Global giving | INSPIRE

These days most companies have corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. They support local sports teams, raise money for charities, and sponsor fun runs. But there are some that think bigger than that. From sustainable innovation to malaria vaccination, these companies are making the world a better place.

WORDS • AMANDA SMUIN

When founded in 1982, the IKEA Foundation focused on architecture and design. But things changed when the company realised child labour was used in its supply chain and began working to eradicate it. “Early in the endeavour, IKEA learned that to prevent child labour, it is vital to address the root causes of why children work. We realised that if we wanted children to be kept out of our suppliers’ factories, we had to make sure that they go to school instead and don’t end up simply working again elsewhere,” says Per Heggenes, CEO of IKEA Foundation. This led to the realisation that to keep children in school, they needed better health and nutrition so that they weren’t missing classes due to illness. The foundation now works to address the fundamental needs of children – home, health, education and a sustainable family income.

That’s why IKEA Foundation partnered with Swedish social enterprise Better Shelter to create flat-pack shelters for refugees. The weatherproof structures feature a solar panel to power light and charge a mobile phone, take just four hours to construct, are made from recyclable plastic, and are designed to house a family of five. But the shelters are by no means the only way that IKEA Foundation is improving the lives of children around the world. In 2016, it gave €142 million, more than ever before, in grants to its partners, which include UNICEF, Save the Children, Médecins Sans Frontières and the UN Refugee Agency.
Fast-fashion giant H&M may seem like an unlikely champion of sustainability. After all, its business model relies on the mass consumption of inexpensive clothing. But unlike other big players in the fast-fashion game, the Swedish clothing retailer is working towards ameliorating the impact it’s having on the environment. The retailer currently has 200 staff working directly on sustainability, under the management of Anna Gedda, Head of Sustainability. She says, “We want to use our size and scale to lead the change towards fully circular and truly sustainable fashion.”

The company has set itself the ambitious goal of 100 per cent circularity, including a commitment to using 100 per cent sustainable cotton in all products by 2020. But it has been making progress – in 2015, 31.4 per cent of cotton used was sustainable, compared with just 7.6 per cent in 2011. And since 2013, the company has collected 22,000 tonnes of garments in stores. Depending on the quality, H&M’s partner I:CO sells on second-hand clothing, turns it into other products, such as cleaning cloths, or recycles it by turning it into textile fibres that can be used for insulation.

“I believe companies that take responsibility for people and the environment will be the most successful in the long run,” says CEO Karl-Johan Persson.

Shoppers should look out for the green Conscious Choice tag when browsing garments. The Conscious collection uses 100 per cent organic cotton, as well as water- and energy-saving processes.
Coca-Cola is kicking goals left, right and centre when it comes to sustainability. The company has smashed its aim of replenishing all the water it uses by 2020; in 2015, the company returned 115 per cent of its water usage through community water projects. It’s improving water efficiency, recovering and recycling its bottles and cans, reducing its carbon footprint, and sustainably sourcing ingredients.

But the truly life-changing program that the most well-known brand in the world has introduced is 5by20, a global initiative to empower five million female entrepreneurs across the company’s value chain by 2020. The aim is to break down the economic barriers that women face, by providing access to training courses, financial services, and the support of peers or mentors. Since the initiative launched in 2010, there have been 5by20 programs in 64 countries, and more than 1.7 million women have participated in those initiatives.

Because women invest heavily in their children’s health and education, as well as into their local economy, by economically empowering women around the world, Coca-Cola is having a huge, positive impact on entire communities.

PATAGONIA DOESN’T WANT YOU TO BUY ITS PRODUCTS – UNLESS YOU REALLY NEED THEM

It’s counterintuitive for a clothing company to instruct customers not to buy its products. But in 2011, Patagonia did just that, with its ‘Don’t buy this jacket’ ad campaign. The accompanying text outlined all the ways in which the production and distribution of the product had a negative impact on the environment. It took 135 litres of water to make the jacket; transporting it to the warehouse produced more than nine kilos of carbon dioxide; and the amount of waste it left behind was two-thirds of its own weight.

It’s a company that sells clothing and gear aimed at people who enjoy the great outdoors, the ad was no gimmick. Patagonia knows that it has no business without an environment for its customers to enjoy. That’s why the company makes products that are built to last, thereby reducing waste, and uses recycled materials whenever possible. The jacket in the ad is made from 60 per cent recycled polyester. It encourages consumers to repair its products. As well as doing so in house, it provides information on its website on how customers can repair their own gear. And Patagonia will take back its products when customers are done with them and find a way to reuse or recycle them.

Yes, Patagonia wants to continue to grow, and must do so through the sale of its goods, but it will do so as sustainably and responsibly as it possibly can.

GLAXOSMITHKLINE HAS DEVELOPED THE WORLD’S FIRST MALARIA VACCINE

‘Big pharma’ gets a bad rap, and pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) is one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world. But over the past 10 years, under the guidance of CEO Sir Andrew Witty, the company has been doing an awful lot of good. GSK is making great strides in improving accessibility to healthcare in the world’s poorest nations, and developing the medications and vaccines they need the most.

Since 2010, pricing is tiered in less economically developed nations, and the pharma company has capped prices of patented medicines and vaccines in these regions at 25 per cent of the cost in the UK. In 2016, GSK decided to release drugs from patents in those nations to provide even better access to healthcare in poorer countries. It consistently ranks highly on the Global Access to Medicines Index, started by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2008.

GSK is also investing in the creation of lifesaving medications and vaccines to combat the World Health Organization’s priority infectious diseases – HIV, malaria and tuberculosis. It has developed the world’s first malaria vaccine, RTS,S, due to be piloted in three regions in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2018. The company partners with Save the Children, UNICEF, WHO, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) to provide access to a range of medications and vaccines to vulnerable children.

With GlaxoSmithKline 2016 group turnover at £27.9 billion, the pharma company proves that doing good isn’t bad for the bottom line.