

LinkedIn

May 7, 2013

Does Your Company Dare to Do Good?



From its inception, Panera has utilized the principles that some call [conscious capitalism](#), and which we at Panera like to call “enlightened self-interest.” This notion of a conscious approach to value creation is built on the fundamental premise that every business has a deeper purpose than short-term profit maximization. Indeed, we regard profit and the creation of shareholder value as the byproduct of making a difference for our key stakeholders and society. When we deliver for our customers, employees, vendors, and the wider community, shareholder value follows.

Several years ago, we set out to sharply define a mission that more authentically connects with our hearts and minds, and provides us with a more direct way to partner with our communities so as to better serve society. The search began with a question: what does the world need most that we are uniquely able to provide? It's a question that leaders of every company must pose, if we are really serious about using business to positively contribute to the world.

The journey to answering that question began when we came across a jarring statistic from the US Department of Agriculture: one in six Americans live in “food insecure” households. These are families that don't always know where their next meal is coming from. In other words, in many of the vibrant communities that Panera and other national brands serve, there are people who are living hand to mouth, and could use a hand up.

Our response to this sobering realization was to launch a new breed of business to attack the worsening epidemic of hunger in America. The result was [Panera Cares](#). These are non-profit, community cafes (administered by the 501c3 Panera Bread Foundation) where people eat tasty, nutritious food in an uplifting environment, regardless of their means, and pay whatever they can afford. There's a full Panera menu, but no prices. The guest decides what to contribute.

This past March, I had the great pleasure of attending SXSW, where I gave a talk on how we used our innovation process to bring Panera Cares to life. If you didn't make it to Austin, you can view highlights from my presentation [here](#).

Thus far, we have opened five Panera Cares community cafes, which this year will serve nearly one million meals. And last month, in all 48 of our St. Louis locations, Panera launched our [Meal of Shared Responsibility](#): Turkey Chili in a Bread Bowl, which comes with three payment options. You can pay the suggested amount, pay slightly more if you have the means to contribute to someone else's meal, or pay what you can. With this latest effort, our experiment in raising awareness of food insecurity and helping those in pain continues.

But let's face it. Despite our progress, Panera and its partnering communities won't come close to cracking the problem of hunger in America. For that, we need other for-profit enterprises to also rise to the challenge. And that's one of the prime reasons why we launched Panera Cares. We hope to inspire other companies to get caught in the act of doing good.

Like many companies, we annually give \$100 million in cash and unsold baked goods to organizations that are helping people in need through our philanthropic arm, the Panera Bread Foundation. But that's not enough. Companies need to think far more deeply about how to contribute to society in ways that go beyond philanthropy, and instead harness those non-renewable resources—their time and know-how—to directly address the world's iniquities.

For every vital service now being provided by a not-for-profit or government organization in this country, there almost certainly is a large corporation with the skills, experience, and scale to do far more.

Are there other “conscious capitalists” who are willing to get their hands dirty so as to positively impact the world? Of course there are, and many got to work long before we did. But given the past few years' business scandals and economic hardships, we hope many more will step up to the challenge.

Has your organization dared to make a difference, beyond donations? Please share your stories.

Photo: [javarman/Shutterstock.com](#)