

# Is this crisis catalysing compassionate capitalism?

Last week, we were lucky enough to host one of UK tech's most influential figures, Stephen Kelly, for a talk about how the world of business is responding to the current crisis. Stephen knows what he is talking about having led Chordiant, MicroFocus and Sage; run the UK government's IT; and been an investor in and mentor of many high-growth tech companies.

His main theme was the rapid emergence, in the past few weeks, of – and fast-growing need for – compassionate capitalism and how most governments and many businesses have been able to demonstrate a hitherto unseen speed and agility as they respond to the crisis.

Recently, we have seen many brands put aside their short-term financial concerns in order to focus on supporting the vulnerable and those on the front-line. Supermarkets have pivoted to create dedicated shopping hours for the vulnerable; many firms have re-organised themselves to start making ventilators, hand-sanitizers and PPEs; and countless firms have released staff to help beleaguered hospitals and other health service organisations. (Conversely, we have seen a much smaller number of brands display a tin ear as they put their commercial drivers ahead of their corporate consciences)

Most of the brands putting societal requirements first are also trying to douse home fires in the form of falling sales and staff reductions. Take JustPark who have re-purposed a moribund business – finding people parking spaces in residential drives for big events – in order to find, at the last count, 5000 spaces for healthcare workers near hospitals.

We all know that staff want their organisations to demonstrate a societal purpose beyond their commercial goals. In the past year we've seen businesses work hard in terms of gender equality, diversity and climate change. But there has been always been a question – would brands still pursue purpose whole-heartedly when times were tough?

The past two weeks suggest that many do. At the same time that people are having to make sacrifices of all kinds to protect both their lives and their livelihoods they are ready to put a contribution to society first. The phenomenal response to the call for NHS volunteers – over 750,000 – and the return of 20,000 former NHS employees are just two examples of this.

Of course, lots of businesses haven't done anything yet either because they are too busy absorbing the business impact of the crisis and/or the right opportunity hasn't made itself apparent yet. But, when they are ready, there will no doubt, sadly, be plenty of opportunities to help with charities and SMEs to resuscitate; public services to re-build; communities to support; and unemployed people to re-train.

# Is this crisis catalysing compassionate capitalism? (cont'd)

As communicators we have the opportunity right now to support and advise our leaders as they balance the (sometimes) conflicting demands of societal purpose and financial performance. Using the increasingly large amount of evidence this crisis is generating, we can show them that doing the right thing for society is indisputably doing the right thing for the business. Because, crucially, as social media illustrates daily, people are going to remember both the brands that stepped up to the plate - and those who didn't - in the current crisis.

Of course, there needs to be one rider to this argument. No-one knows how long we are in this crisis for. Will all these initiatives be sustainable for businesses in the long-term? And, when it finally ends, will consumers permit brands to revert to type or expect them to keep putting society first?

One thing is clear for those brands that persevere - customers are on their side and, when things are back to normal, those brands will reap the benefit. So, as Stephen Kelly concluded, this is the time for leaders to 'galvanise morale and company culture'.

Will our governments, our businesses and our communities emerge from this crisis more caring and more compassionate? Maybe this experience will prove that global challenges, such as climate change, could be addressed at the required speed by all countries in a way we previously thought impossible.

We still have a long, long way to go but that's something to hope for.