

CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP

GOOD FOR BUSINESS; GOOD FOR EMPLOYEES

by Mike Sheehan

There's the oft-cited aphorism that companies can—and should—“do well by doing good.” Last year I was on a panel at Boston University for incoming MBA students. They were asked, “How many of you think a company has an obligation to give back to the community?” I was pleasantly surprised to see that they all raised their hands.

I then had the unpleasant task of telling these civic-minded young people that I believe they are wrong. A company doesn't have an obligation to give back to the community. A company's obligation is to shareholders. That said, any business that doesn't give back, one way or another, is crazy. You can call giving back what you want: corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate citizenship, being a part of the community. And there are many ways to do good. Writing checks, doing pro bono work, matching employee donations, giving workers paid time off to do volunteer work. But the bottom line is the same: Giving back, however you choose to do it, is the right thing—for you and your employees.

Roots in the Community

First off, it is good business, and what's good for the business is good for employees. Look at a company like Timberland, which has wrapped CSR around its brand, making the brand stronger. The brands I hold in the highest esteem are the ones that have a defined commitment to corporate social responsibility. Giving back to the community was one of the ways in which Hill Holliday's founder, Jack Connors, initially built the business. He couldn't get in to see the CEOs from 9 to 5, but he could spend time with

them after hours by serving on boards of the causes they cared about.

Being a good corporate citizen has given us roots in the community. It has also become part of our culture. Hill Holliday isn't just known as a company that gives back—we're known as an *employer* that gives back. That's a big distinction, because that's about getting the employees involved.

Of all the things we do to be a good corporate citizen—and there are many—I am perhaps most proud of our commitment to pro bono work, doing thousands of hours of work for free. Having worked in advertising my entire career, I know that we are unique in our level of commitment, the firmness of that commitment, and the longevity of it. It was part of the legacy I inherited from our founder, it is part of the legacy I am leaving behind, and I know it will be continued.

What do I mean by a genuine commitment to pro bono work? It means doing your best work, even though you will never bill for those hours or get paid for what you do or create. It means not cutting back when business or billings take a hit. It means you don't say no when you've had to downsize—or when you're firing on all cylinders with new business. Doing pro bono work isn't a way to keep people busy who don't have enough to do or whose talents aren't being adequately utilized.

A deep, genuine commitment to pro bono work tells your employees what kind of company you are and what your company's relationship is to your community.

Professional and Personal Development

Just to be clear, pro bono work is not something people do instead of billable account projects, but work they do in addition. They do it happily, enthusiastically, and with the same professionalism they apply to paid work. They see it as a chance for professional development, and it becomes a source of personal satisfaction and pride. But why it's good for employees

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goes beyond building and strengthening the business and allowing them to hone their skills. It's more holistic, more basic.

In our business—advertising—we have to relate to different demographics, understand what makes all kinds of people tick. Not just the people we all interact with every day as part of our personal and professional lives. Advertising isn't unique in this regard. Nor is it unique in the fact that ambitious, client-oriented people can lose their peripheral vision. It's easy to look straight ahead or upward; much harder to look to the side and below. When you are working on behalf of people who are facing challenges every day, you can't help but look around and see things you didn't before. And you can't help but be affected by it, professionally or personally.

There's a good chance our employees aren't likely to know the people Project Red and Oxfam are helping, but their work on behalf of these organizations, writing ad copy, filming commercials and public service announcements (PSAs), has made them better communicators, better advertising people. More important, this work has made them better people. I'm proud of the quality of the work we do, the depth of the commitment we demonstrate, and the fact that our pro bono work is neither a disruption nor a distraction for our employees, but rather a source of pride and opportunity on every level. This hasn't happened by accident. We've learned how to make good decisions and have developed best practices.

Granted, the kind of business we do lends itself to doing pro bono work. But helping out isn't limited to companies that do creative work or perform services. *Pro bono* is short for *pro bono publico*—"for the good

of the people.” Pharmaceutical companies that donate medications for people who can’t pay for them are doing pro bono work. Companies that donate whatever goods they make, give their employees time off for doing volunteer work, or make cash donations are all acting for the good of the people. Any company can. Here is some advice, based on the many years of experience we’ve had.

Have a Formal Program

For everyone’s sake—your company’s, the groups that you help, your employees’—have an organized program that is well thought out and executed. A formal program sends a message to your employees that you take this work seriously—and so should they. Also, with a formal program in place, your employees understand what the rules are. For example, we have a policy of not matching employee gifts to organizations, but we give people paid time off to volunteer. If they want to help a cause they about, they know how to ask for it, and what we will—and won’t—do.

Be consistent. Don’t be here one year but not the next. We had a challenging year a while back when we lost a major client, but we never cut back on our pro bono commitments. Corporate citizenship is in our budget; but just as important, it’s in our DNA.

Align Your Projects with Your Company’s Strengths

We use the skills and knowledge that are specific to our work as an advertising agency to help our partners, whether it’s designing brochures, producing videos, or writing copy. This allows us to give them our best work and also allows employees to sharpen their skills and show off *their* best work.

You don’t have to be a service provider or create goods to have something to offer. Is there anything wrong with a financial services company donating large sums of money to important causes, or matching employee gifts, or giving workers time off to do volunteer work? Of course not. Figure out what your company can do best, and commit to it.

Find what fits, what you’re truly passionate about.

Choose Causes That Resonate

At Hill Holliday, we have a soft spot for organizations that help those who can’t help themselves. For example, Catholic Charities in Boston meets the basic needs of people—providing services for refugees, running a food bank, feeding people who need to be fed *today*. It represents the finest mesh in the social safety net, catching those people who have fallen through coarser mesh. That’s who we are. Your company might be committed to supporting the arts or working with the homeless. Find what fits, what you’re truly passionate about.

We sometimes choose programs that are suggested to us by our clients. That’s good business and being a good partner. But the programs still have to fit with what we care about. One of my favorite events every year is given by a client-supported program: the South End Community Health Center. I love this organization and their “gala” because it’s really an anti-gala. It’s held on site at the health center in the early evening when they’re still seeing patients. Every nickel that has been given to the cause goes to helping patients.

Give Employees a Voice

Just as we sometimes support programs because clients ask us, we support programs because an employee has a particular affinity for an organization or a cause. Then you have the one-two punch of people not only being passionate about the work they do but whom it’s for.

Examples of employee-driven projects include a self-defense program for young girls, for which we did everything from host events at the agency to collateral

work, and the Vest-a-Dog program, which solicits donations to provide protective wear for police dogs. One of our employees who is a dog lover brought it to our attention, and we created some terrific ads around it. It's important to show employees we care about what they care about.

Be Fair to Employees

Employees not only need the freedom to do great work, they also need to be able to say no. It rarely happens, because most people who join Hill Holliday understand that we are active in the community and do this type of work. We also try to match people up by skills, interest, and availability. If managers know their employees and what is going on with them, they have a sense of who is off limits at any given time.

I have found that people are genuinely honored to be asked, but I also recognize that it's extra work that is coming out of their hide. So, when someone says no, I respect that. I seldom hear people say no, but it's important for them to know they can.

Whomever You're Working for Is Still a Client

Whomever you are working for or with is a client, regardless of whether you are getting paid. They deserve professionalism, quality of work, and commitment. You need to collaborate with them. They need your expertise, but they have expertise and knowledge that you don't, and you need them to share with you so you can do your work well. You need to manage this relationship, just like you would any client relationship.

Be Clear About What You Can Do

Be upfront about what you will and won't take care of, how much time and staff you can devote, whether you will be able to commit to the project again. We have a rule that all third-party costs have to be absorbed by either the organization being helped or another party. So, if we are designing a brochure for an organization, we won't pick up the costs for paper or printing, nor will we arrange for those to be donated.

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Otherwise, it's a distraction for us, taking time away from what we do best.

Bear in mind that once you do something, it is very hard to not do it. That's why at least 65 to 75 percent of our cash donations go to the same places every year. Organizations depend on that money. They build programs around it. So sometimes we have to say, "This will be the last year."

Don't Be Afraid to Say No

You can't do everything for everyone. We say no more than we say yes, because we want to do the stuff we do well. We don't want to overwhelm our employees. That's why it's important to pick the causes you want to be associated with. We can't even accommodate all of those, let alone others. For example, we tend not to do work for museums. That isn't to say they aren't worthy—they just don't interest us as much. Eventually, you'll get fewer requests from organizations that don't fit your profile.

Speak Up

Part of what you can offer in these situations is strategic advice, and it's not just your right but your obligation to do so. I look very closely at the administrative costs of any organization that wants our help. There have been a few times where I've raised a red flag about administrative costs or the cost of a gala. I want to make sure our time and effort are well invested.

I'm also not afraid to tell charities when they should consolidate. In many businesses over the past few years, consolidation has been a key to survival. The nonprof-

its haven't done that. And they are going to have to make very tough decisions. Help them do that.

Quantify

Our pro bono work is as much a part of our plan and budget as anything else we do. We give every piece of pro bono work a job number, just as we would work for a paying client. We need to know what our employees are doing. I don't care if someone is spending 30 percent of their time on pro bono work if that's what we asked him to do. We are a very nimble organization, and we can stretch if need be, so not everything has to be 100 percent planned. But that's why it's critical to have to have clear optics.

Getting by Giving

According to a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* (HBR), people who "give" their time away

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by doing something for others feel as if they have more time, not less. Professor Cassie Mogilner of the Wharton School told HBR, ". . . The explanation that emerged in our results is that people who give time feel more capable, confident, and useful. They feel they've accomplished something and, therefore, that they can accomplish more in the future."

Fighting Crime — One App at a Time

All of our best practices for pro bono work came together in a program we worked on at the request of the mayor of Boston, Thomas Menino, and the Boston Police Commissioner, Ed Davis. It was a genuine partnership between us and them; it gave our employees a chance to stretch and do something very creative while making a real difference in the community.

Like any city, Boston has its share of crimes that go unsolved because people don't want to come forward with information. We were asked for some ideas about tackling that. We live in an age of instant, nonstop communication at our fingertips, yet people are reluctant to communicate certain types of information.

We created the country's first anonymous-text tip line. Remember the "Drop a dime" programs? Well, that worked when there were pay phones on every corner instead of where they are now—in museums. Everyone has a cell phone, but those calls are traceable, and people don't want anyone to know that they "snitched."

We realized that we had to make texts untraceable. People can text quietly and unobtrusively. Then the challenge was, How do you make texts untraceable? We worked with a third-party company that scrubs the traceable data before the text is sent to the police. As soon as the message is sent, the source is scrubbed, so all the police get is the text.

It's not a question of whether privacy could be breached or whether data could be subpoenaed. There is nothing to subpoena. It is absolutely foolproof.

In addition to creating the tech solution, we did all the communications around the program. It has been in effect for more than three years; some eighty serious crimes have been solved in Boston alone, and the program is in use in a number of cities around the country.

This doesn't surprise me. Doing good makes people feel good in a variety of ways. When you connect the chance to do good for people's communities, the causes they care about, and the work they do every day, it's a chance for them to do more, give back, and hone their skills.

Every business has a chance to give back, whether it's writing checks, encouraging employees to volunteer their time, or donating the kinds of products the company is known for. Those of us in service businesses have a unique opportunity to give back in a very personal, targeted way. It doesn't make our contribution more valuable to those we help, but it does give our people a more personal connection, especially when they work with local organizations or on causes that are important to them individually.

It also enables you to relate to clients and peers in the business community in a different way. It gives you a chance to see them—and have them see you—as people who share an interest in doing the right thing. Giving back reminds us all that not everything is about a transaction, or commerce, or winning business.



Mike Sheehan is chairman of Hill Holliday, the fifteenth largest advertising and communications agency in America. He joined in 1994 as a group creative director, became president in 2000 and CEO in 2003. In May 2013, he became chairman.

Mike's board service includes BJ's Wholesale Club, numerous not-for-profits, and his alma mater, Saint Anselm College.