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Ben & Jerry's Social Mission

Words by Andrea Newell



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Despite being owned by Unilever, Ben & Jerry's steadfastly maintains its own vendor relationships and, most importantly, its determination to continue its social initiatives.

About ten years after the company began in 1978, founders Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield sat down and wrote a three-part mission statement. As [Greenfield explained](#), the community-minded organization, at some point, had to become a company and worry about marketing and distribution, but they wanted a concrete reminder of what they really stood for.

Ben & Jerry's created social, product and economic statements to define their mission. Whenever the company, led by their social

initiative-minded board, needs to make a business decision, they use this mission statement as a compass to point the way. "The success of the business, quality of the product and the value we bring to the world go together," said Social Activism Manager, Chris Miller (formerly of Seventh Generation).

Many times companies will write a mission statement, only to revise it numerous times as their direction changes, Miller explained, but Ben & Jerry's mission statement has stood the test of time for twenty-five years.

Ben & Jerry's has three main areas of focus: Caring Dairy, fair trade practices and eliminating GMOs.

Caring Dairy

Ben & Jerry's works with more than 90 farms in Vermont (their home state) to source 100 percent of their dairy needs. They have established a program called Caring Dairy under which they work with the farms to meet guidelines for eleven global indicators, including:

- animal husbandry
- biodiversity
- energy
- farm economics
- impact on local economy
- nutrients
- pest management
- social human capital
- soil fertility and health
- soil loss
- water

The company helps farms implement sustainable farming practices that benefit the livestock, the land and the farmers. Farmers pledge not to treat their cows with hormones, learn how to conserve water, enrich the soil and run their farms better.

It's all part of a long-term strategy to invest in communities, Solheim explained. "We not only work with farmers to pay a fair wage, but

to move them up on the value chain. We'll be back next year and the year after. They can count on it."

Fair Trade

As Greenfield mentioned, Ben & Jerry's has long been a big proponent of fair trade wages and practices.

Fair trade is about making sure people get their fair share of the pie. The whole concept of fair trade goes to the heart of our values and the sense of right and wrong. Nobody wants to buy something that was made by exploiting somebody else.

Again, relationships come heavily into play. As with the dairy farmers, the company looks to develop and maintain long-term relationships with the intent to benefit not only the farmers, but their communities. The company's goal is for all products to be fair trade certified by the end of 2013, but it does not plan to sever ongoing supplier relationships to meet that goal. For example, as part of Unilever, Ben & Jerry's could source their vanilla from the same fair trade supplier Unilever uses, but the company has a long-established relationship with a fair trade Ugandan cooperative and continues to work with them. The company's brownies come from [Greyston's Bakery](#) in New York, where they "don't hire people to bake brownies, but bake brownies to hire people." The bakery supports childcare, affordable housing, community gardens and health care programs, and Ben & Jerry's has ordered brownies from the bakery since the 1980s.

Ben & Jerry's also [sources](#) their cherries from Oregon, and although they are not certified fair trade, the company will continue to get their cherries from Oregon and pay a fair price due to the long-term relationship they have with the supplier and community. Ben & Jerry's also works with Fair Trade International and together they have established a fund

where the company pays whatever difference exists between the prices they pay their current vendors and fair trade wages (if there is any), and FTI uses those funds to support fair trade practices worldwide.

"The real power we have to do good," Miller said, "is the money we spend on the business - purchasing fair trade ingredients, paying a living wage and investing in the community."

Anti-GMO

As much pride as the company takes in treating its own people well, they also take in making a quality product. Ben & Jerry's ice cream is a premium product marketed to adults (not children) and made with exceptional ingredients, fair trade and otherwise.

Twenty-two of their flavors (80 percent of ingredients) are already free of GMOs (genetically modified organisms), and they expect that all of their products will be GMO-free by the end of 2013. The day after they spoke to us, Solheim explained, the company was hosting a special workshop for their specialty suppliers to help them identify GMOs and avoid them. Ben & Jerry's supports change in the food system and is dedicated to helping rebuild non-GMO supply chains in the U.S. The company supports all measures to ban GMOs and mandate product labeling. They are implementing product labeling for themselves by 2014.

Get the dough out of politics

In addition to these business-related social initiatives, Ben & Jerry's also stands [staunchly against Citizens United](#). During the 2012 election season, the company campaigned to [get the dough out](#) of politics. Cohen himself goes the extra mile with his personal crusade, the [Stamp Stamped](#), and stamps money with slogans such as "Not to be used to bribe politicians," and "Stamp money out of politics."

"I think it's important for companies to stand up for something or things not just related to the widget that they sell, but issues as a whole," Miller said.

The word we heard the most from Miller, Greenfield and Solheim was "relationship" and how important their long-term relationships are to the company in its dealings with suppliers and investments in community, but one that wasn't spoken but demonstrated at every turn, was "loyalty."

Image credit: [Robert Marschelewski/Flickr](#)



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