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Compassion, Inc.: How Corporate America Blurs the Line between What We Buy, Who We Are, and Those We Help

Mara Einstein

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Mara Einstein : Compassion, Inc.: How Corporate America Blurs the Line between What We Buy, Who We Are, and Those We Help before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Compassion, Inc.: How Corporate America Blurs the Line between What We Buy, Who We Are, and Those We Help:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy AngieLove this topic. Great book as it opens up our

minds to the world.0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. In-depth critique of corporate CRMBBy eabseacliffI haven't finished reading it yet, but so far it is a very well-written, wonderful examples, thought-provoking, challenging the status-quo book. Thank you for undertaking this study!5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A timely and important book!By AmyHave you ever noticed all the "green" products nowadays and been skeptical of whether the companies making those products really care about the environment or are just jumping on the "do good" bandwagon? Have you ever felt uncomfortable with the idea of purchasing products to make a donation, like Product(REDD) items, or donations that get you a badge of honor to wear, such as the ubiquitous yellow LIVESTRONG and other rubber bracelets? If so, you will probably enjoy this book; if these questions haven't ever crossed your mind before now, you should definitely read this book.Compassion, Inc. is a thoughtful analysis of the trends of cause-marketing that seem to be tied in to almost every major corporation today. Mara Einstein evaluates different corporations and the causes they support--and comes to some surprising conclusions for those of us looking to do good with our pocketbooks. Oftentimes, companies obfuscate how much money is actually being donated to a charity, or what has to be done to cause that donation (it's not always as simple as buying a product, sometimes codes need to be entered on websites, etc.), or caps are placed on the amount of donations that will be raised. Einstein looks at some of the larger campaigns and thoughtfully discerns which are primarily about helping charities and causes and which are really focused on the product, celebrity, or giver and therefore seem to ultimately be a marketing ploy. She also raises some of the deep underlying questions about these issues: Should corporations be seen as the public saviors (neo-liberalism)? Do we all too easily buy into consumerism as opposed to good citizenship? Are we more concerned with easy "quick-fixes" instead of the hard, long-term work that is really necessary to solve some of society's gravest ills? These are all great questions, and while I would have loved to see them explored even more fully, I'm thankful that they were raised and discussed in the book--demonstrating that Einstein is not just simply analyzing these trends at the surface level, but is aware of the deeper causes underlying our consumerism and our tendency to get caught up in fad "charitainment" without understanding whether we're actually doing the good we seek to do.Einstein begins the book by talking about "branding"--the history of its development, what exactly it is, and how charities and causes are sometimes being used to serve the brand, not the other way around. As someone who has become increasingly concerned with the seemingly increased rootlessness and lack of powerful meta-narratives shaping American society, I was caught off guard by Einstein's description of branding--we do have narratives shaping our society, but not necessarily good ones. Branding uses narratives and symbols to shape us into consumers, and `evangelists' for certain products. Think of the "Cult of Mac" and the perceived image that goes along with the brand--Macs are cool and sleek, used by artists, educators, and tech-geeks. Perhaps advertising has filled a hole left by the decline of other institutions (e.g. the Church) and the lack of civic engagement. As Einstein notes, "Instead of finding faith in traditional religious institutions (only about 25 percent attend services weekly), most Americans--more than 90 percent of whom believe in a higher power--find spirituality through a hodgepodge of secular products such as books, television, programming, the Internet, and a myriad of classes on everything from meditation to learning the `law of attraction' promulgated by the best-selling self-help tract *The Secret*. Brands substitute for moral mythologies that used to be found outside of the consumer marketplace" (15, emphasis mine). Perhaps the problem is not that we have a lack of narratives, as I had previously suspected, but that we have shallow ones which come from the market and promote self-absorption and consumerism. Instead, we should have narratives coming from strong societal institutions that give a larger meaning to our lives and resist the fragmentation and rampant individualism that has become a systemic problem of American society, and which allows us to get caught up in cycles of endless consumption.Next, Einstein lays out the basic tension between two impulses in corporations: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which she defines as "being a good corporate citizen, with an emphasis on highlighting corporate ethics" and a tendency she traces back to the Milton Friedman school of economics, "which held that a corporation's only responsibility was to make money for its shareholders." I appreciated that Einstein was balanced in her analysis; she doesn't claim that all corporations are necessarily evil and self-serving and solely concerned with the bottom line. This is more of a spectrum, with some companies barely doing the minimum of ethics as required by law (and sometimes not even that), and others becoming "social innovators" and taking things beyond corporate responsibility and completely interweaving social justice within their business model. Einstein gives a plethora of examples in this chapter, and throughout the rest of the book, of companies who are doing great things, companies who have a mix of good policies but not always the best integrity within their own practices (McDonald's, Walmart), and companies who really aren't serving the social good, and sometimes are even undermining it.In this latter category, Einstein has some harsh critiques for what she names "hypercharities" defined as "organization[s] that [are] structured and promoted to appeal to large corporations looking to tie in with a charity partner for maximum marketing exposure." (71). The most egregious examples of these are the (RED) campaign, sponsored by places like Starbucks, Apple, Gap, etc. and the Susan G. Komen foundation. Einstein is not denying that these organizations do some good work, she is just concerned that their "underlying raison d'ecirc;tre is marketing. Not only marketing, but marketing made easy" (72). These products feed into our consumerism more than our goodwill, have obscured how much is being donated with the purchase of each individual item, and are so prevalent that they contribute to "charity fatigue." This results in other important causes being

marginalized because they don't bring the brand recognition and product promotion that these bigger-name foundations do, and really, there are only so many causes and charities that one person can support and be active in. Not to mention, this type of charity doesn't really ask us to become any more involved than indirectly buying a product, and perhaps getting some publicity for the cause. It would be better for a person to donate directly to an organization and find out ways to get involved in advocating and volunteering for a cause, but these things aren't quick and easy fixes, nor should they be. What is the solution then? What about companies that are making a difference, what do they look like? Also, if we should be concerned about weaving together charity with consumerism, what are more productive avenues for engaging with causes that we care about? Einstein gives us a starting point in answering these questions as well; one of the many strengths of this book is that it doesn't just outline the problem, leveling criticisms without offering any solutions. The first thing one should look for in a company that supports a charity or cause was mentioned briefly before: integrity. For example, a company like McDonald's supporting the American Heart Association would be hypocritical at best--sure, money may still be going to the AHA, but the cause itself is undermined by McDonalds' products. The best companies have their commitment to causes deeply embedded in the structure of the company itself--everything from the products it sells, to how it uses the profits. Companies like Newman's Own (not to be confused with Newman's Own Organic) and a carpet company called Interface are listed as positive examples here. The former donates all of its after-tax profits to charity while still providing a quality product; the latter has changed its business practices to be more sustainable--promoting recycling of old products and environmentally responsible production. What would it look like if a company like Apple did this? Instead of selling (RED) iPods, Apple could work to make sure its factories are operating efficiently and with care and concern for worker's rights. They could find ways to reuse old products--especially since so many people buy the latest and greatest Apple product as soon as it comes out, regardless of if there are substantial improvements on the previous model. That is the kind of relationship that should exist between company and causes--one that is fully integrated with the business model itself, and seeks to maximize awareness of and support for the cause (whether it be environmentalism, education, cancer research, etc.) instead of company profits and product promotion. The bottom line needs to be about bettering communities and ultimately, the world, instead of making endlessly more profits; this does not seem to be an unreasonable expectation of our corporations, but it would require a substantial shift in vision. To this end, we need to do our part and be conscious about what we buy and not fall for gimmicks. We need to research companies and charities and see how much is actually being donated and where that money is going--to overhead costs or to help people and the planet? We need to remember that long-term involvement is the key, and buying a product should not be the only response we take. We need to volunteer for organizations we care about and become direct sponsors of charities, even if it's only a \$5/month contribution--which is probably far less than we would spend on buying some of these special products, and more of it would go to the charity itself! Furthermore, we need to tell corporations what kind of engagement we want to see from them and that we will no longer be duped by shallow marketing campaigns, but will hold them accountable and expect that they will contribute back to society in meaningful ways. These things are possible, and Mara Einstein's Compassion, Inc. is a great tool to begin the conversation and foster meaningful contributions from the corporations themselves as well as individual citizens. Disclaimer: I received a free review copy of this book from the Englewood Review for Books. This review originally appeared on the ERBooks website here: [...]

Pink ribbons, red dresses, and greenwashing--American corporations are scrambling to tug at consumer heartstrings through cause-related marketing, corporate social responsibility, and ethical branding, tactics that can increase sales by as much as 74%. Harmless? Marketing insider Mara Einstein demonstrates in this penetrating analysis why the answer is a resounding "No!" In Compassion, Inc. she outlines how cause-related marketing desensitizes the public by putting a pleasant face on complex problems. She takes us through the unseen ways in which large sums of consumer dollars go into corporate coffers rather than helping the less fortunate. She also discusses companies that truly do make the world a better place, and those that just pretend to.

"Einstein has the unenviable task of reminding us that shopping is not philanthropy. The consumer marketplace is increasingly becoming the mechanism for funding organizations that do charitable work, thus tying the fates of charities to the whims of the market, Einstein warns. It is also enabling governments to further abdicate problem-solving, with the result that the causes we care so much about are not genuinely helped."