; it's an uncommon way to fuel your business and your brand. 

“By supporting the things your target demographic cares about, you gain their attention, respect, and trust.”