

Corporate Social Responsibility

Making better community part of your practice.

BY SHAREEF MAHDAVI



For many years now, I have believed that physicians in private practice have to pay attention to two primary objectives: (1) doing what's good for their patients (better medicine) and (2) doing what's good for their practice (better business). After several excellent conversations with

Mark Kontos, MD, of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and Tyrie Jenkins, MD, of Honolulu, I've come to see that there is a third and highly compelling leg that needs to be added to this proverbial stool: doing what's good for the world around me (better community). It's high time that doctors in general and refractive surgeons specifically embrace and create their own version of doing good while doing well.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In the business world, the mantra du jour is *corporate social responsibility*, a term that has companies scrambling to figure out how they can become more accountable in their pursuit of profit. This means taking into account the impact of corporate actions on employees and the community at large as well as assessing the environmental impact on our planet. The rise of corporate social responsibility is not coincidental, as the Internet has given tremendous voice to consumers and the power to both reward and punish companies, organizations, and even political candidates. It's a new day in the media world, where everyday consumers can use blogs and tweets (terms none of us knew just a short while ago) to influence consumer behavior. Just witness what happened to cable provider Comcast (Philadelphia, PA) when one frustrated customer started the blog "Comcast Must Die" in response to a very poor customer service encounter (www.comcastmustdie.blogspot.com). "Big Brother" is no longer an Orwellian nightmare; it is a situation that can be instigated by anyone with access to the Internet.

The medical environment is no different when it comes to being a good corporate citizen. This is especial-

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ly true for the refractive practice, where the self-pay elective nature of the offering puts it at the mercy of consumers and their purchasing decision. Because consumers are now rating their trips to the doctor's office in the same manner as their dining and vacation experiences, (courtesy of zagat.com and a host of other Web sites), doing nothing is no longer an option.

THE RISE OF AUTHENTICITY

The key question that each practitioner needs to ask him or herself is, "What do I want to accomplish?" The power of this question is that it forces you to think beyond patient care and practice profits. Consumers are seeking a higher degree of authenticity in their purchasing experiences. Patients want something more, and part of that "more" is an understanding of how your practice helps make this world a better place. Consumers are increasingly seeking transactions that validate their own set of values (eg, www.vocationvacations.com). As put forth by Pine and Gilmore in their new book *Authenticity*,¹ we are increasingly making decisions based on how authentic we perceive the offering to be. This new consumer sensibility helps explain the rise of Whole Foods Market (Austin, TX) through its appeal to natural authenticity by offering a wide range of organic foods. Similarly, the enduring popularity of Harley Davidson motorcycles (Milwaukee, WI) can be attributed to its appeal to original authenticity, as thousands of its customers willingly tattoo the Harley Davidson logo on their bodies and join local HOG (Harley Owners Group) chapters.

What does authenticity mean for your practice, partic-

OPPORTUNITY INTERNATIONAL

Opportunity International (www.opportunity.org) is a 26-year-old “bank” that loans money to the poorest of the poor in third-world countries. As part of the microfinance movement that generated a Nobel Peace Prize for Mohamed Yunis in 2006, Opportunity International now has more than 1 million clients worldwide who each started with \$50 loans to the start or expand a local business in their village or town. Those loans provide basic capital that would not otherwise be available and that allow access to the entrepreneurial dream to those living in poverty. The default rate for Opportunity International's loans is around 2%, which is in line with that of commercial banks in the developed world.

What I truly appreciate about this organization is that it focuses on giving the poor a hand up rather than a handout. It is a form of social capitalism that, rather than become one-time act, creates long-term sustainability as loans are repaid and then recycled into new loans. Opportunity's last annual report¹ showed how each \$1.00 donated creates \$2.74 of leverage in their financial system. Because this bank is a nonprofit organization, the money put in creates sustainability for the system.

The organization now offers gift cards in \$25 denominations (available at www.optinnow.org) that can be purchased by your practice and given to patients as gifts. In my opinion, this type of postsurgical gift will have much more impact on your practice than a mug or T-shirt with your practice's logo. This is just one example of making better community. For those of you who agree and put this idea to work, please send me an e-mail message and let me know the impact on your patients and your practice.

1. Opportunity International. More than a loan. 2007 Annual Report. Oak Brook, IL; May 2008.

ularly in relation to corporate social responsibility? Ideally, it means that “doing something more” becomes embedded in the corporate culture of your practice. Simply practicing good medicine is no longer a differentiator in the eyes of the medical services consumer (formerly known only as a patient). Going forward, if you want to be remembered as a great surgeon, you also have to stage a great experience. Part of that experience should include appealing to the greater good.

PUTTING CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY INTO PRACTICE

Incorporating corporate social responsibility into your practice does not have to be difficult, but it should involve everybody on the staff rather than just one person (eg, the surgeon going on a medical mission). For example, I recently heard a refractive administrator describe how her practice gave up its traditional holiday party for a day devoted to building a house for Habitat for Humanity (Americus, GA). It was simultaneously less expensive and more valued as an event that brought the staff closer together while helping others in need. Here are several more ideas to consider:

- **Adopt a charity.** Much like those highway road signs, your practice could adopt a charity and make a donation for every patient visit that occurs during a specific timeframe

- **Host an event.** Plan a charitable fundraiser that takes place right in your office or center and invite all your patients to participate

- **Replace T-shirts and mugs with charitable gift cards.**

Take that \$25 post-LASIK thank you gift budget and offer your patient a gift certificate to use at one of the numerous charitable Web sites such as www.kiva.org and www.modestneeds.org (see *Opportunity International*)

- **Go green.** Closely examine what precious resources (paper, water, electricity) can be reduced, eliminated, or recycled in your practice without compromising the quality of care. Involve your patients in this process.

What is most important is that you empower your staff; you will be surprised how well most team members will respond to such an effort. In the long run, you will increase your appeal to patients and staff, all of whom likely aspire to be a part of something greater than them. To borrow from successful boutique hotelier Chip Conley and his book *Peak*,² efforts such as those outlined herein will allow your employees to view their roles more as a calling than a job and will permit your patients to fulfill needs they didn't even recognize they had until you brought them to their attention! ■

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1. Pine J, Gilmore, J. *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press; 2007.

2. Conley C. *Peak: How Great Companies Get Their Mojo From Maslow*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2007.