



Limited-Service, Unlimited Possibilities

[Charitable Giving](#) | [January 2012](#) | By [Karon Warren](#)

Why Corporate Responsibility is Part of Your Job

As quick-serve CEOs become more engaged in corporate social responsibility, they may find the real beneficiaries are their own companies.



In today's business environment, corporate social responsibility (CSR) receives a lot of lip service from media and public relations. But experts say a CEO who steps up his company's CSR efforts will find that his organization receives more than just media accolades.

In fact, chief executives could find that many of the big-picture business components they struggle with daily become a little bit easier with a solid CSR plan in place. Maximizing the benefits of corporate social responsibility, however, requires a CEO who is willing to play point and maintain a clear CSR strategy.

Mike Lassiter, president of Atlanta-based sandwich concept Rising Roll Gourmet, says his brand's corporate CSR is key to its success, therefore making it one of his biggest responsibilities.

"This is one of my major areas of focus; it's not something we take lightly," Lassiter says. "My job is to make sure we are exceeding our plan."

That plan includes being a positive part of the community where each Rising Roll Gourmet store is located. Rising Roll's CSR initiatives include supporting local schools and youth sports, as well as lending a hand to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

In addition, the company focuses on ways to be more environmentally responsible, such as using more efficient delivery vehicles, installing programmable thermostats in stores, and using recyclable materials for interior signage.

"The best way to get him involved was to take him out and experience it."

Some CEOs may find it difficult to handle their CSR efforts personally, but their involvement is still essential to its success, says Barnaby Dinges, vice president of KemperLesnik, a public relations, events, and sports marketing firm in Northbrook, Illinois.

"CEOs who embrace it and are public about it, that sends a strong message," he says.

At International Dairy Queen, the company has designated staff members who work with DQ Cares, the group that manages contributions made by the company, including its partnership with Children's Miracle Network Hospitals. The team presents an annual plan to the executive staff on how to work with its various programs during the year.

But John Gainor, president and CEO of International Dairy Queen, says he makes it known to his DQ Cares and Children's Miracle Network teams that he's always available if they need him to represent the brand.

"I try not to turn down any requests," Gainor says. "It sets the tone from the top."

Another key role that a CEO plays in his company's CSR efforts is building a strong team around him to support and grow the program.

Lassiter says that because social responsibility is constantly evolving, he needs a team that is staying abreast of the opportunities available to the brand.

“We manage that process together because it’s changing all the time,” he says. “It takes the whole team to manage the process.”

A productive CSR team extends beyond the C-suite to include the company’s franchisees, Lassiter says. He says his franchisees are very responsive to corporate social responsibility initiatives because they understand they need to be involved with and serve the community where they are located.

“If you keep up CSR communication with the franchisees, they’re going to be looking out for opportunities because everyone wants to help out,” he says.

Gainor says he encourages his senior leadership to serve on the board of a nonprofit organization. “Those boards tend to be some of the companies or charities we support,” he says. “It shows leadership from the top.”

One of the most important people a chief executive has in his wheelhouse is his chief financial officer, and this is especially true with CSR efforts, Lassiter says. He says a CEO must work diligently with his CFO to keep the finances of social responsibility in check.

“Price point comes up a lot, and some of the green products are very expensive, so we have to evaluate that and the impact on our franchisees,” Lassiter says. “When we look at those, we have to make sure it’s also a positive for our franchisees. It is a fine line, but I think there is low-hanging fruit that you can do immediately that is a win-win.”

If any C-suite member needs some convincing on why corporate social responsibility is right for their brand, the experts say they should take a look at the wide range of benefits it delivers to the company.

For example, according to a 2011 study by the Harvard Business School, “Corporate Social Responsibility and Access to Finance,” firms with a strong CSR commitment can help ease the fears of potential investors, making them more likely to invest.

Dinges says another benefit is improved employee morale. He cites an example of employees spending the day working on a community project together. “People come back to work feeling more energized and a part of something,” Dinges says.

This also gives the company a story to tell, Dinges says, one that could play a role in recruiting quality employees. In addition, community involvement could lead to new business contacts. “You never know who you’re going to meet when you move out of your comfort zone,” Dinges says.

Of course, corporate social responsibility also is a great draw for customers. “I think Miracle Treat Day is a great example,” Gainor says, referencing Dairy Queen’s promotional day that supports Children’s Miracle Network Hospitals. “It’s usually one of our best days in the summer. I think people want to patronize businesses that give back.”

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