

# Beth's Blog: Nonprofits and Social Media

This is Beth's archived blog: 2003-2010

## Lethal Generosity: CSR Context Is Important

### Lethal Generosity

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On Wednesday, fellow Zoetica founder, [Kami Huyse](#) and I presented on Lethal Generosity, (a term from Shel Israel's "Twiterville"). The topic is our [Society for New Communications Research](#) Fellowship research. Kami and I have been honing the refining the definition as a starting point for our research:

*Lethal Generosity is when a corporation applies its core competencies to advance social change in a way that contributes to business results and gives it a competitive advantage*

JD Lasica took [detailed notes](#) on the case studies we looked at to ponder that question. The four case studies that JD transcribed included: [Molson/Coors](#), [Tyson Foods](#), [Haagan Dasz](#), and [Greenopolis](#) He's not sure the term "lethal generosity" will catch on. His point is that it is simply just CSR done right. I might add with a social media component.

Participants in our session debated the subtleties between [corporate social responsibility](#) and [cause marketing](#) and whether lethal generosity is something different. If we had more people from a nonprofit perspective in the room and activists, we'd gotten into a [philosophical debate](#) as to whether or not lethal generosity can impact [systemic change and corporate score cards](#).

I wasn't surprised to see this comment on JD's post from a [human rights activist](#) about one of the examples on our list:

*The EPA recently filed an enforcement action against Tyson Foods for violating the Clean Air Act, and they previously have plead guilty to 20 felony violations of the Clean Water Act. Their labor practices have been criticized by no less than Human Rights Watch. And of course they tie their community efforts to their mission. It's a form of marketing.*

JD countered in a comment suggesting that a CSR effort that goes to a company's core mission is more genuine

than a tack-on cause marketing campaign that serves as a one-off publicity stunt. This makes me think of another criteria in our selection of case studies that the examples show a long term commitment. Of course, it is also important to get a full profile of the negative impact the corporation is trying to reduce with its CSR program.

Elaine Cohen who writes a blog about CSR Reporting, made this good point:

*Corporations are made up of people, just like you and me. None of us are perfect and totally 100% sustainable or responsible. It is unrealistic to expect corporations to be perfect. We must be ever-vigilant and make sure that corporate leaders know that doing good in one area does not absolve them of accountability for their impacts in other areas. However, doing good in one area is still doing good and should be acknowledged as such. Cause marketing is based on a dual interest - making a profit and making a social contribution. This isn't green washing - it's a legitimate way to advance multiple interests. In this light, I believe the examples quoted in the article are worthy and deserve our recognition alongside our urging these companies, where relevant, to address other, less worthy behaviors.*

This leaves me with some good ideas about contextual questions to ask in interviews for the case study part of the research.

The next step of our research is identifying social media programs and campaigns that meet these criteria and studying their efforts in detail, including interviewing them to find commonalities that spur success.

We will then publish our findings in the SNCR Journal of New Communications Research, which will inform the survey research to determine if CSR programs delivered through online social media do indeed provide better results.

If you have a case study that you think embodies the research we are undertaking, please let us know. We have a short list already, but your thoughts on this are important to both Kami and I as we design the survey.

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April 23, 2010 in [lethalgenerosity](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Dear Beth,

Thanks for writing about Lethal Generosity. I think this should be the Oxford phrase of the year.

We see this in governmental aid as well as in well-meaning individual donors who just want to send a pair of boots to Haiti.

We need to ask, "Who is getting the government contract to give "aid" to these people while making tons of money off of this crisis?"

And we need to ask our donors who want to send aid to somewhere in crisis,

"Is there someone in a local or neighboring community that you could pay, thereby stimulating the local economy, creating jobs, and increasing the prosperity of the region, instead of expensively sending a lot of things you have lying around, flooding the region with cheap, free or useless pieces of "foreign aid"?"

Let's stop thinking like savior supermen for a minute here and realize that regions can do a lot of their own aid, if we do a little research and work to increase their pipeline efforts.

Mazarine

<http://twitter.com/wildwomanfund>

<http://wildwomanfundraising.com>

Posted by: [Mazarine](#) | [April 25, 2010 at 03:29 PM](#)



Hi Beth

Great concept, terrible name. I know precise language is going to hell in a handbasket but whichever way you cut it, 'lethal' means deadly. Before the term spreads too far, can you find an alternative, like 'potent' or 'telling' (the latter has that nice link to social media as a double definition).

Regards

Doug Jacquier

Connecting Up Australia

PS - A note in passing to undermine my own case - indigenous Australians use the term 'deadly' to mean something really outstanding and in fact have The Deadlys music awards [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Deadlys](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Deadlys)

Posted by: [Doug Jacquier](#) | [May 02, 2010 at 03:13 PM](#)



Fascinating (although I agree that the name leaves something to be desired). I would love to see a longitudinal study that tracks the longevity and success of "lethally generous" corporations as compared to competitors, something along the lines of Jim Collins' Built to Last.

Are you up for it, Beth? Could be a seminal work if you're willing to spend the next 10 to 20 years on it.

Posted by: [Dhutson](#) | [May 02, 2010 at 05:05 PM](#)



@dhutson - what a great idea! Something of that scale would definitely require a sponsor. Have any ideas?

Posted by: [Beth Kanter](#) | [May 03, 2010 at 04:58 PM](#)

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