

# BRANDED

Fresh Thinking About  
Branding And Marketing

A red t-shirt is centered on the page. The text 'Branding Employee Volunteerism: Building Culture and Community' is printed in white on the front of the t-shirt.

## Branding Employee Volunteerism:

Building Culture and Community

DeSantis  
Breindel

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When it comes to maximizing the impact of corporate volunteer programs, a well thought-out branding and communications strategy can be your most powerful tool. Even when employees volunteer on their own, an effective communications campaign can make them feel connected to a company-wide effort, transforming all volunteer initiatives into a culture-building activity. This whitepaper shares seven principles for leveraging communications to enhance the long-term success and impact of your employee volunteer program.

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Employee volunteer programs are an increasingly important component of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). As the recovery from the Great Recession limps along, many companies continue to cut staff and reduce budgets across the organization. Often, CSR programs feel the impact of these cuts first. But even as companies cut back, the pressure to give back is increasing. This is particularly true for high profile corporations, including those in financial services, that have taken a reputational hit in recent years. Negative press coverage not only weakens relationships with customers and prospects, it can deeply damage employee morale, with disastrous consequences for a company's long-term prospects. Employee volunteer programs can go a long way toward restoring a tarnished reputation and building employee morale.

However, simply creating a new employee volunteer program does not guarantee its success. Nor does supporting a long-standing program with tired, uninspiring messaging. Effective communication, directed to both internal and external audiences, is critical to maximizing a program's impact – on the company's reputation, on employee morale and, most critically, on the community organizations with which the company partners.

Effective communication begins with creating a compelling “brand” for the volunteer program. Brands are developed to instill desired impressions in the minds of key audiences. The audiences for a volunteerism brand includes employees, the community partners engaged by the program and, ultimately, the wider network of individuals and organizations that influence the company's success – its customers, shareholders, suppliers, regulators and others. How that brand is communicated to these audiences is equally important, particularly when it comes to recruiting volunteers.

This whitepaper will examine seven principles for developing and implementing a branding and communications strategy to enhance engagement in and maximize impact of employee volunteer programs:

Principle 1:	Make sure the objectives of the volunteer program align, directly or indirectly, with what the company stands for, believes in or does.
Principle 2:	Determine what motivates employees to participate and use this to develop the key messaging and value proposition for your recruitment campaign.
Principle 3:	A picture is worth a thousand words – let employees see themselves participating in the program.
Principle 4:	Plan ahead. Use this year’s program/activities as the building blocks for next year’s recruitment campaign.
Principle 5:	Make each campaign unique to maximize engagement over time.
Principle 6:	Develop shared goals for the program and keep employees updated on progress to build a sense of teamwork and connect the volunteer activity to the corporate culture.
Principle 7:	Leverage the broadest possible range of media to engage employees at multiple touch points while phasing communications over time to build momentum.

There are two elements to consider: what you say about the program, and how and where you say it. Let’s begin with what you say.

## Principle 1      **Make sure the objectives of the volunteer program align, directly or indirectly, with what the company stands for, believes in or does.**

The most effective employee volunteer brands align closely with the company’s mission, values and/or products. An excellent example of this is Campbell’s Soup Company, whose diverse CSR activities are united under a “nourishing” brand. Campbell’s CSR activities include “Nourishing Our Consumers,” “Nourishing Our Employees” and its employee volunteerism program, “Nourishing Our Communities.” While the linkage to the company’s products is obvious, the “nourishing” brand doesn’t limit the types of activities in which employees can

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engage to food-related endeavors – it merely ties everything they do back to the company’s overall mission. The program has been quite successful; in one recent four-month period, 700 Campbell’s employees volunteered \$162,000 worth of time to a wide range of activities and organizations.

Disney offers another good example of tying a “volunteerism brand” to the corporate brand. In one recent year, through the company’s VoluntEARS program, employees contributed more than 466,000 hours of service, including building playgrounds, building homes for families in need, and assisting with disaster relief efforts. Note that not all the activities are directly related to what Disney does; however, by embracing them in the VoluntEARS brand, all employee efforts are linked closely to the corporate brand – a win for the company, for employees and for the organizations served.

Not every volunteerism brand must be as tightly linked to the corporate product as Campbell’s’ “nourishing” efforts or to the corporate brand, as with Disney’s VoluntEARS. A client of our firm, a prominent investment banking firm, links its employee volunteerism activities to the concept of teamwork, which is a core principle of its strong corporate culture. An explicit purpose of its volunteerism program is bringing together employees from diverse departments and with different levels of authority to work together on community projects. The volunteer brand isn’t related to the firm’s product offering (financial services), but it is directly tied to its corporate culture.

Companies just launching a volunteer program should consider the linkages to their brand, product or values when determining which types of activities to support and/or encourage. But even those with a long-standing volunteer program should make sure that its objectives and impact are in some way tied to the what the company stands for, believes in or does. This can be done explicitly, as with Campbell’s, or subtly, as with Intel. Intel’s volunteer program, “Intel Involved,” is a subtle play on the “Intel Inside” concept, offering a sense that the company’s employees are “inside” the communities in which they work.

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## Principle 2

**Determine what motivates employees to participate and use this to develop the key messaging and value proposition for your recruitment campaign.**

Why do employees sign up for a company volunteer program? Is it the opportunity to “do good?” The chance to make a positive impression on company management? A day off from work? The answer isn’t always obvious. A few years ago, our firm was asked to create a communications program for a client’s community volunteer program. Participation had been holding steady at 70% for several years, and the company wanted to boost this to at least 80%. In the past, communications about the program had focused on the social importance

of the work done by the volunteers. Images in recruiting posters showed employees visiting senior centers, cleaning urban parks, painting school buildings. It was all very inspirational. But when we asked employees in informal focus groups why they signed up, it wasn't always "doing good" that motivated them. Instead, the most common motivation was the opportunity to step out of their day-to-day routine. Since many of the volunteer activities took place on weekends, it wasn't just a matter of a day off from work. It was the chance to do something different, to be someone different, if only for a day. A hard-charging young finance executive could be a soccer coach for a day. A marketing director with grown children could spend time at a day care center with young children. A senior executive could work with her hands for a change and see immediate results in the form of a freshly painted schoolyard wall. With these insights, we created a recruitment campaign built around the notion of "being" something or someone different for a day. Communications featured bold headlines: "Be a painter." "Be a coach." "Be a landscaper." Participation rates jumped significantly the first year.

The lesson from this experience is clear: find out what motivates employees to get involved and use this information to create your recruitment campaign. (It should be noted that learning why employees choose not to get involved is also important.) Motivations will vary from company to company, depending on the type of business, the communities in which it operates and the kinds of organizations supported.

While the recruitment message may vary from company to company, certain principles about how it is delivered cut across all organizations.

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### Principle 3

### A picture is worth a thousand words – let employees see themselves participating in the program.

In our experience, the most successful campaigns involve images of employee volunteers out in the community. In asking employees to volunteer, you're asking them to step out of their comfort zone in some way, whether by visiting a neighborhood they aren't familiar with or interacting with people they might not ordinarily come into contact with. Showing images of colleagues participating in the community helps allay any anxiety employees might have, enabling them to "put themselves in the picture." On a recent campaign for a client with a relatively new volunteer program, we created lobby posters and other communications that showed employees volunteering in small groups. This not only promoted a sense of teamwork, it reassured employees that they would not be "flying solo" when they ventured out of the office.

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## Principle 4 Plan ahead. Use this year's program or activities as the building blocks for next year's recruitment campaign.

Showing images of your people in the community requires an investment in custom photography – and a good bit of planning. For seasonal programs that occur each year at a specified time, it's vital to have a photographer on hand to capture images this year to use in next year's campaign. This is where the planning comes in. But it's worth the extra effort to avoid using stock photographs. Employees have no trouble sniffing out phony images, and it's important that they see themselves in the photography, not posed models. For a global investment banking client, we sent a single photographer to volunteer sites in six cities on four continents. The images he captured were used to recruit volunteers for the next year's program. Using a single photographer ensured a cohesive visual style across all sites and activities.

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## Principle 5 Make each campaign unique to maximize engagement over time.

It's also important to keep your communications fresh. Just as magazines invest in new campaigns to secure renewals from subscribers, employee volunteerism campaigns need to find new ways to engage past participants as well as non-participants. The volunteerism brand should remain the same, but the messages – in words and visual expression – should change each year to draw attention to the program and give employees a new reason to join. We recently created a new campaign based on a volunteer program's 10th anniversary; though the brand for this program was well established, the campaign messaging used the anniversary as a catalyst to engage employees who had not yet gotten involved.

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## Principle 6 Develop shared goals for the program and keep employees updated on progress to build a sense of teamwork and connect the volunteer activity to the corporate culture.

One way to generate enthusiasm, even for a program that may be several years old, is to share participation goals and keep employees updated on progress. A client of ours incorporated target participation rates into its one-day volunteerism program three years ago and used a variety of communications, including emails from senior management and frequent postings on the company intranet, to chart progress. Employees felt they had a stake in helping the company reach its goals, and participation increased significantly that year. Sharing goals and outcomes also helps transform the volunteerism program into a culture-building activity; even when employees volunteer on their own, they will feel connected to a company-wide effort. Even if you choose not to share participation goals beforehand, it is almost always advisable to share results after the fact. Again, this will connect the volunteer activity to the corporate

*Sharing goals and outcomes also helps transform the volunteerism program into a culture-building activity.*

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culture – and build a sense of teamwork. Beyond participation rates, find ways to quantify the impact of what was accomplished. Campbell's did this by adding up the monetary value of the hours “donated” by employees. An even more meaningful approach was taken by a client of ours who calculated the impact of its volunteer efforts using a number of significant yardsticks: acres cleared of rubbish, meals delivered to homebound seniors, etc. These calculations brought home to employees that, while individually their impact may appear insignificant, collectively they are making a difference – a key pillar of the company's corporate culture of teamwork as well as an incentive to get involved.

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## Principle 7

**Leverage the broadest possible range of media to engage employees at multiple touchpoints while phasing communications over time to build momentum.**

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Posters in your lobby and other common areas are important but not sufficient. To build interest and excitement, it's vital to reach employees where they are most comfortable acquiring information. More and more, we are creating Facebook pages devoted to employee volunteer initiatives. Employees can post photos of volunteer events on the site – provided they pass muster with the page's administrator. Video is another effective medium, unique in its ability to capture the moment and convey the spirit of an activity. For the global client noted above, we sent a video team with the still photographer to capture footage of volunteer events. The footage was edited into a five-minute film that was posted on the company's intranet to generate buzz for the next year's program. It was also posted to YouTube and Vimeo sites, where it can be seen by external audiences.

The more media you incorporate into a campaign, the more easily you can phase communications over time. Lobby posters may not change, for example, over the course of the campaign, but online photo messages of last year's events can be posted to your intranet at appropriate intervals.

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*Volunteer programs are highly effective in leveraging the skills and enthusiasm of employees to make a difference in the community. They build a strong internal culture as well as goodwill with external audiences. But to be truly effective, they must project a compelling brand that communicates their goals in a way that relates to what the company does or what it stands for. This will ensure maximum participation among employees and maximum benefit for community partners.*

## About DeSantis Breindel



DeSantis Breindel is a B2B branding and marketing firm based in New York. At critical inflection points, we work with our clients to align brand strategy with business strategy—creating stories and experiences to engage customers, influence prospects, rally employees, inspire investors and build communities. To learn more go to [www.desantisbreindel.com](http://www.desantisbreindel.com)

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