Walgreens: Lessons for community involvement

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IESE's Domènec Melé and Thomas Mammoser identify four major factors for delivering a meaningful and successful program of corporate community involvement.

Modern corporate philanthropy tends to follow the traditional ethos of giving back to the community, through donations, sponsorship and charity, often generating positive publicity in the process.

IESE's Domènec Melé and Thomas Mammoser of the Midtown Educational Foundation of Chicago, however, propose a more thoughtful approach to enhance existing models.

In their paper, "Humanistic Corporate Community Involvement: Walgreens/MEF One-On-One Program," they explore how companies can successfully combine working for the greater good with a strong focus on the needs of the individual.

They focus on an initiative by Walgreens that combines corporate volunteering with corporate community involvement in a very effective way.

The MEF One-to-One Program is inspired by Catholic social teaching. Far from reducing humans to mere commodities or anonymous elements within the economic system, their alternative approach sees the personal development of human beings and their lives as the primary end of economic activity. This understanding also strives to balance the rights of the individual with those of society as a whole.

"We not me"

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As evidence of this philosophy in practice, Mammoser shares from his own experience the example of Walgreens. This U.S. drugstore chain adopted a corporate culture of "We not me," fostering concern for people outside as well as inside the organization.

As part of its commitment to corporate community involvement, Walgreens launched an initiative for its executives to mentor deprived, inner-city, middle-school students, in association with the Midtown Educational Foundation of Chicago.

Based on this example, the authors identify four major factors for delivering a meaningful and successful program of corporate community involvement.

1. *Pick the Right Initiative.* When deciding which social cause to support, steer clear of controversial issues, such as the death penalty or euthanasia, which are likely to prove divisive. Instead, search for a cause — like equal access to education for children — which will be universally respected.
2. *Develop the Individual, Develop Society.* Whenever possible, companies should look to foster the development of individuals as an integral part of society. The Walgreens/MEF program seeks to address school dropout rates, for example, which has wider implications for their future and society as a whole.
3. *Motivation Matters.* Ensure that the motivation for your initiative stems from a genuine concern for people's wellbeing, and is not an empty public relations exercise or a calculated attempt to gain some competitive advantage. Besides wanting to help children, Walgreens felt that by exposing and sensitizing its professionals to such activities, it would make them more likely to support other such initiatives throughout the rest of their working lives.
4. *Find the Right Fit.* Find the right fit between the needs of the community and the company's capabilities and goals. It was Walgreens? corporate commitment to customer service that naturally led it to take a hands-on, person-to-person approach in its corporate community involvement.

There are many ways that companies can get involved in their communities, whether it is providing time, know-how or money in the form of sponsored partnerships with NGOs, foundations or charities directly engaged in social concerns.

The Walgreens case that the authors highlight can serve as inspiration for how other businesses can contribute to society meaningfully and effectively.

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