

The Social Purpose Continuum

A TRANSFORMATIONAL TOOL FOR BUSINESS

Businesses contribute to society in different ways, ranging from traditional philanthropy to fully embedding a social purpose at the core of their business. This continuum outlines four distinct approaches. The first three—philanthropic, strategic, and integrated—reflect increasingly sophisticated forms of corporate social responsibility. The fourth represents a different model altogether: social purpose, where a company’s reason for being is to create a better world.

The continuum is designed to help organizations identify where they are today and understand what it takes to deepen their contribution and impact over time. It highlights the shifts in mindset, strategy, and operations required to move from peripheral activities to a model where purpose defines why the business exists and shapes how it creates value for society. Businesses do not need to move through each stage of the continuum. At any time, they can choose to embrace a social purpose and embed it at the core of their business.

	1.0 Philanthropic	2.0 Strategic	3.0 Integrated	4.0 Social Purpose
Motivation	Give back or PR	Achieve results	Be more competitive	Build a better world
Activity	Ad hoc Donations	Community Investment Vision, goals & targets + Volunteering & in-kind	CSR vision Core competencies & assets	Business purpose Mission Whole of enterprise
Strategy	Side-lined	Siloed	Integrated into corporate strategy	Central to / inseparable
Resources	Grants budget	+ Volunteering & staff skills	+ Other assets, functions, products & services	+ Leveraged collec- tive resources
Investment Models	Profit allocation	Community investments	R&D innovation investments	Value creation
Issue Selection	Respond to community requests / where most PR value can be gained	Address community needs	Deliver strategic positioning	Address complex social challenges
Lead	Community relations manager	CSR manager	Chief strategy or sustainability officer	CEO
Employee Role	Donors via payroll	Skills-based volun- teering	Performance plans & daily decision-making	At work, at home & in community
Customer Role	None	Volunteer & donate	Join & co-create	Customer movement
Brand Promise	Quality: aware com- pany donates money	Trust: aware of how company contributes to community	Pride: aware of company's socially beneficial impacts	Meaning: believe society is better off if they do business with the company & that as customers they are part of a social movement
Marketing	Paid advertising tells a story	Earned media / cause marketing tell story	Customers tells a story	Everything you do tells a story
Participation	Passive	Strategic partnerships	Multi-stakeholder collaborations	Innovation labs for system change
Timeline	< 1 year	Multi-year	Medium term	Long term
Measurement	Inputs	Activities	Outcomes	Impact
Business Value	Goodwill	Reputation	Profitability	Long-term viability

