

The Social Venture Network Series

growing local value

how to build business partnerships
that strengthen your community

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An Excerpt From

***Growing Local Value:
How to Build Business Partnerships That Strengthen Your
Community***

by Laury Hammel and Gun Denhart
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Customer and community first

An entrepreneur finds a need and fills it. However, if you're one of a fast-growing group of people starting and running companies all across the country (and that includes us), you want to build a business that goes a step further and fills real needs that will improve the quality of people's lives.

Unfortunately, not all successful businesses sell products that make our lives better. A consumerist culture driven by omnipresent marketing often influences us to buy things we really don't need. When products are designed to meet artificial needs, they generally have a negative impact on our communities.

Of course, determining which needs are real and which are not can be tricky. You may be thinking that no one should pretend to determine your real needs. And you might even ask, "Shouldn't the marketplace alone determine whether or not a product succeeds?" Yes, the marketplace is the absolute ruler when it comes to the success or failure of a product.

But it's also true that in most cases, long-term business success is directly related to the ultimate value of the product to society. We're sure you could point out plenty of examples of products that have been around for a long time that don't serve

real needs, but as a rule, the products with the longest staying power tend to be the ones that meet actual needs. And going a step further, plenty of us are looking to make purchases that offer genuine value and also match our values. Whether we're considering a hybrid car or Seventh Generation paper towels, we've definitely become more discriminating customers.

The desire to meet a real need has probably been the driving force motivating you to start your own business. We are passionate about supporting emerging entrepreneurs, and it's exciting for us to know that hundreds of thousands of needs remain to be met in communities all over the world. And these needs offer tremendous opportunities for would-be entrepreneurs to start businesses that make tangible contributions to their communities.

Most likely, you understand intuitively the importance of community relations. You may already be partnering with your customers to improve community life (or planning to do so). For example, whereas many people view purchasing a plant at a local garden center as a simple and uncomplicated transaction, you may, as we do, view it as one episode in an ongoing partnership that will last as long as you live in your community. If you follow this logic a step further, you'll see that when an entrepreneur works to develop deep and lasting partnerships with customers, both the community and the business receive a multitude of benefits.

Of course, building partnerships with customers requires that you do more than merely offer a product to meet a one-time need. When you forge vibrant business-customer partnerships, you are deeply connected to the customers and you learn the depth and breadth of a particular category of needs. You find yourself naturally working hand in hand with customers and continually searching for new and better ways to meet their needs. By actively nurturing these relationships, engaging in

meaningful conversations with customers, and never taking these pivotal relationships for granted, you work yourself into the hearts of the customers and the community. Those strong partnerships with your customers will then become a major competitive advantage for your business. Conversely, complacency regarding customer relationships is deadly: customers are fluid, their needs change, and new competitors are always springing up, ready to take your place.

You may have observed that when customers rave about how much they love doing business with a company, developing partnerships with them as a way of contributing to the community follows naturally. These dynamic partnerships can take a variety of forms, including

- Creating a quality product that fulfills a real community need and is consistently upgraded and customized in response to feedback from customers
- Collaborating with customers to support charities, local nonprofits, or community events, such as Earth Day celebrations
- Partnering with customers to improve community life by supporting government agencies and schools
- Finding ways to expand your customer base to include people who may not be able to afford your product at the standard prices
- Reaching out to populations in your community who would like to use your product but do not have access to it because of distance, inability to travel, or personal schedule

In this chapter, we'll describe the experiences of four companies—the Longfellow Clubs, TAGS Hardware, the King's English Book Shop, and Joie de Vivre Hospitality—to illustrate how businesses can partner with customers to grow local value.

Partnering with Customers: The Longfellow Clubs, Wayland, Massachusetts

In 1980 Laury Hammel founded a business that has embraced the guiding principles of this book from day one. Beginning as one tennis-only club outside Boston, the Longfellow Clubs has grown into a group of health and sports clubs, holistic health centers, and children's centers and camps. Longfellow has become a recognized industry leader in innovative business practices, social responsibility, and community service.

While at the University of Utah in the sixties, Laury was a civil-rights, antiwar, and environmental activist. Laury's story is that of an entrepreneur who built a business by creating innovative products that met real community needs. He rejected the prevailing way of doing business—making the single bottom line of profits paramount. Instead, he valued the relationships with all stakeholders and measured success by tracking multiple bottom lines.

Laury's desire to meet the needs of his customers pushed him into starting the business in the first place. If someone had told him in the sixties that he would one day be a businessman, he would have laughed at the absurdity or wept at what he perceived as "selling out to the establishment." Having played competitive tennis since the age of ten, he fell into teaching tennis. This was at the height of the tennis boom, and millions of people were lining up to learn this rapidly growing sport.

Laury found himself in the right place at the right time, and he utilized his playing and teaching skills to create a highly successful tennis program. In the process, he unwittingly became a businessman, an "intrapreneur" working inside clubs owned by others. He didn't see this as running a business. He did what he loved and saw himself simply as making tennis fun for people

of all ages, genders, and incomes and training and organizing other tennis pros to do the same. His initial experience was with club owners who had adversarial relationships with their members. As Laury became more involved in the club business, it began to dawn on him that maybe a business could be managed in a way that authentically cared about the customers and was still profitable.

This insight led him and his partner Myke Farricker to open their first club in 1980. Laury, Myke, and their management team immediately began looking for ways to run their business differently—to manage it with values in the forefront. One of their first actions was to take the then highly unusual step of crafting their mission statement:

To build a world where people’s basic needs are met and people experience love, happiness, and satisfaction.

To run a tennis and recreation business that works toward the fulfillment of our global vision.

For more than twenty-five years since those words were written, a successful community-based business has flowed from the wellspring of these shared values.

Throughout Laury’s life, he had always placed a premium on relationships. He found that the best way to develop strong and lasting relationships was to listen to people and respond with care. When he entered the world of business, he addressed the expressed and observed needs of his clients by inventing new ways to teach tennis and run programs. His passion for excellence on and off the court and his capacity for listening to his clients resulted in large numbers of what author Ken Blanchard calls “Raving Fans.” Laury knew that it wasn’t good enough to

have satisfied customers; he wanted customers who were blown away by the results.

Laury created a company culture that focused on customers and how his business could meet the needs of the community. This perspective gradually grew into a series of partnerships with club members. These partnerships began with straightforward efforts such as building a strong women's team and teaching participants how to improve their game and have more fun and eventually included a low-cost tennis program for young people with special needs. The deeper these relationships grew, the more opportunities for customer partnerships arose. It wasn't long before Longfellow expanded to meet the health and fitness needs of the community by offering facilities and programs for strength training, group exercise, cardio fitness, basketball, swimming, and water exercise, to name a few. As the clubs continued to evolve, Longfellow opened children's centers and holistic health centers offering healing modalities such as chiropractic, acupuncture, massage therapy, and physical therapy.

Laury and his staff have learned that when connections with their customers are strong, partnerships to improve the community happen naturally. Their efforts now include

- Partnering with customers to participate in community events to support nonprofit organizations and schools
- Adopting a policy of saying yes to all requests by members for in-kind (product) and/or cash donations to local community groups or events
- Teaming with members to raise money for a local charity race, walk, or health fair

Through efforts such as these, Longfellow has become a platform for community residents to work together to help make a more livable and healthy community.

An Idea Whose Time Had Not Come

Not all of Longfellow's initiatives have been successful. For example, once Laury had an "outside-the-box" idea to open a restaurant in his second club.

One of the key ingredients for success in starting a business is having passion for the product. But sometimes that passion can blind us to the lack of demand from customers and other reasons to abandon or modify a new product.

This was the case with Laury in 1986. He had just opened his second multipurpose club, and it had a perfect spot for a full-service restaurant (overlooking two new basketball courts). In his mind's eye, he could see patrons enjoying good, healthy food and a glass of beer or wine while watching high-level basketball through the floor-to-ceiling windows. No restaurant within miles specialized in natural and organic vegetarian cuisine, so Laury believed the restaurant would fill a need. He was convinced this new venture would complement Longfellow's emphasis on health and fitness.

He hired a restaurant manager and designed and built a full-service restaurant and complete kitchen. Unfortunately, on opening day, no one but staff and a few close friends came to eat. Perhaps, he thought, it would take a few days for the word to get out. However, days turned into weeks and weeks into months, and still no one was eating there but a few staff members. Longfellow changed the menu and added meat. It lowered the prices, but the place was still empty. And every day, cash was flowing out and none was coming in. After losing over \$300,000, Laury was forced to shut down the restaurant and make it a function room.

Twenty years later, Laury realizes he broke many rules and ignored several facts. First, few if any health clubs in the nation have profitable restaurants. Second, nonmembers generally won't

go into a club they don't belong to, and members alone can't support a restaurant. And, third, the reason why the area had no vegetarian restaurants was there simply wasn't enough demand.

The restaurant may have been a wonderful idea, but it was an idea whose time had not come. Laury was convinced his new venture filled a real need, but his potential customers didn't see it that way. He was a willing partner in this venture, but precious few customers shared his enthusiasm. A one-way partnership never works. Laury learned the hard way that the marketplace can be an accurate, if brutal, indicator of what customers are willing to purchase.

Balancing Pricing for Profit with Reaching a Broader Customer Base

At its birth, Longfellow was committed to offering its services to people of all ages, genders, abilities, and incomes. But could this be done while still making a profit? How Laury and his team handled this management tension offers lessons for us all.

The mission of Longfellow is to make the world a better place, and a logical extension would be to price Longfellow's products so that all people could afford them. However, multi-purpose health clubs require constant capital improvements and new equipment, and payroll expenses are high. Consequently, the prices required to ensure profitability often push some potential customers out of the market.

This creates a contradiction: Longfellow's purpose is to provide services that support all people's health, and yet its typical prices exclude many middle- and low-income people. What did Longfellow do to mitigate this management tension? The first step was to acknowledge that it was an ongoing issue that needed to be addressed by management. The next step was to brainstorm about how to deal with this tension. Laury and his

management team developed a policy to make every effort to never turn a person away, and they found numerous ways to make the clubs' services available, including

- Hiring highly skilled part-time staff members to work a few hours a week so they can have full use of all the facilities.
- Partnering with local towns to put together special programs for schoolteachers and police and fire department employees. The individuals, the towns, and Longfellow all contribute to the membership fees.
- Working closely with a local HMO (health maintenance organization) to provide full membership at a reduced rate. In addition, seniors and juniors are welcomed with a price reduction of 20 percent.
- Offering unemployed people or those who are in a personal crisis and struggling financially complimentary or steeply discounted memberships to help them build their strength while they get back on their feet.
- Pricing off-peak court time at a very affordable fee.
- Seeking out talented young tennis players who may not be able to pay for a complete program and giving them scholarships.

Many members are aware of these policies and regularly step forward with a person or family in need.

Having done all of this, Laury still wasn't satisfied. His clubs are located in wealthy communities where most of the residents are Caucasian. Because most people will travel no more than twenty minutes each way to a health club, Longfellow's locations limit the diversity of its customer base. Laury considered opening clubs in lower-income neighborhoods. However, the core business involves tennis, which requires substantial land, and no location in the city of Boston was financially viable.

In the late nineties, Longfellow took an important step in resolving this management tension. Laury had a long-standing relationship with the Sportsmen's Tennis Club, a Boston inner-city indoor/outdoor tennis club founded by African Americans. In 1997 it was on the verge of closing its doors. Laury and Longfellow were asked to step in and manage the club. Laury signed a management contract for one dollar a year, and he soon found himself traveling forty-five minutes to the Dorchester neighborhood two to three times a week to help rebuild this important community institution.

By the end of 2002—when the club had recovered and the formal management contract had ended—Longfellow had made an enormous impact. Under the new management, enrollment in the free children's programs grew from 43 to over 500, and the summer camp grew from 40 children a week to over 130. The worn-out courts were resurfaced, four new state-of-the-art outdoor courts were built, the dim lighting was replaced and upgraded, the leaky roof was fixed, the offices and lobby were remodeled, and the outside of the building was painted. The tennis professionals' pay was increased, and staff training programs were put in place. Sportsmen's was experiencing a rebirth. During these five years, Laury and Longfellow raised over \$1,000,000, donated over \$75,000 in cash, provided over \$400,000 in in-kind services, and loaned the club over \$100,000.

This partnership stands as an excellent example of a business expanding its customer base. Even though it didn't bring in any revenue, it served Longfellow's social mission and generated immense amounts of goodwill.

Best Practices in Partnering with Customers

Just as Laury Hammel has built a thriving business grounded in his commitment to serving his customers and the larger commu-

nity of which they're a part, so has Simon Shapiro. Simon, proprietor of TAGS Hardware, has an old-fashioned ethic of partnering with customers by taking care of them both as patrons of his business and as residents of the community they share.

Take Care of Your Customer and Your Community: TAGS Hardware, Cambridge, Massachusetts

In many communities, locally owned hardware stores have gone the way of the horse and buggy. Every time a big-box home improvement store pops up, small businesses nearby suffer or, worse, just disappear. Fortunately, Cambridge, Massachusetts, still has a number of small local hardware stores that are thriving.

After spending many years in retail, Simon Shapiro began working at TAGS Hardware in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1972 when it was grossing around \$170,000 in revenues. By 1982 he was running the family business. A year later he met his future wife, Margaret (Mardi) Moran, and by 1986 she became involved in the business. Today this husband-wife team manages TAGS. Simon serves as the CEO, and Mardie is the president of this beloved community institution that has 25,000 square feet of retail space and generates almost \$7 million in revenues.

Originally in the movie theater business, Simon's father, Norton Shapiro, founded TAGS in 1955 with the help of a relative who was having great success in the hardware store business. In response to customer needs, the store grew over the years to be more of a small department store, stocking items including hammers, small kitchen appliances, and garden supplies.

How does TAGS compete with the big-box stores? According to Simon, TAG's success and longevity are directly related to the business mantra drilled into him by his father: "Take care of the customer, and the customer will take care of you." This fundamental value permeates everything TAGS does, and the

company is on a continual search to find new ways to meet customers' needs.

The most important way that TAGS serves customers is with superior service provided by highly trained staff. Every new staff member goes through a standard orientation and receives constant on-the-floor training. Regular off-the-floor educational meetings focus on new products and are led by in-house and outside experts. Opportunities for staff to hear the customers' perspective include regular reports from professional "secret shoppers." Creating a pleasant shopping experience and providing exemplary service by answering customers' questions, locating requested items, and finding solutions to problems is the mission of every TAGS employee.

TAGS employees work as a team. They meet every morning and go over sales goals, new products, and special offers and programs. During the day, department managers help out when needed. And TAGS doesn't skimp on staffing. Every department keeps at least one staff member easily visible to customers.

TAGS is famous for the innovative ways it partners with customers. For example, every new Cambridge resident gets a coupon in the mail offering a free trash can and a duplicate house key. TAGS also sends out "free light bulb cards" to frequent customers. TAGS gives away an average of 650 light bulbs every month. The high point of the year's calendar is TAGS's Customer Appreciation Weekend in November. This wonderful extravaganza includes Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus, product demonstrations offering taste treats, free popcorn, and fun activities.

TAGS is located in Porter Square on busy Massachusetts Avenue within walking distance of a subway stop. Yet some local residents still drive a significant distance to compare prices at big-box stores. TAGS carefully studies the competition to ensure TAGS merchandise is priced competitively.

Simon's business ethic stems from his father's deeply held values. Not only did Norton Shapiro preach taking care of customers, he said it was the responsibility of a business to give back to the community. Nonprofit organizations in Cambridge know they can count on TAGS as a partner. Whether it's paint and brushes or a hammer and nails, every reasonable request is honored and no one goes away empty-handed.

TAGS's return policy also reflects a deep commitment to the community. TAGS will take back any merchandise within thirty days of purchase, and returned items in good condition are promptly given to worthy nonprofits in the community, including a local agency that helps battered women get a new, independent start in life.

It's not surprising that Simon and Mardie are very involved in community affairs. A Cambridge resident for over twenty-five years, Simon spends a lot of time partnering with various community groups, whether it's building up the infrastructure of the Porter Square business district, regularly representing the business community in City of Cambridge issues, or promoting the growth of Cambridge Local First, an organization of locally owned independent businesses that promotes local businesses.

When asked why he doesn't open other TAGS stores, he replied, "Because I don't want to fail. I wouldn't know how to service a suburban crowd; I have no idea how to sell a power lawn mower." We suspect that Simon could learn to sell a power lawn mower but that he sees his consistent presence at TAGS and his deep relationships with customers and staff to be mandatory for success—and his pleasure.

Like Simon, Betsy Burton is in retail, and she's also a respected community leader in her hometown of Salt Lake City, Utah. *Partnership* and *collaboration* are two words that describe the very essence of Betsy, her entrepreneurship, and her community leadership. In a city that tends to be divided by religion and

culture, Betsy is a bridge builder, and her business and her community are the better for it.

Personalizing Your Product:

The King's English Book Shop, Salt Lake City, Utah

Betsy Burton has taken the concept of being close to the customer to a glorious level of intimacy. The King's English Book Shop has found fun and deeply meaningful ways to touch the souls of its customers. Meeting practical needs isn't the goal here—Betsy's work is all about the heart, the emotions, the invisible parts of us that have a yearning. Be it a thirst for knowledge, a desire for romance, or the healing of an open wound, Betsy, her staff, and her many author friends offer care and an open ear. Nothing brings her more satisfaction and joy than successfully building a bridge from a customer to a good book!

“Contortionists one and all, we [independent booksellers] delight in climbing into other people's skins or clothes or shoes in order to walk a mile or two along another's path. We question them and listen carefully to the replies, intent on deciphering what they want. The real pleasure in bookselling comes in pairing the right book with the right person. That's what drives us as we look, listen, assess, ask questions until—bingo!—we come up with a match.”³

And it must be a match from the customer's point of view. Betsy aims to give customers what they want, not what she thinks they should want. When this happens, she's found it can change lives.

The inspiration for the King's English Book Shop came about during conversations between Betsy and her good friend, Ann Berman, about what their own bookstore might look like. The more they talked, the more excited they became about their concept, and before long they found themselves opening the doors of their new business.

In the early days, they would talk with customers forty to sixty hours a week, take boxes home and unpack them, check packing lists, haul everything back to the store, and pay bills. And after doing all the work necessary to keep the business moving forward, they'd stay up nights reading every book they could.

A bench where customers would sit and talk with Betsy or Ann became known as the confessional bench. Here people would share their tales of tough divorces and betrayals, deaths, and other deep sorrows. Betsy and Ann recommended books that soothed people's souls and helped create customers for life.

Very early on, Betsy saw the importance of working in the community to promote good literature and, in particular, to introduce new authors to her customers. She believed that she could generate enthusiasm for books by partnering with customers on a variety of community events. To that end, Betsy has hosted public presentations and book signings featuring famous and not-so-famous authors. Other community activities that represent partnerships with customers to enliven the community include

- Creating the Writers Advocacy Award for those promoting literacy in the community
- Partnering with Westminster College in a three-day symposium featuring a prominent poet or fiction writer
- Supporting a University of Utah science and literature series to open up an interdisciplinary conversation
- Organizing a wide variety of book clubs for adults
- Serving on the Salt Lake City Book Club Committee, which encourages people to join book clubs and runs an annual book festival
- Supporting the books behind bars literacy program (run by a nonprofit organization founded by a local judge) for inmates in the city jail

Many neighborhood children stop by the store after school because it's a safe place to spend time and read. Betsy knows that the future of books resides with the children, so she brings in popular authors such as Lemony Snickett to encourage them to experience the magic and wonder of books. The King's English does much to encourage children to read, including

- Offering a Children's Story Hour every week
- Organizing Kids Reading Clubs complete with games and prizes
- Hosting nights at the bookshop for teachers and librarians, giving them discounts and handing out possible curricula for classes

The King's English has become much more than a place to pick up a book. It is an empowering community resource as well as a community within a community. The feeling of connection and partnership that customers have has enabled Betsy and her small independent bookstore to thrive in an industry that is dominated by big-box stores and online sellers.

Betsy also understands that her business success isn't strictly about growing market share in the face of intense competition. It's about creating more customers for literature. For this reason she has immersed herself in the bookselling industry both nationally and locally. As a result, all the leading independent Utah bookstores now work as partners to bring authors to the area, trade books, and offer mutual support.

Betsy Burton builds friendships and partnerships that form the foundation of her single-location business and simultaneously grow local value. Can such personalized service and deep connections happen in several locations? Chip Conley has created a model for how powerful business-customer partnerships can thrive in a multiple-location business.

Connecting Customers with the Community:

Joie de Vivre Hospitality, San Francisco, California

Joie de Vivre Hospitality (JDV), founded by Chip Conley in 1987, operates thirty boutique hotels (with 3,200 rooms), eight restaurants, and three day spas located primarily in the San Francisco Bay Area. Chip's business not only grosses over \$100 million annually, but it actually lives up to its name, which means "joy of life." The staff-authored mission statement, "Creating opportunities to celebrate the joy of life," is the holy grail of JDV, and everything the company does focuses on personalizing this celebration.

Chip's hotels are designed with great flair, and each one is styled after a particular magazine. JDV's most famous hotel, the Phoenix, has décor, services, amenities, and an overall identity influenced by *Rolling Stone* magazine. Rather than focusing on demographics, the company's marketing emphasizes "psychographics," with each property appealing to a different taste. JDV has even gone so far as to introduce Yvette, the online Hotel Matchmaker, as a way of helping guests find the perfect hotel to fit their personality. Guests are asked to fill out a short personality test that gives Yvette an idea of which hotel they might like. She also suggests six cool local activities that fit each guest's personality profile. Her work has been well received by customers, and Yvette has become a bit of an icon.

While most hotels aim to provide a good night's sleep, JDV is more concerned with creating wonderful dreams. Chip's vision is to develop deep and lasting relationships with his customers and to transcend simply providing a service to his guests. JDV fosters vibrant partnerships that bring joy to customers by honoring their diversity and individuality and enabling them to transform their dreams into reality. JDV hotels reject sameness

and homogeneous branding and instead embrace a distinctive character and offer a tangibly different experience. This commitment to establishing a dynamic difference in product reflects the company's respect for the uniqueness of each customer. And the proof that these are real partnerships is in the pudding of repeat customers.

Besides helping rekindle the tourism industry in the Bay Area, JDV hotels also strive to educate their guests about hidden treasures and off-the-beaten-path places that make San Francisco so special. They play an important role in steering dollars into the local economy by promoting local and independent businesses and nonprofits.

JDV also grows local value through customer partnerships in many ways that go beyond uplifting the lives of guests. In 1996 it opened the Hotel Rex, which has a theme of arts and literature. At the time, Congress was involved in a big ruckus about censoring art and cutting federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Although the NEA survived, severe federal funding cutbacks were instituted. As a way to support the arts, the Rex offered all guests a list of thirteen local arts organizations to which they could contribute \$5 of the price for each night's stay. Customers and JDV together raised over \$40,000!

Another JDV hotel, the Carlton Hotel, has recently partnered with the Kohala Foundation, a charitable organization founded by SVN member David Levenson. Kohala's "Win a Week with Us" is a donation program for hotel customers. Every Thanksgiving a drawing is held for all donors and the winner receives a free week's stay at the Carlton. When guests register for a room, they are asked if they'd like to round up their bill and contribute the extra amount to the Raphael House (located next door to the hotel), which helps feed homeless people and offers them job training programs. As of this writing, the Carlton is averaging \$12 per donation and has a 9 percent visi-

tor participation level. Over \$1,000 per month in customer donations is going to the Raphael House. Guests appreciate the opportunity to support a local nonprofit, and this psychic bridge connects them more deeply with the local community.

Lessons Learned: Partnering with Customers

Maybe the business you're running (or the one you want to start) isn't a health club, a hardware store, a bookshop, or a hotel chain. But the experiences of these four world-class small businesses have a lot to teach us, no matter what industry we're in. Following are just a few of the many lessons you might take away from the examples we've cited in this chapter:

- **Listen, listen, listen.** The closer you are to your customers, the more responsive your business can be to their needs. This intimacy can result in creating customers for life.
- **Be on the leading edge and take calculated risks.** A requirement for successful entrepreneurship is finding solutions to people's problems that others don't see. Being a market leader gives you a major competitive advantage. All of the entrepreneurs profiled in this book are constantly upgrading current products and creating new ones. Going to market with a new product is by definition a risk, so it's important that you've done your due diligence and have real evidence that the product will sell.
- **Don't let your passion for your product cloud your vision.** You may think your idea will change the world, but customers must be willing to buy your product. Be brutally honest with yourself and do your homework before you roll out a new product.
- **Sometimes being second is best.** Being first of a kind in the marketplace positions your company for great rewards.

However, being first also carries more risks since you're learning tough lessons as you go along. Often the most successful products are upgrades of already successful products. When choosing a new product to roll out, consider one that enables you to learn from the successes and failures of others before you.

- **Make your company a reflection of the world.** Our world is a tapestry of ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, and most companies can benefit from a more diverse staff and customer base. The first step is to make diversity a major business priority, and the second step is to seek guidance and support from others who have had success in this area.

Taking care of customers is not a new concept, nor is valuing the importance of business-customer relationships something fresh and rare. However, building partnerships with your customers to improve your community is a relatively new business strategy. By intentionally building multiple bridges to your customers, you can grow your business and grow local value at the same time.

Building values-driven partnerships with customers is one thing. But how about doing that with the people who provide you with capital? You know that one of your most important roles as the leader of your business is to attract and develop strong financial partnerships. The following chapter points you in an unusual but surprisingly effective direction—building financial partnerships with institutions and people who are committed to growing local value. You'll see how sharing values and a vision with financial partners can be a key strategic advantage and can make a big difference in the community. And it's more fun to boot!

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