

As a student studying business, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an area I pay close attention to. Over the last decade, I've seen customer expectations around ethical business practices rise tremendously. And issues like climate change and inequality make it clear that no company can operate in a bubble oblivious to societal problems. “Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a set of practices a business undertakes to contribute to society in a positive way. A business may set environmental goals, follow ethical practices and internal governance, or set social objectives - these are all forms of CSR that are integrated into a businesses' operations and interactions with its stakeholders” (Ben and Jerry’s CSR: Activities & Strategies | StudySmarter, 2019).

The companies I truly admire for CSR have made it core to their mission, not just a PR campaign. Take outdoor gear maker Patagonia - they have decades of demonstrated commitment to environmental conservation that goes beyond just profits. Through rigorous audits and supply chain transparency, they take responsibility for social and ecological impacts at every stage. I respect that they work closely with factories to improve conditions while also funding grassroots activists on the frontlines of crises like deforestation. They turn words into tangible, far-reaching actions. “Patagonia has also shared product innovations, like its plant-based neoprene, with its competitors in hopes of accelerating more sustainable practices” (Auld & Grabs, 2022).

Ben & Jerry’s inspiration comes across in their creative support for so many social justice issues. As a young voter passionate about addressing money in politics, I was thrilled by their campaign to overturn Citizens United by stamping dollars with anti-corruption messages. They leverage their brand in ways that build awareness and drive policy change. And with their climate justice fund and fair-trade sourcing commitments, they match their quirky personality with true purpose. “Even before Unilever, the company was always going to the uncomfortable edges of advocacy

and activism,” Mr. Michalak said. “We are doing more now on the social mission than we ever have in the company’s history” (Gelles, 2021).

At the other end of the spectrum, tech giants like Amazon and Foxconn symbolize CSR claims masking ruthless business motives. Exposés about back-breaking warehouse jobs with minimal comforts and high injury rates show that Amazon’s priority is fast shipping at the cost of exploited labor. And reports of poor living conditions and draconian rules at Apple supplier Foxconn facilities make me doubtful they really care about that workforce. The PR spin sounds empty when contrasted with the real experiences of countless workers and contractors enabling big tech’s convenience-focused empire.

These kinds of contrasts leave me cautious about many companies waving the CSR flag. Too often glossy sustainability reports and words about responsibility serve as window dressing concealing business-as-usual indifference to the wellbeing of communities sustaining their profits. Cynically dressing ambition as altruism. Exploitation in an ethical facade.

Even when leaders have positive intentions, layers of bureaucracy within large corporations make it tough to implement comprehensive commitments that consider all stakeholders. Incremental CSR steps often hide backsliding in less public areas. Priorities get muddled between departments. Gaps emerge between ideals and full accountability throughout tangled supply chains. Having good CSR intentions isn’t the same as tangibly preventing abuse and injustice.

To address social and environmental issues, we need passionate advocates driving ethical change within companies. As a business student interested in corporate social responsibility, I can strengthen oversight to make firms more transparent and accountable. Though profits often

trump ethics, incremental improvements in corporate policy crafted by internal champions can promote justice and sustainability over time.

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