It's Time to Start Thinking About Corporate Social Responsibility

New or small businesses may think of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs as something belonging in the domain of larger companies.

CSR policies speak to how a company will not only comply with legal and ethical standards, but also go beyond -- perhaps, by engaging in further social and/or environmental good in the local and ultimately global community.

Don't have a policy in place yet? Not sure why you would yet?

Well, the growing attention to global sustainability issues are compelling leading multi-national brands to proactively leverage their buying power to reduce social and environmental impact among their suppliers.

This means large brands are increasingly looking to do business with companies whose policies mirror their own commitment. And whether your firm is a start-up, SME or an international corporation, your access to business could hinge on whether your company has a CSR policy that aligns with theirs.

By creating a CSR policy early on, you can lay the foundation for future growth now.

When setting up your policy, consider the sustainability requirements of large brands to help better position you to attract future business partners, customers as well as employees who increasingly consider CSR when evaluating prospective employers.

Simply put, a company's market success may well depend on how genuinely it demonstrates its CSR commitment. So it's never too early to begin establishing your CSR policies and programs so they become embedded within your organization's cultural DNA over time, part of your calling card and appeal in the business development process.

Four things to keep in mind when developing your CSR policy are performance, leadership, engagement and trust:

1) Establish your baseline performance according to a global standard. Adopt an internationally recognized standard with approved criteria and metrics that are independently verified by a certification body. Find one with metrics most relevant to your business so you can establish your baseline performance and goals -- perhaps that's the certification of core source material you use in your business, or your carbon or water footprint, level of waste diversion, and/or your community involvement. Look at the areas that are impacted by your business, the areas that matter to you, and to the stakeholders you want to engage.

2) Determine your unique ways to lead. Each company's culture and skills position it to establish unique ways to support sustainable communities through initiatives that are intrinsic

to a company's brand. This is your company's opportunity to get local or global or creative or all of the above.

Establish what will motivate employees and align the company's objectives with external stakeholders. Companies might initiate best-in-class policies, champion regulatory or legislative changes, or reinvent a product that changes an industry.

3) Engage your employees. By engaging your employees in the process of creating, implementing and managing your CSR policy you will discover the ways in which core business must adapt its practices to internalize your policy. Whatever the scope -- from procurement, to manufacture, to consumption -- together you can identify the metrics that reinforce or highlight practices that align your company with potential customers and position you for future growth across multiple markets. This process encourages employees to foster a sense of ownership in and responsibility for the success of your company's CSR program.

4) Leverage your CSR policy to build trust. Once your baseline CSR performance and goals are established, you can begin reaching out and engaging with external stakeholders about your efforts. Not only does this showcase continuous improvement, it also fosters a mechanism for drawing in like-minded connections and creating crucial feedback that informs strategic planning for future positioning and growth.

Ultimately, creating a CSR policy may seem like a daunting, distant proposition. But if your company is committed to upholding far-reaching and long-term sustainability standards, it's best to be clear about what that means and demonstrate that commitment by weaving it into your corporate DNA early on. The sooner you establish your CSR policy, the sooner you can begin demonstrating your leadership, build key relationships of trust, and position yourself for future growth.

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