

LATA SUBRAMANIAN'S VIEWS ON PARTNERING COMMUNITY TO ENHANCE REPUTATION

Leveraging a corporate brand name...

Some years ago there was a workshop and one of the debates going on was - when can a corporate brand name be leveraged onto all kinds of diverse businesses?

When a corporate name stands for the kind of corporate values...

The agency doing the analysis reached the conclusion that there is only one context in which a corporate brand name can be lent to all kinds of businesses. This is when the corporate name stands for the *kind of corporate values* that get leveraged onto any kind of product and services irrespective of how diverse it is. The only examples from the Indian context that the agency was able to give were the Tatas, the Birlas and the Godrejs, whose names they felt could be leveraged onto a whole host of products or services.

Reputation - the greatest asset ...

It is my personal conviction that the greatest asset that anybody, be it an individual or a corporation can have, is its reputation. In the good old days people contributed to society from the goodness of their heart, but today this belief is articulated in business and management circles, sometimes as stakeholder management and at other times as management of intellectual capital.

Apart from this there are the intangible elements of your corporate or brand equity, one of which is the goodwill that you build with your different sets of stakeholders and customers.

Jet Airways credo...

Corporate giving forms part of Jet Airways' intrinsic credo. The last paragraph of our mission statement reads, "*Jet Airways will achieve these objectives (business goals) while consistently returning a healthy rate of return to its shareholders and providing an environment of growth for its employees.*"

Healthy profitable returns & an environment for growth...

Both statements- healthy profitable returns to its shareholders and environment for its employees to grow - implies corporate giving. The first, because unless you are profitable, you can not re-invest in expanding your business or diversifying into other areas of business. It can be argued that a corporate's contribution to the economic development of a community is possibly the single highest order of corporate giving. Without profits, a company cannot invest in training its employees and equipping them with skills to grow professionally and thereby contribute far more productively to the organisation, the community and the overall economy.

Jet Airways and community programmes...

Without profits, a company cannot give back generously to the community in which it operates. How has Jet Airways done this? We are a very young company and will be celebrating 7 years in May 2000. In these seven years of operation, Jet Airways has supported the community in several ways. It has given India a domestic airline that the community can be proud of. It has developed a 5000 plus highly professional skilled workforce.

In fact, today, the problem we are facing is that we have become a favourite hunting ground of recruitment for other service organisations. Jet Airways is currently investing on building airlinks between India's metros and its smallest cities even though it means incurring a loss for some time. We are ploughing back all the profits that we are earning and some of the returns earned to socially deserving initiatives for the education and development of India's future and her children.

Do all these business initiatives qualify as community development?

When you empower somebody by giving them the professional skills that helps them become economically independent, you are definitely helping community development. When you give them the confidence of having the skills to go out anywhere in the world and make a contribution, this perhaps is one of the biggest contributions you can make. Yes, we also use some of the profits that we earn in other ways by helping the physically challenged and the less fortunate sections of society.

Save the Children...

Jet Airways organises 'flights of fancy' or 'dream flights' for under-privileged children across India and works with an organisation called '**Save the Children**', to prevent the abuse of women and children. One of our earliest efforts in contributing to the community as a two-year old airline was transporting 30 Nepalese women who had been rescued from Mumbai's red light district back to their homes.

Jet Airways and the Magic Box...

Jet Airways derives values from its association with Save the Children in multiple forms. The Magic Box in-flight collection is a participative scheme. Because it is a participative programme, it generates more than just a mere positive impression among the passengers. It goes to building a deeper bond between the airline and the passengers - a feeling of togetherness - since it is a joint effort.

Bonding between the airline and its customers...

We have not done any formal research in this area but we get enough informal feedback from our passengers to know it has helped in strengthening the bond that we have with our customers. The other way that it has helped us is that it has given our own employees a pride of association with the airline - a feel good factor - I like working for this airline because they do good things and I am proud of it.

Maintaining a low profile... We have consciously chosen to maintain a very low profile in our community development contribution efforts. A lot of you may not be aware that in a year we do 5-6 dream flights for orphan children across the country. We have done it out of Cochin, Chennai and Mumbai, with the help of Indian Oil who give us free aviation fuel, the airport authority who waives the navigation fees, and in close association with the Rotary Club. We have consciously not invited the media. Publicity is largely through the vehicle of our own in-flight magazine, Jet Wings.

The reason that we believe in maintaining a low profile is largely due to the belief that these kind of community building efforts should and will speak for themselves. We are after all a service organisation and all service brands get their equity built through word-of-mouth referrals which are far more important to our service brands than any amount of advertising or publicity.

Doing good for the sake of publicity ... Too much of media hype and publicity, especially these days may lead to loss of credibility for what are otherwise sincere efforts in supporting the less privileged sections of society. Today we are operating in a tough-talking, fast-moving, highly cynical world and how often have we heard the words, "oh, they have done it for the publicity."

Are socially responsible companies held to higher standards? Building reputational capital has to be done on a solid foundation. A corporate earns goodwill through demonstrating tangibly that it has a social conscience and is doing its bit to give back something worthwhile to society. Such a company is perceived to be a company with high standards and by inference earns a quality connotation to the products and the services that it markets. If you have a reputation of being a corporate with a social conscience, by automatic inference your consumers think that you will not let them down.

Social responsibility at Jet Airways... Jet Airways encourages its employees to be socially responsible. In fact, it was an employee's idea that we should all take a voluntary salary cut and the donation that Jet Airways gave to Kargil was through employees' contributions and the company put in its own bit. Another touching example is that of a soldier who approached our check-in staff at Mumbai. He had to travel to Chennai to attend the funeral of his cousin who had been killed in Kargil and then return to the front. He did not have money for this. Our staff on their own initiative collected the airfare and helped him out. We also do a lot of sports sponsorships at the local level although we will not sponsor a Pepsi Cricket Cup!!

Feel good factor... What are the returns we get from all this? I cannot give you an answer to this. However, the conviction is very strong that it does make good business sense, and it makes good business sense because of the 'feel good' factor that it generates especially among the employees. This intangible factor has a lot of payoffs in terms of employee motivation and morale. There are of course some hard core business returns, but at the end of the day, I feel it is more important to do community-building efforts because of that *feel good* factor.

COMMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Sharing experiences in employee volunteerism and community development....

Ford has a worldwide policy, which encourages every employee to spend 16 working hours annually on a social cause. We in India identify one or two social causes so our contribution has a long-term effect instead of each of us taking off time for a variety of causes. We also have other local initiatives such as health centres, which gives free medical attention to 15 villages in and around our area.

BPL has provided certain communication equipment like satellite phones to the Indian army to facilitate their operations. In Bangalore the company has adopted a municipal school which is being sponsored by the company.

Pfizer's employee initiative was to educate children in neighbouring schools on the cause of diseases. Pfizer also invites these children to see their laboratories. We also have a moving exhibition called 'Microbes', which we take from school to school. We also undertake a lot of social work activities with local slum children in and around the area where we are based.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Lata Subramanian, GM Corporate Communications, Jet Airways (India) Pvt Ltd., at PR Pundit's workshop – Pillars of Corporate Reputation, held in Mumbai on March 29, 2000)