

## Going Beyond Profit

by Somik Raha

A crowded room listened to an intense man, strangely dressed in shorts, talk about marketing. Drawing parallels with Nike, this man pointed out that great brands don't talk about the details of their products, but celebrate the values they stand for. He went on to articulate the core value of his company, Apple: "To think differently." And so their ad campaign celebrated out-of-the-box visionaries, ranging from Einstein to Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. Every time I watch that classic Steve Jobs talk, I wonder what the secret is behind his legendary effectiveness in communication. Slick videos, minimalist slides and articulate delivery all play their part, but the most important factor? The message itself. There is something about aligning with our intrinsic values that unleashes a hailstorm of creativity and energy, be it in designing moving advertisements or amazing products.

Rewind two decades. I am 14, sitting in a large hall in India, listening to an 84-year-old monk talk slowly and clearly about business. The monk said, "The definition of business is service. We serve others, and out of gratitude, we are compensated. As long as our focus is on the service, compensation is bound to come. Therefore, we should put all our attention on the service." This single idea magnetized my mind with a positive and glorious view of what is referred to by many as the "for-profit sector." Growing up, I was confused when I heard people both within and outside this sector define the purpose of business as either "maximizing shareholder value" or "making profits."

Sure, money is necessary, and I respect money and the need to honor promises to people who lend me resources. But to think that the sole reason I am in business is to make my lenders happy would be rather strange. If our core goal was really to "make profits," then writing software, doing drug discovery or etching silicon are very complex ways of achieving that goal. Wouldn't the most direct approach be to just join a hedge fund on Wall Street? No, many people spend countless hours writing software, researching drugs, or making better hardware because they find meaning in what they do and are driven by a vision of what their work enables. Profits are important because they sustain the work. "For-profit" is then a gross mis-characterization of the spirit of such organizations, and is really more a tax-accounting category.

At a foundational level, profits are an important instrument that afford us the freedom to create by covering our survival needs. At a subtler level, they are also one important feedback mechanism that reflects how successfully our creations serve our audience. Our vision and existence, however, goes way beyond profitability and into the very purpose of our lives -- that of creation. A friend once insightfully pointed out to me that every product we hold in our hands was once just a thought in someone's mind, an inborn desire to imbue life and meaning into something that had yet to take form. With each passing day, I wonder if most of us who work in "for-profits" are actually really working for "beyond-profits," engaging in the act of creation to express our fundamental aliveness. The meaning in our daily work, then, comes from engaging in this creative poetry of life. This is not a new idea. In my own work, I've been encouraged to discover that the

beyond-profit perspective is familiar for those who concern themselves with value-creation. In a strategy consulting exercise with a product manager at a reputed web services company, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the intrinsic value driving his company's business was "happiness of users." Profits mattered, as they allowed the company to continue increasing productivity and extending capability. I pressed further. "Do you mean that the happiness of your users is important because it leads to more profits?" "No," he responded. "We are very clear that profits are important because they help us build great products that make our users happy." In another strategic consulting experience with a pharmaceutical company, a client team member raised the question, "What if clinical studies show that our treatment is not as effective as we had thought? Can we market it in words that are legal to get as much mileage as possible?" The head of the organization had been engaged -- but silent till now. He now spoke slowly and decisively: "This company was founded on a core idea. Anything we do must pass three tests -- it must be legal, it must be based on solid science, and it must help our patients. If it fails any of these tests, it's not an option." Profitability is important, but only when placed in service of the organization's core values. And when strategy loses touch with these values, beyond-profit leaders restore that connection.

Are these stereotype-breaking examples the norm or the exception? "Are profits what motivate us to share our gifts?" Asking that question to myself and others, I find the answer to be overwhelmingly, "No!" More and more, I find that those of us who wish to create value are already in the beyond-profit mindset, driven by a strong motivation of service through a channeling of our greatest creative gifts. We struggle with the tax accounting view of our lives, and drastically reduce our value-creation potential when we buy into it. Thankfully, it only takes a split second to wake up -- and think differently.