

Corporate Volunteering – From Social to Business Case

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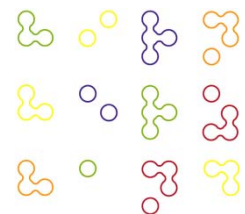
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Volunteering initiatives can deliver significant added value for internal and external communications, says **Georg Lahme**.

2011 is the *European Year of Volunteering*, highlighting the fact that every day, all over the world, millions of people volunteer in their free time, and invest talent and energy to make a difference in their communities. Levels of professionalism in organizing this vast social power have risen rapidly in the past years, social businesses and bodies have formed around it, designing projects and linking volunteers and beneficiaries. The internet accelerates the networking of these resources.

Influenced by US and UK corporate cultures, European corporations increasingly realize that the idea of volunteering bears potential for their business. Still, most companies have not implemented volunteering concepts and those who have, usually do not realize its full potential. Estimates state that, today, some 23 Million Germans volunteer, that is almost 30 per cent of total population. Similar figures are available for other European countries.

A survey, Klenk & Hoursch conducted for RWE Energy in 2007, shows that 40 per cent of the German workforce is already engaged in volunteering. They would appreciate, if their employer supported their project and personal mission. More than that, 43 per cent of all employees who are not socially engaged, yet, can imagine starting an activity. They, too, would appreciate an impulse by their employer. The survey impressively showed how many people are out there not actively looking for a good cause to engage in, but ready to go, if they are taken by the hand. Most promising for brand and communications experts: More than 50 per cent of the German workforce would be ready to volunteer for a good cause in a company funded initiative. They would go out there, do good, and wear T-Shirts and caps with a company logo. For big brands and decentralized companies, this opens great opportunities to anchor brands directly in its social and market environment.

Corporate Volunteering creates a Win-Win-Win

Corporate Volunteering is a win-win-win, for the person engaging for a good cause, for the community, organization or individual who benefits, and for the

company supporting it. Unfortunately, initiatives to implement volunteering often come to a halt at an early stage. The main reasons are

1. **Costs:** fear of high implementation and ongoing costs
2. **Complexity:** too many functions and persons in the company (want to be) involved
3. **Experience:** often decision makers lack experience in community work, and underestimate the degree of their employees' social motivation
4. **Business case is unclear:** the benefits of volunteering are often not clear enough to prepare a decision.

Volunteering creates a significant value added for internal and external communications, it motivates employees and increases loyalty, it sustains corporate change processes, it helps to roll out and embed responsibility and sustainability programs, it supports and prolongs teambuilding, and it has proven its effect in talent as well as leadership development programs.

The RWE Companius Case

A Klenk & Hoursch customer case, RWE Companius, shows that employees are very open for corporate volunteering and that it can grow to be a decisive asset for in- and external communications.

RWE Companius was launched in September 2007 as a volunteering initiative of RWE Energy, back then the sales holding of RWE. The idea was to create a major volunteering initiative supporting the rollout of the corporation's overarching CR strategy, and also supporting the brand image and sales activities in the regional markets (RWE Energy was made up of more than a dozen regional companies). The team worked out a concept for a membership-based organization of volunteers, including criteria and processes for funding. The online platform www.rwecompanius.com was set up as both information hub and project marketplace. Employees could register, suggest their projects for a funding by RWE (500 € to 2,000 € per project), sign up for projects of colleagues, and exchange ideas. In 2009, RWE decided to roll out Companius across the entire organization. Today, four years after the initial launch, RWE Companius is established as one of the major corporate volunteering initiatives throughout Germany. Since 2007, RWE has funded more than 5,000 projects with more than six Million Euro. 5,500 members have joined the Companius Community, some 13,000 employees and external volunteers have worked roundabout 50,000 hours in Companius projects. These figures underline that volunteering creates a strong bond between employees and company, and that Companius is a tremendous platform for stakeholder communications.

Scalable amounts of time and money

Various approaches to Corporate Volunteering offer great choice to companies of all kinds and sizes. RWE gives an impressive example of how effective and broad project funding can be institutionalized by building an online-marketplace and a long-lasting volunteering organization, but the same approach can be implemented in small and midsize organizations by basic tools such as simple printout application sheets. Volunteering-events, -toolkits or teamwork-based concepts are other options.

Types of Volunteering

Project funding	Company offers standardized budgets and criteria for funding employee projects. Results in a variety of projects in the company's "community" in the long term
Event	Company organizes one central event or a volunteering day across the company. Focused activity with usually very visible communications results
Toolkit	Company develops a standard toolkit enabling employees to carry out small activities on a regular basis (e.g. build something / workshop in schools). Grassroots approach, pays back in terms of team building and limited local coverage

Teamwork Employees develop an idea and organize its realization. This approach is suited for small groups and occasional initiatives. Especially helpful for leadership and high-potential programs

Whatever the approach: there is no better tool to implement a sustainability strategy or CR program than a good volunteering activity. It can underline strategy and facilitate employees' personal understanding and involvement of CR. In 2009, Coca-Cola Germany supported the introduction of the business sustainability strategy with a company-wide volunteering week. 450 employees participated at 70 locations all over Germany.

comdirect bank established "Maths4Life" to support the launch of a new company foundation in the area of maths and numeracy. A team of volunteers, lead by the HR department, developed a toolkit for structured workshops at schools. The concept is very close to the brand values and makes use of the employees' professional skills.

These examples prove some of the toughest prejudices against corporate volunteering wrong: Volunteering is scalable from very small and simple to very broad. Volunteering is not expensive and not complicated, if you stick to some ground rules.

Corporate Volunteering should not be planned as an isolated measure. It should always be embedded in CR strategy and programs. It should from the very beginning be aligned with HR and Communications functions. Work councils should be informed and persuaded of the concept, and management should back it up. Success factors for volunteering are:

1. **Credibility:** The initiative should fit the company brand and support its attributes. It should integrate the company's competences to appear logical and credible. And it should address a true societal problem.
2. **Differentiation:** It should differentiate from competitors in a positive way.
3. **Relevance:** It should possess high (personal) relevance for stakeholders and society (in terms of topic/size).
4. **Awareness:** It should permit continuous and frequent contacts with stakeholders.

Get the best out of volunteering

Communications and HR functions benefit most from Corporate Volunteering and they are in the best position to promote employee involvement. They should take the motto of the "European Year 2011" as an opportunity to discuss and promote ideas of corporate volunteering and reduce prejudices. Volunteering significantly sharpens the profile of a company as a responsible business entity and thereby increases its attractiveness as a potential employer. Social involvement doesn't just benefit the common good, it also helps to emotionalize the brand, develop the corporate culture, and the social horizon of leadership and employees. It pays back across management disciplines featuring an outstanding cost-benefit ratio.

The Author's Details

Georg Lahme, 36, is Director and Partner at Klenk & Hoursch Corporate Communications, Frankfurt, Germany. His focus areas are Responsibility & Sustainability and Stakeholder Management.

He has worked on several widely recognized CR and Corporate Volunteering projects for RWE, Bacardi Germany and comdirect bank. In 2010, Klenk & Hoursch was awarded with the renowned German PR Award for the concept and successful launch of Stiftung Rechnen, a foundation promoting qualifications in math and numeracy.

Before joining Klenk & Hoursch in 2003, Georg worked for several public relations agencies, including Edelman. He is a member of the German Public Relations Association DPRG, and volunteers as advisory council for a Frankfurt based child-help foundation.

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