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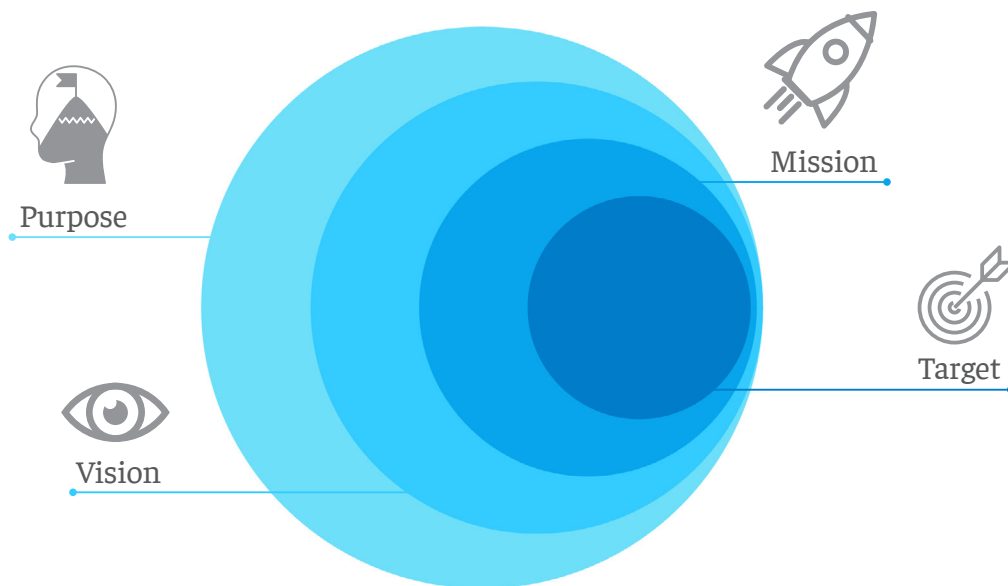
Expert Speak

The Pursuit of Purpose

Recent research has shown that social purpose has come to acquire increasing importance, particularly in the post-pandemic era, and businesses have had to re-align themselves to accommodate consumers, employees, and other stakeholders in their organisational goals. Harish Bijoor, brand strategy specialist and Founder of Harish Bijoor Consults Inc., reflects on how organisations can pursue good purpose practice to create holistic advantage for all stakeholders while also driving profitability.

Traditionally, corporates around the world have worked along the lines of what can be seen as moving from the narrow to the broad. Today, with a focus on the bigger picture, organisations are moving from the immediacy of the target, mission, and vision, towards what is the outermost circle of this Venn diagram¹ of concentric circles—purpose.

Purpose is an endless pursuit of what is correct for an organisation. If we were to assign symbols to these aspects, then purpose would be assigned the infinity loop, with no beginning and no end. And in my opinion, organisations today need to leverage themselves to become purpose-driven, and not narrowly driven by mission, vision, and targets.



Geography is History for Purpose

For long, organisations have concerned themselves with stakeholders within limited geographies, but in a purpose-led approach, the boundaries will have to be redefined. To return to my illustration of target, mission, vision, and purpose being concentric circles, if the target is about the immediate and vision and mission span a somewhat broader perspective, then purpose would concern the entire cosmos.

¹A Venn diagram is a diagram that is used to represent mathematical or logical sets pictorially as circles, with common elements being represented by intersections of the circles.

In this light, when we talk of purpose, we talk of the entire system we live in. To this end, the narrow approach followed in the past for defining the stakeholders of an organisation becomes redundant. One must now account for man, woman, child, as well as the flora and fauna in an ecosystem due to the infinite and all-encompassing nature of purpose. Therefore, organisations must account for the people working for them as well as the people who don't, for those who choose their services as well as those who don't, and for the positive and negative footprint their products, services, or brands create for our ecosystem as a whole.

Aligning Purpose with the Stakeholders

Considering the all-encompassing nature of purpose with regard to stakeholders, when aligning with broader perspectives, companies can focus on two major aspects—one is to touch the consumers and the other is to touch your employees. Essentially, people like to buy good brands and people like to work for good companies. But what is a good brand? To take an example, when one sets out to buy a cake of soap, consumers want to buy a brand which they know will not harm their skin. The second aspect is that consumers like to buy brands which do good for the earth. This is an important statement because it implies that consumers don't mind paying the premium if the brand benefits the planet as well. In that sense, this is politically correct buying. Purpose, thus, is politically correct; it is purpose that makes you feel good after buying it. And this 'feel good' factor plays an important role in the decision making of consumers.

The second major dimension of the stakeholder challenge for organisations is their employees. Employees love to work for companies with a purpose, they will even work for a cigarette company as long as it has a purpose that they can identify with. Indeed, employees are keener on working for companies doing good for the world than for those that don't. To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, have purpose and the means shall follow. A belief that we will see resonate throughout the article.

As I mentioned previously, since purpose takes a broader look, organisations also need to align themselves with their other stakeholders who are part of the larger picture—shareholders, investors, and the society at large—in the pursuit of organisational goals. They will also need to factor in the aspirations and needs of these stakeholders and engage with them as the organisation integrates 'doing

good' with its business goals. Ultimately, it's a question of trying to lengthen the life of one's business and trying to give it enough traction to last longer because society is changing dramatically.

The Pursuit of Purpose

With the 'feel good' factor in play, organisations today are faced with what I like to call the socially conscious society of the future. Maslow's pyramid² depicting the hierarchy of needs perhaps best explains this new challenge. At the bottom of this pyramid are customers with basic needs, the *roti, kapda, makaan*³ kind of customers. The middle layer is comprised of those with advanced needs while at the very top are those with self-actualisation needs, the ones who may be considered 'woke'.⁴ Purpose, therefore, appeals only to organisations and individuals who are the top of the pyramid. But the masses who are at the bottom of the pyramid and also way higher in number, would not be able to relate to such a concept. So, if we want the masses to accept purpose, it should be driven top down, it should be driven by the 'woke' and the rest of the country needs to be woken up. Because in the long run, purpose matters to all.



Maslow's Pyramid

² Maslow's hierarchy of needs, depicted in the form of a pyramid, is an idea introduced by American psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943 in his paper titled "A theory of human motivation." The pyramid explains how actions are driven by motivations in humans.

³ Roti, kapda, makaan is a Hindi language phrase which refers to the necessities of life—food, clothing, and shelter.

⁴ Woke is an adjective used to refer to people who are more aware of discrimination and injustice in society. It traces its origins to African-American vernacular from the 1960s.

How do organisations then deliver purpose in a manner that it also appeals to the masses? Let me explain this with a recent example of our work in this space. A footwear company had an annual turnover of ₹120 billion, or, as I prefer to say, had a footprint of ₹120 billion, selling a high volume of low-priced footwear. When it came to developing a purpose for the company, I concluded (after a substantial study) that for any meaningful impact, the company needed to go beyond its target of achieving its sales quantum and its mission to make good and high-quality footwear. Because in the end, the mission and vision statement of the company were trite and nothing very different from what other companies across verticals around the world were claiming for their own. Therefore, the purpose the organisation set for itself needed be so unique that it would lend an entirely new perspective to the company and draw attention to it as that singularly different one. Purpose in this case is everything the brand should stand for. Purpose is the brand.

The basis for the new purpose for the footwear company then came to this—people use footwear to walk and if the company was making millions of Indians walk, it was making products that facilitated walking. Walking is good for health. To this extent, a footwear company is more than a footwear maker. It instantly became a healthcare company which was encouraging people to walk. Their new tagline, “Walk India Walk”, indicated this redefined purpose which implied that if you walk, you are likely to stay healthy. By dint of purpose then, every employee and distributor of the company was a healthcare professional, selling footwear that urges people to walk more and get healthier. This new purpose and vision thus drove every aspect of business of the footwear company. To view this from a different perspective, if the actions of a bricklayer amounted towards building a school, the simple action of bricklaying would generate a purpose worth getting behind. Therefore, the company’s new purpose drove the entire team to do what they do with passion. Thus, I reiterate, once you have a purpose, the means to deliver the purpose will follow.

Delivering Purpose in the New Age

The digitally savvy Alpha generation⁵ is here, and they hold significant weight as the largest growing consumer population today. To return to Maslow’s hierarchy

⁵The Alpha generation is a generational cohort comprising of those born in the early 2010s till 2025.

of needs, the Alpha generation sits at the top of the pyramid, comprising of those with self-actualisation needs, i.e., the woke section of the society. To appeal to this politically correct generation, purpose is the most politically friendly thing companies can dabble in. Putting purpose at the forefront, this generation wants to know—what purpose does this product or service serve for me? What purpose does it serve for the community? For the planet? And if they are convinced that the product or service does good, they will choose it.

To survive the future with this purpose-driven Alpha generation, companies will need to realign themselves and thus, every product/service must undergo what I call the ‘purpose due diligence.’ This will apply to all products and services, to brands, to agencies, to governments, as well as to non-governmental organisations. There is no escaping it.

Purpose due diligence begins by undertaking an in-depth understanding of the Alpha generation which is like no other. This will need to be followed by due diligence on existing products for relevance, originality, innovation, and correctness, keeping in mind the needs of the Alpha generation. Some brands have already done it. Take Coca Cola for instance. Their classic beverage based on the Pemberton formula, contains high amount of sugar. Therefore, to align with the health concerns of the new generation, they first introduced the Diet Coke which sparked its own concerns, but this was followed by Coke Zero, which tastes the same as the original formula but has none of the sugar or calorie concerns of the latter. This means that other brands, the Bournvitas and the Haldiram's, will have to do the same.

Re-orienting for the Sake of Purpose

The re-orientation in the wake of purpose comes with its own challenges. If the purpose of a popular category, say a malted drink, were to change its product offering all of a sudden, how would it be implemented? My recommendation would be to leave it to the consumer. When we look at the socially ostracized categories of products (alcohol and cigarettes being the first set in this category), change must come at four levels. Purpose must first come at the level of the governments who will outline an agenda (say, the reduction of pollution), followed by the companies (who will propose how to implement the agenda of reducing

pollution, say, by introducing new vehicles). This will then lead to the third level, the products themselves (electric vehicles, to continue the example of pollution), followed by the fourth level being the brand itself, which must be oriented to be politically correct for the purpose to be driven forward. Therefore, reiterating my earlier proposition that if you have purpose, then all the other things will fall in place.

Purpose and Profitability



In the discussion on purpose, there is often the argument that purpose is at odds with profitability. However, nothing could be further from the truth. When purpose drives business, it also drives growth. It is my firm belief that purpose delivers terrific returns on investment. This it does in two ways—it helps run organisations more smoothly by improving employee loyalty and drawing new talent, in turn helping obtain bigger and better profits. To return to my example of the footwear company, so long as it was merely manufacturing functional and fashion footwear, it was an ordinary footwear company. The moment it transitioned its purpose to being a health-oriented company with various campaigns like “Walk India Walk,” “Run India Run,” or “Jog India Jog,” it gained more traction. Consumers who were previously buying one pair of footwear were now considering buying three pairs—

for walking, for jogging, for parties. Theoretically, it could be argued that there were consumers already doing this, buying three pairs for their needs. But here is the catch—now they are buying twice the number predominantly because the more they walk (encouraged by the campaigns), more the attrition (wear and tear on the footwear), and more the need to replace the footwear. And this benefits the business, more than even corporate social responsibility (CSR) or environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals could.

CSR is so Yesterday! In 2023, Let's Focus on Purpose

Purpose is manna from heaven that has fallen into our laps post this act of God called COVID-19. Make the best use of it. Reorganise your corporation's basic purpose, rather than anything else.

With purpose as the goal, the corporate lip service paid to CSR and ESG goals must stop, as with their limited outlook, reach and passion, they fail to make any real impact. Any company or organisation can build a purpose for itself and its stakeholders. Every category has the potential for a purpose. Fundamentally, all categories of products and services are used by human beings and human beings are essentially good people. They are, at the end of the day, purpose-driven animals.

Just as some 25 years ago the world of business ran behind positioning theory as the mantra to manage the future with stand-out value, 2023 heralds the era of purpose. Coming back to Mahatma Gandhi—find purpose and the means shall follow!

Harish Bijoor is founder of the boutique consulting firm, Harish Bijoor Consults Inc., a brand name that has a consulting presence across the markets of Hong Kong, Seattle, London, Istanbul, Dubai, and the Indian sub-continent. A public speaker and author, he has been teaching at the Indian School of Business for the last 21 years. As a brand and business strategy specialist, he has previously served in senior roles across the aggressive realms of FMCG, telecom, and consumer durables. Currently, he works on the bleeding-edge brand & marketing work related to AI-led marketing, the Metaverse, and web 3.0.