



Corporate Citizenship

Health Is The Next Green For Business

Nancy Turett, 04.13.10, 3:04 PM ET

Like green, it is becoming a necessity for meeting society's expectations, for enhancing reputation and for generating future profits, all at once.

Whatever your political views about health care reform, you have to agree that in the past year health has come to the forefront as a socioeconomic and personal issue for all Americans. Businesses need to pay close attention to that fact. In the just-released Edelman Health Engagement Barometer 2010 study of 15,000 people in 11 countries, 73% of respondents said that protecting the public's health is as important as protecting the environment, and 69% said that companies should put as much effort into maintaining and improving personal and public health as they put into the environment. Business has gone green, and now it's time to go health.

When the business world first became aware of the green movement, the C-suite went on the defensive. Today green is a fact of life, for consumers, corporate messages and new product development, because green has come to mean opportunity. Using fewer environmental resources while operating sustainably helps save both the planet and money. Adopting a green approach can make a company more attractive to consumers, prospective employees, business partners and government. And it can build the company, too, through the creation of new products or services.

In my work I see some organizations already beginning to make health part of the kind of holistic strategy that marries positive business results with societal good. For example, General Electric (disclosure: an Edelman client), building on the success of its green-focused "ecomagination" campaign, has launched "healthymagination," a \$6 billion investment in innovation, technology, financing and more aimed at helping deliver better health care to more people at lower cost.

We've reached a time in history when our ability to protect and improve our health is nothing short of amazing, thanks to scientific and technological breakthroughs not even imaginable just a few decades ago. Yet we're plagued by ever-more health threats that lessen people's quality of life, imperil economic development and challenge the sustainability of our planet. American society is aging, and more people are dealing with aging-associated illness and disability than ever; cases of Alzheimer's disease are expected to nearly double by 2030.

Around the world, growing epidemics of obesity, diabetes and heart disease, poor management of chronic diseases, bad behavioral choices like smoking and disparities in access to health care continue to impair people's health. Poor employee health means lower productivity. Worries about global pandemics and a risky food supply are growing. Astonishingly, research shows that our children will have shorter lives than their parents.

Clearly, these problems won't be solved only by offering employees good, affordable health benefits plans. Companies need to work not only to prevent illness and protect their interests but also to promote wellness. When a company makes health part of its social contract, it can propel its business and enhance its reputation with four important kinds of stakeholders:

Employees. A company's health engagement begins with innovative, cost-effective health benefits programs that give employees incentives to adopt and stick with healthy lifestyle choices. EMC, a data storage company, ran a pilot program that gave employees with hypertension the tools to measure their blood pressure several times a week, whether at work or at home. Over six months, the average blood pressure among the volunteers fell significantly. With this remote monitoring program and other health care innovations, EMC expects to save no less than \$111 million over six years.

Consumers. Our survey found that 75% of people believe it is important for businesses to create new products and services that maintain or improve health. Consumers want to live well as they live longer, and that opens up market opportunities, from health-enhancing car and phone designs to travel opportunities. Volvo, the car manufacturer, adheres to a textile standard that ensures that no fabrics, threads, carpets or safety belts can produce harmful emissions inside a car. One of its cars has a system that keeps the interior air cleaner than what you often breathe outside.

Business partners and the supply chain. Encouraging companies in the supply chain to promote health can bolster everyone's business opportunities. This means collaborating with organizations both inside and outside of one's traditional business partner networks. Wal-Mart (disclosure: an Edelman client) has recognized that Hispanic women have up to three times the risk of delivering babies with neural tube defects that non-Hispanic whites have, and has partnered with the National Council of La Raza, the Spina Bifida Foundation and the Mexican company Gruma, one of the world's largest producers of corn flour and tortillas, to enrich Gruma's corn products with folic acid, a crucial nutrient for pregnant women.

Local communities. Our survey found that 71% of people worldwide believe it important for businesses to support the health of their local communities. Anheuser-Busch, the beer maker, sponsors a Community Health Mobile Screening tour that travels to 50 American cities each year providing immunization and screenings to underserved neighborhoods.

In the coming decades concern about health will help shape people's trust, purchases and investments. Nearly two-thirds of the people we surveyed said they either recommended or bought products from companies they believed to be effectively involved in health matters.

Trust and transparency are now as much a component of a corporation's reputation as is the quality of the products and services it provides. As businesses work to regain public trust in the wake of the global economic crisis, making the fundamentals of personal and public health part of their business strategies will be essential. If a company pursues health beyond its immediate workforce, it will find wellness on many levels--among employees, in its local community, in its reputation and in its profit-and-loss statements.