

CSI done right during Covid-19

By Jennilee Peremore-Oliver

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With the clear economic divide in South Africa, the extension of the Covid-19 lockdown is hitting most South Africans harder than others. When the president announced the extension on 9 April, I was one of those people who realised that I was in a more privileged position than the majority, and I wanted to find ways to help. I know that there are many people out there who feel the same way I do, but they don't know how to reach out without breaking regulations.



Jennilee Peremore-Oliver, founder of communications consultancy Jenniemore.

I know some businesses want to use their influence, resources, and reach to support those in need, and many of them have already started with their efforts to help South Africans come out of Covid-19, together and stronger. I encourage all businesses to stand together to do something, collaborate, and help where they can.

I want to give businesses some advice on marketing and executing their corporate social investment (CSI) initiatives during this time. In another article, I explained how [fake CSI could damage a brand's reputation](#) and while companies are embarking on these initiatives now, I thought it is important to elaborate on this article to help companies get their CSI initiatives right during Covid-19.

Covid-19 poses a unique challenge for South Africans. We are all in survival mode; we're going back to basics. Survival mode might look different depending on the resources you already have, but it's survival mode, nevertheless. Therefore, the standard way that businesses usually implemented or promoted CSI initiatives might not be effective during Covid-19. It's in the best interest of all South Africans that every businesses' CSI initiatives are effective.



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I advise businesses to keep the following in mind to ensure that they can make the most significant impact possible without damaging their brand's reputation:

1. It's not about you

I get that businesses want to be seen and be visible right now during Covid-19 so that they are remembered post-lockdown and can recover quickly. I also understand that companies have identified CSI as an opportunity to remain seen. However, people will remember businesses that show humanity and authenticity.

Brand loyalty will come as a natural consequence of your good actions. You don't need to paste your logo on everything.

I wrote an article about [authentic marketing](#), which explains the importance of ethical marketing messages and how it's the only way to retain customer loyalty. Even people who used to be your customers are no longer your customers because

they are also in survival mode. When they make their come-back after the lockdown, you can be sure they will remember you if you implement your CSI initiatives with a genuine sense of care and kindness.

It all comes back to [Maslow's hierarchy of needs](#). Right now, South Africans are at level one - basic needs of safety, security, health, food, and water. When promoting your initiative, don't focus on selling or marketing your business – your focus must be on the people and helping them to survive with you. Use your power and influence to do bigger and better things to help those who are in the greatest need during Covid-19, but don't ask people to promote your brand while supporting the initiative. It comes across as disingenuous, and like I always say, CSI is not a marketing tactic. You should do CSI because you genuinely care. Good people and businesses always win in the end.



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2. Make it easy to support

Don't make it too complicated for people to support your initiative. Focus less on being clever and more on being clear. Ask people to donate, and that's it. Don't ask them to do steps two, three and step four of your initiative to donate. Keep it simple.

3. Be equally invested

If you're asking someone to sacrifice a scarce commodity, like food, and limited resources, then make sure that you are doing the same. What will you be sacrificing to join them in this initiative? Make it clear what your sacrifice is. People will expect your sacrifice to be greater than theirs, because you're an organisation, and they are individuals. What will be your contribution in terms of the sum of their efforts combined?

4. Be transparent

Who will benefit from your CSI initiative? Coming from a corporate, I understand that most people want to support registered non-profit organisations. During normal circumstances, NPOs are the go-to, because they already have a set beneficiary-list, but remember the people who are in need now are not only people who were always in need. With Covid-19, it could be people who are retrenched as a result of Covid-19. How will you reach those people who are not necessarily aligned with an NPO?



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5. Collaborate

Join forces with other organisations who specialise in other services or products that can help in efficiently implementing your initiatives. It would be best if you don't do it all alone. This problem is too big to fight alone. Partner with your competitors. Remember point one, "this is not about you", so stand together with other businesses that can help you make a more significant impact. Join forces. There has never been a more critical and profound time for competitors to become friends.

6. Empathise

It is difficult for people who have never experienced hunger or poverty to understand how it feels to be hungry or how it feels to watch your child go to bed hungry. However, to show empathy does not require that you must experience poverty, it only requires you to accept that you do not know how it feels, and hopefully, you will never have the first-hand experience of that. Once you admit you don't understand, you then must start asking the right questions to the right people – the people who know how it feels or who walk amongst the people who know how it feels. Connect with people or organisations who will be able to inform you of the unique challenges faced by people who have little or nothing to help them survive the Covid-19 lockdown. Don't assume you know what people are going through; you could be in for a rude awakening and massive criticism if you get it wrong.

7. Protect the dignity of beneficiaries

This point brings us back to point six, to empathise. Imagine yourself in a similar situation, where you are unable to provide for yourself and your family. Even though we are not in control of what is happening right now, we all want to retain our dignity. Give from a place of humanity and kindness and make sure that in your communication, you make it clear that “we are all in this together”. Veer away from statements that differentiates between the giver and the receiver as the haves and have-nots, an ‘us versus them’ approach. Avoid photos and videos, and instead be present in the moment of giving, and of making a difference.



UCook launches Food Fund to help South Africans in need

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8. Be accountable

Tell people about your initiative and of your partners to increase support for the initiative. Brand names carry value and credibility.

The more credible the partners you collaborate with, the more people will want to support as they trust that the initiative will be run smoothly, and they trust that the donations will go to people who genuinely need it. Account for the donations you have received. Indicate how many contributions you have received, whom you donated it to. You could account for this by releasing a news release that includes all this information, along with statements from beneficiaries (where possible). In this scenario it is not vanity, but accountability.

Final thoughts

Covid-19 has challenged all businesses to adapt their operations; work-from-home and the increasing use of digital platforms to connect.

Similarly, we need to be agile in our CSI approach to this challenge, and we need to work together to survive this. Adapt the way you implement your CSI initiatives to ensure that you remain empathetic to your community. South Africa will come out of this, and we will come out stronger when we work together.

ABOUT JENNILEE PEREMORE-OLIVER

Jennilee Peremore-Oliver is an award-winning media and communications professional, who started her career in 2009. In 2017 she founded the Communications Agency, Jenniemore (Pty) Ltd. She has worked with brands in the corporate, media and non-profit sectors.

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