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Ben & Jerry's: A Conversation with CEO Jostein Solheim and Founder Jerry Greenfield

Words by Andrea Newell



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Last week, I got an inside look at [Ben & Jerry's](#) - the community-minded B Corporation that was swallowed up by a corporate giant, except that it is still a community-minded, socially-conscious company more intent on its social missions than ever. Oh yeah, and making world-class ice cream.

How does that happen? The corporate behemoth that bought Ben & Jerry's is [Unilever](#), a CSR frontrunner that other companies try to emulate. Ben & Jerry's protected their community roots by digging in their heels and inking an agreement that their social missions must continue to grow even more than their profits. And - Unilever agreed, leaving the laid-back ice cream company to continue down its own path, developing loyal relationships with vendors, paying a premium for quality ingredients and paying double minimum wage to its starting employees. And it works.

When thinking about the company and the people I met, several descriptors come to mind: genuine, gracious, authentic, down-to-earth and (in a business sense) transparent. How do they describe themselves? Loyal,

committed to relationships, concerned about community, determined to pay a fair wage and, most of all, fallible.

More than one employee, and independent of each other, said that while they loved the company, they didn't claim to be perfect, just that they did their best to put community and making great ice cream first. Co-founder Jerry Greenfield echoed it, and CEO Jostein Solheim agreed. That is the way the company started, and all these years later, that is still what they stand for.

Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield started Ben & Jerry's in 1978, when they cobbled together \$12,000, renovated an old gas station in Burlington, Vermont, and began serving ice cream. Jerry told me (and a group of bloggers) that they really didn't have a plan in mind, but that ice cream making sounded fun (the official ice cream plant tour explained that Ben & Jerry took a correspondence ice cream-making class from Penn State first). Ben was the creative, and Jerry made the ice cream. "Ben would rather fail at something new, than do something that's been done before," Greenfield said.

From the beginning, Cohen and Greenfield always felt connected to the community. When they made it through their first winter, Ben & Jerry's instituted Free Cone Day to thank the community for supporting them. It led to free movies and community festivals - all accompanied by great ice cream.

Greenfield explained that they named it Ben & Jerry's so that people would know that there were two people behind the company, and it was first and foremost, personality-driven. "The company needed to stand for more. It was all about the values." The social mission, he said, has to be just as important as the rest of the business.

"We're trying to use the power of business to actively affect social impact and alleviate environmental impact. For people [in the

company] that believe in the mission, they get to interject their own values into their jobs. In my experience, the more caring and compassionate the company has been, the more profits it has made."

When the company started, Greenfield said, it was all about the community, then had to become a business, but continued to be about community. Currently both Cohen and Greenfield are employees of Ben & Jerry's, "with no responsibilities whatsoever," Greenfield said with a laugh. The amazing people that work at the company are fantastic, he says, "It's the only reason I show up here."

Jostein Solheim, Ben & Jerry's CEO for the last three years, talked about Ben & Jerry's business strategy and aversion to blowing its own horn.

"I hate greenwash," Solheim said immediately, explaining that he is reluctant to broadcast Ben & Jerry's social missions for fear that the company's achievements become lost in the cacophony of do-gooder stories that so many companies tell these days, some valid and some not.

"It's much better for other people to find out about it themselves than for us to tell them," he stated.

And people are getting the news. Ben & Jerry's has a loyal social media following that cheers their every move. Their strategy? "We try to love our fans MORE than they love us," said Mike Hayes, Assistant Digital Marketing Manager. Ben & Jerry's has been known to pick up a fan whose car has broken down and take him to work and show up to other fans' workplaces to give away ice cream.

"We see ourselves as a social justice company that also makes the world's best ice cream," Solheim said.

There was an uproar over Unilever's acquisition of the company, but Solheim

explained that Ben & Jerry's took steps to protect their social mission by staffing the board with their own friends who shared their social passion and putting into writing their social goals. Now the board holds them to those, while Unilever stays out of Ben & Jerry's way and concerns itself only with financial support and distribution. Ben & Jerry's is still free to employ Fair Trade principles and pay a premium for ingredients to ensure those workers are paid a fair wage, and Unilever doesn't object.

"We're trying to build a model here. How do you go through the whole supply chain from farmer to community and build in benefits at each step?" Solheim asked. "Everyone in the chain should be paid a livable wage and live a dignified life. Fair Trade is our principle. We pay a fair wage for ingredients. Is it perfect? No. Is it better than non-Fair Trade? Yes."

For now, Ben & Jerry's has the best of both worlds: the freedom to pursue their social missions and run the business to benefit the community and broaden their global reach with Unilever's financial support and vast resources. It's like a perfect blend of fair trade vanilla ice cream, with fair trade chocolate chunks and nuts. We'll call it Community Minded.



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Andrea Newell has more than ten years of experience designing, developing and writing ERP e-learning materials for large corporations in several industries. She was a consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers and a contract consultant for companies like IBM, BP, Marathon Oil, Pfizer, and Steelcase, among others. She is a writer and former editor at TriplePundit and a social media blog fellow at The Story of Stuff Project. She has contributed to In Good Company (Vault's CSR blog), Evolved Employer, The Glass Hammer,

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