March 2009
What Is Your Purpose?

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Every once and awhile something comes along just when you need it. Such was the case with a book written by Roy M. Spence, called It's Not What You Sell, It's What You Stand For. This book put into words for me what has been the driving force of starting my own business, and more importantly, how I have always chosen to live my life. Before you roll your eyes and go back to your job, you might want to give yourself an opportunity to better understand the concept of purpose. Mastering this concept may allow you to build a better life for both you and your customers and maybe even build a company that lasts "forever". Read on.

What Is Your Purpose?

What would you say if you were at a party or a networking event and someone asked you "what is your purpose?" What would you answer? Would you even understand the question? I can tell you from first hand experience almost everyone looks at me quizzically, may ask what I mean, and then eventually tell me their job function. Oh, I am an attorney, a CPA, an entrepreneur, etc. So, what would you answer if I asked you "what is your purpose?"

What Is Purpose?

To understand purpose let's put it in context. There was time in America that people founded and built companies to last "forever". In some cases they actually achieved this goal. Companies like Johnson & Johnson, Ford, IBM, and others have withstood the test of time and have adapted and survived decades of tumultuous change while thousands of other companies have come and gone. Jim Collins and Jerry Porras wrote about this phenomena in their best selling book, Built to Last. So what made these companies different? In a word these companies were founded with a purpose.

Johnson & Johnson actually wrote their purpose in a credo they published just before going public in 1943. It has remained unchanged to date. There are four groups that the company pledges to satisfy. It specifically states that the company's first and primary responsibility is to the doctors and nurses who are trying to alleviate a patient's suffering. Next come their employees, then the local community, and lastly, the stockholders. Despite prioritizing their stockholders last this company has been in business for over 120 years and has been one of the best and safest long term stock investments in the US. How can this be?

Henry Ford did not decide to found an automotive manufacturing company to flip it for a quick profit. Henry Ford wanted to bring the freedom of the open road to the American masses. He also wanted to pay his employees enough so they could afford to purchase and enjoy the automobiles that Ford was producing. The brilliant concept of the assembly line was a byproduct of this goal not the other way around. The Ford Motor Company succeeded in putting America on wheels, transforming our culture, and in large part driving the industrialization of the country.

What do companies like Johnson & Johnson and Ford have in common? In short, they have a purpose. Johnson & Johnson's purpose is to alleviate pain and suffering for its customers, period. That is why the company exists. Everything else is secondary. Ford wants to provide the freedom and independence of automobile ownership to the average American (their customer base is now more global). Having a purpose allows these companies to retain a directional focus even during challenging times like we are living in now. Perhaps, that is why Ford is the only US auto maker not seeking or requiring a bailout. Companies without a purpose tend to shift and drift as conditions change, losing focus and often their entire corporate direction. The results of this often prove fatal.

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Companies aren't the only entities founded with a purpose. The United states of America was founded with a purpose. Instead of writing it in a credo like Johnson & Johnson, it was written in a document called the United States Constitution. Any time this country faces difficult challenges its current leaders always refer back to this document written by the founders over 200 years ago. It is the most distinct competitive advantage we have over every other country in the world and it is over 200 years old. How powerful is that?

The Compass

Did you know that you only need one piece of information to avoid being lost anywhere in the world? It's true. Do you know what it is? The answer is True North. If you know the direction of True North you can navigate toward a safe location anywhere in the world. Purpose is True North. If you have a purpose you can also navigate toward a safe location at any time and from any place in the world. The reason for this is that True North, like true purpose never moves. Although the path you travel may vary your point of reference never does. This is a powerful concept that can allow you and your company to navigate past less fortunate entities that do not have this reference point.

It's Not Just For Companies

The true power of purpose is that it works just as effectively for individuals as it does for companies. In fact, all "built to last" companies were launched based on the personal purpose of the founder or founders as noted above. So whether you are looking to launch a "built to last" life or a "built to last" company it all starts with you and your stated purpose. The purpose of the The Rockland Group is clearly stated on the home page of our web site. It is the first thing I want our customers to see. It is based on my personal purpose of wanting to help people by providing them use of the skills I was lucky enough to learn over my life time. Everything we do is based on fulfilling this purpose. This True North makes it much easier for us to maintain focus and navigate through these challenging times.

Now, what would say if you were at a party or a networking event and someone asked you "what is your purpose?"

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