Submittable

How To Start &
Build An Effective
Corporate Social
Responsibility
Program (CSR)

CONTENT

Give back and build a better world

Most everyone wants to give back to their community and build a better world, from individuals to large corporations. But giving strategically and impactfully isn't easy. In fact, corporations that write checks to charities without a thoughtful plan and process are likely being wasteful—not to mention losing out on big opportunities.

The good news is that if your organization is committed to supporting local communities and nonprofits through a smart and streamlined corporate giving program, you can make a big impact while also boosting your brand, improving employee engagement, and strengthening your relationship with clients and customers.

HOW TO START &
BUILD AN IMPACTFUL
CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) PROGRAM

WHAT IS CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR)?

Also known as corporate citizenship or community relations, CSR programs are a type of philanthropy and marketing strategy that connects business and community, holding your organization accountable for its actions. At the heart of a good CSR program is social consciousness around interactions with other groups, businesses, and individuals in your area—especially the ways your organization affects, gives back to, and supports the community.

Many modern consumers prefer to buy from companies that are making a positive difference in the world—and those numbers are only growing. Given the choice between buying dog food from a company that supports your local humane society and seems to genuinely care about dogs, and one that doesn't, the choice is easy. Research even suggests that most people would pay more for the same product to ensure they're buying from a socially responsible company.

Additionally, due to growing concerns over local, national, and international issues, more and more organizations have launched initiatives focused on giving back—in their communities and beyond. The rise of corporate service and giving campaigns indicates that brands are realizing even small contributions of funding, time, labor, opportunities, goods, and services can have a substantial impact. And not only is corporate giving a responsible and ethical practice, but it can improve employee morale, boost community quality of life, and inspire new advocates for a generous company.

These days, CSR is primarily an umbrella concept, encompassing everything from climate resilience initiatives and brand activism to important conversations about diversity, inclusion in the workplace, and ethical supply chains.

Types of corporate giving

Matching gifts
A company matches (or doubles or triples) the amount that their employees contribute to a cause

Employee grant stipends
Corporations give employees funds to donate to an organization of their choice

Volunteer support initiatives
Corporate employees donate time and specialized support to nonprofits

Volunteer grants
Employees contribute a certain number of hours to an organization and their employer gives a corresponding monetary donation

Community grants
Organizations apply to corporations for a direct donation

Corporate sponsorships
Corporations donate funds towards the cost of a specific activity or event in exchange for publicity of some sort

More executives are examining what effective corporate citizenship looks (and acts) like. For example, beyond just creating value for their brands, companies are also considering [how they account for the environmental and social impacts](#) of their work—and CSR is a major part of the equation. Paired with CSR's positive internal effects on a corporation, companies of all sizes are increasingly engaging in community relations and philanthropy.

Really, when it comes to CSR, the big question for companies is no longer why or when but how.

THE BENEFITS OF A STRONG CSR PROGRAM

When you're focused on growing your business, you can easily get lost in the numbers, from profits and margins to sales totals and sticker prices. However, you'll want to remember that while growth is measured in numbers, it's also fueled by people. Growth is more than how much you're making or how recognizable your logo is—it's also how much of a difference you're making in your community.

Your customers aren't simply numbers on a page. They're people with lives, families, friends, hopes, dreams, fears, and tangible needs. All of these items factor into their decision-making processes, including what they buy and who they buy it from. If you want to build brand awareness and earn their business, you need to treat customers like people and meet them where they are—a strong corporate social responsibility program is a great way to do this. Understanding your business' values and what your ultimate goals are is essential. What does true success look like for your company?
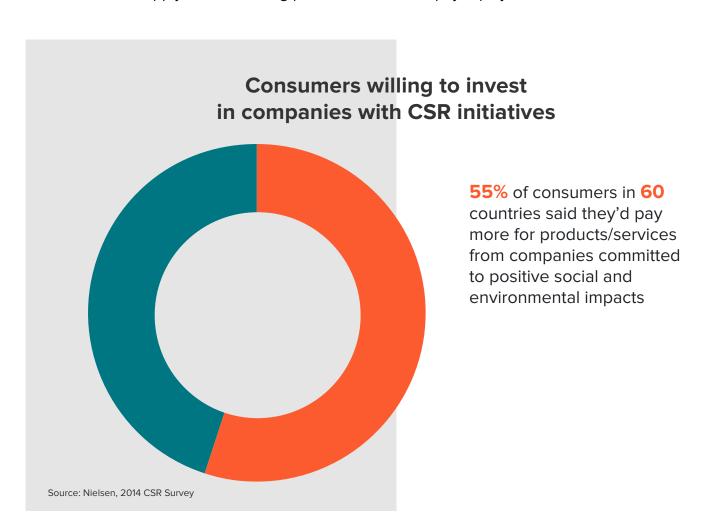
If your organization has money to spend and sway in your community, you have the opportunity to make change. In addition to the good you can do in the world, consider the many benefits that come from practicing good [corporate citizenship](#).

Smart CSR initiatives:

- Build positive reputation for your business
- Increase brand recognition
- Support sales
- Improve customer loyalty
- Boost employee morale and retention
- Encourage investments

Organizations looking to stay competitive are incorporating CSR into their core brand. In just a few years, CSR has risen from a low-level marketing initiative to a standing C-suite agenda item.

Plus, modern consumers are savvier than ever. They want to do business with companies that are socially conscious and socially active. And they've got the tools to find and engage with businesses that are taking CSR seriously, from supply chain sourcing practices to internal pay equity standards.

Consumers willing to invest in companies with CSR initiatives

55% of consumers in **60** countries said they'd pay more for products/services from companies committed to positive social and environmental impacts

Source: Nielsen, 2014 CSR Survey

SUCCESSFULLY CREATING YOUR CSR STRATEGY

CSR is much bigger than a photo opportunity with employees in company t-shirts with shovels in hand. With the rise of B corps and corresponding withering critiques of past CSR efforts, companies are making CSR a strategic priority more than an afterthought. At the same time, the expectations for CSR programs are rising alongside the opportunities for real impact.

Whether we're talking about environmental leadership in procurement practices and ethical labor practices or philanthropic giving to nonprofits and organized volunteering opportunities, companies are stepping up their CSR game and redefining how it works in practice.

Now that you've built the basic foundation of your CSR strategy and are on the ground running, you have the ability to dig deeper and consider your strategy, both to improve your brand identity and to maximize your impact. Let's look at the trends currently shaping CSR as well as the tools companies are leveraging to build a winning CSR strategy.

CSR TRENDS TO WATCH

As you're building your CSR program, you'll want to learn from the past while looking ahead at emerging trends in the field.

In 2019, CSR was solidified as a C-suite priority with a greater focus on measurement, diversity and inclusion, as well as employee leadership and corporate transparency. With investors stepping up to signal their interest in the ways that companies engage with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors, CSR matured significantly in the past year.

Top CSR trends in 2019

- **Growing investor interest in environmental, social, governance (ESG) factors**

- **Broader focus on the measurement of social impact**

- **CSR finds a foothold in the C-suite**

- **Diversity and inclusion goals receive greater scrutiny**

- **Increased transparency and employee leadership in CSR**

Top CSR trends in 2020

- **Sustainability in procurement takes center stage**

- **Deeper investment in supply chain analysis and innovation**

- **More focus on dialogue among CSR leaders in an election year**

- **Equity plays a much larger part in diversity and inclusion goals**

- **More brand activism that speaks to Gen Z consumers**

Moving forward, many of the anticipated top trends will focus on going even deeper. Conversations about equity in treatment will grow within the diversity and inclusion space. A stronger emphasis on more eco-friendly supply chains and sustainable procurement will likely dominate. Companies will keep a close watch on the elections in the United States while striving to respond to Gen Z's thirst for brand activism.

So what do all these mean when it comes to shaping your CSR strategy? In short, a winning CSR strategy should internalize these trends and execute based on what they mean for your company and its unique CSR priorities. And modern companies can't afford to ignore the trends shaping CSR because the consumers they're looking to court are the ones shaping these trends. Companies that align their CSR strategy to the social impact priorities of their target market will (increasingly) win over a larger swath of their target markets.

Sit down with your team and analyze these past and emerging trends while you develop your CSR strategy. Now, let's break down the steps you should take for building your winning CSR initiative from start to finish.

THE NITTY-GRITTY OF BUILDING YOUR CSR STRATEGY

The ingredients of a winning CSR strategy in 2020 and beyond

- **Link to company values**

- **Build from your customers' priorities**

- **Develop employee buy-in**

- **Enlist external stakeholders**

- **Connect with existing local initiatives**

- **Execute your program with fidelity and flexibility**

- **Measure results and communicate your impact**

- **Research thoroughly**

- **Reflect on the process**

1 Research thoroughly

Before you engage in community-based work, make sure you've done your homework.

- **Assess community needs.** What challenges are community members and organizations looking facing? Where are the areas of greatest or most immediate need?
- **Poll your customers.** What do your customers want your brand to address, and do they know what you're already addressing? Do you have a strong understanding of the gaps that your customers perceive when it comes to your brand and its stances/actions on areas of social impact?
- **Survey your team & external stakeholders.** What differences and similarities are you finding between your senior management and local community leaders when it comes to CSR priorities? Which causes do your employees actively support?
- **Analyze your own landscape.** What socially-oriented actions and positions has your company taken over the past few years in the realm of CSR? What were the results? Did you keep your brand promises?
- **Assess your capacity.** What internal resources can be leveraged to effectively execute a CSR campaign? Which external stakeholders can be enlisted to support our CSR goals?

Every CSR campaign should be grounded in strong knowledge of and connection to the community you're looking to serve.

2 Link to company values

All of your CSR work should flow from your company values. Which social causes are a natural fit for your company given its values and market position? What level of salience do these causes carry today?

If your CSR strategy is not values-aligned, you're risking your brand identity. Assuming your employees are invested in these values, your CSR work will feel like a normal part of their work rather than a burdensome add-on.

When prepping your CSR strategy, create a values-driven strategy map that explicitly links your CSR activities back to those values. That way, you can be very intentional and explicit in the projects you select and how you communicate your impact.

3 Build from your customers' priorities

Once you've asked your customers what they care about, it had better show up in your CSR strategy. Don't inquire then disappoint. That's a surefire way to lose customers.

Be transparent about the results you get from your customer base. They'd probably like to hear their priorities reflected back to them in reporting that shows you're listening to them and, more importantly, **making their social impact agenda the centerpiece of your CSR strategy.**

4 Develop employee buy-in

Your CSR strategy doesn't move without your employees. This starts with determining your employees' preferred social causes and using that information to help build your overall strategy. They want to see themselves reflected in the CSR work you'll be asking them to support. Without that buy-in, it'll be hard to execute any CSR program.

Be sure to go beyond just a one-time survey, but actually **enlist your staff in developing the strategy from the start.** Allow them to define how the company values show up in your CSR work, to connect directly with customers about CSR, and to build strong internal teams that will execute the strategy. Remember, your employees are the lifeblood of your overall CSR approach.

5 Enlist external stakeholders

Armed with that internal support, you can begin building relationships with external stakeholders such as community leaders and organizations to partner with in your CSR campaign.

They'll likely know the lay of the land better than your team and frankly, you'll need their support and collaboration to achieve your CSR goals. Also, it's the practical (and kind) thing to do since you'll be working alongside them in their communities.

This is where lots of companies get tripped up. They fail to build a strong team outside of their offices. But you can avoid this by engaging with local stakeholders early and often as you build and execute your CSR strategy. By trusting the wisdom of local leaders and community members, you'll end up with a better CSR approach that's informed by the lived experiences of those you're looking to support. It's just that simple.

6 Connect with existing local initiatives

There's already good work going on in the communities you're looking to empower. Don't ever forget it. **Entering into CSR work with an [asset-based lens](#)** is a crucial and research-backed approach that yields better results for your program and the communities you're serving.

In practice, this looks like scanning the neighborhoods you're looking to work in and **building relationships with the organizations** there already addressing the issues that mean so much to your customers and employees. This is one juncture where you connect the dots as you build your strategy.

What you'll likely find is an incredible number of strengths existing in communities that will serve your CSR program well and enhance the impact you're able to achieve in partnership with these communities. It's also the humble and kind thing to do when working in any community.

7 Execute your program with fidelity and flexibility

Execution is where all of your preparation and diligence pays off. Whether you're tackling health disparities in local neighborhoods or running a literacy campaign partnered with nearby schools, this is where you get to see your big plan in action.

From your company values and customer priorities to your employees' preferences and that landscape analysis of the communities you're looking to serve, you've got a lot to take into account. Part of this work involves balancing the values of your company with the wishes of your employees, consumers, and community. Those values and priorities may not always align—the biggest challenge here is clearly communicating how you intend to execute on specific values through your CSR program. Even if certain stakeholders wish for a different approach, they'll likely respect your clarity and intentionality.

Make it an open and active conversation among all parties. When you truly take into account multiple perspectives while shaping your CSR program, you enlist greater numbers in your eventual work and enrich the overall CSR effort.

As you launch your program, make sure you've determined your criteria for success in advance (and the data you'll collect to verify them). Know how and when you'll measure your impact.

It's a delicate balancing act. Keep your execution tight enough that it sticks to the goals you set out based on all of those factors while also allowing for some flexibility to adapt as you go. In social impact work, the facts on the ground can change rapidly and you'll need to exercise patience and dexterity with those shifting realities. Just ask the community organizations with whom you're working. They'll tell you.

8 Reflect on the process

Make sure you build in time for reflection as you execute your CSR program. It can be easy to get caught up in the grind of the work itself. Whether it's a monthly all-team meeting or quarterly data check-ins, create some space for analysis within your execution strategy.

When it comes to the data, ensure that you're collecting it throughout the project, not just at the end. Set up clear data collection checkpoints and hold your team accountable for gathering the relevant stats you'll need to measure your impact.

Measurement isn't a destination, it's a journey. **Having interim points of analysis throughout the campaign** will help you execute better during your CSR work while also informing your overall strategic approach.

Be sure to listen as you go. Check in with your team regularly and with community members—recipients of the CSR project most importantly—to see how the CSR work is landing for them. And don't forget to celebrate progress. Give your team shout outs for small victories along the way. Keep the whole company updated on results as they come in and invite stakeholders out to see the work, even if they're not directly involved in the project.

9 Use your results to improve future programming

When your program wraps up, you're not actually done. Prioritize sharing your results. You're on the hook to communicate your outcomes with multiple parties. First off, your employees will want to hear how it went. Empower your internal CSR team to lead this conversation. They're the ones who did the work, they deserve the glory.

You'll also need to have some frank conversations with the local stakeholders and organizations you collaborated with about what impact you did or didn't achieve. This can be one of the hardest parts of CSR engagement because people will expect a lot of you as a company. Enter into these conversations with humility and a commitment to continuing the work.

Lastly, don't neglect to **report out how your CSR initiative went** to other companies and the broader public. Think of this as a way to keep your own team accountable while also spreading your impact more broadly. By informing other players in the CSR sector of how your project went, you can positively influence other initiatives to prevent mistakes and improve their approaches. **Communicating your impact helps others make an even bigger impact.**

Your customers also want to hear about your CSR work. Whether you regularly update your website with facts and figures from your CSR efforts or share photos and videos on social media, make sure you're maximizing the brand benefits of publicizing your corporate giving. In other words, don't be shy and play show and tell when it comes to your CSR work.

LEVERAGING THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR YOUR CSR INITIATIVES

As the expectations for companies involved in CSR work continue to rise, so do the stakes. CSR programs are increasingly complex and it's important to give your team the best possible tools to organize and execute a winning CSR strategy. Submittable is a [modern submission platform](#) that allows your team to significantly reduce the time and resources it takes to run a top-notch CSR initiative.

Whether you're wrangling in-kind donations to nonprofits, funding grants, or sponsoring local events in the community, you need a tool that puts your CSR work in one centralized place.

Submittable ▯

Submittable is a cloud-based submission management platform that makes it easy to accept, review, and select any kind of content, no matter where you are. Since 2010, Submittable has helped organizations collect more than 10 million submissions for thousands of customers all over the world.