

Doing Well by Doing Good

Recent disasters may have directed the spotlight to companies willing to help. But the disasters didn't necessarily inspire the response; in many cases, businesses that "do good" have been doing good all along.

Consider Houston-based Gallery Furniture, where owner Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale shot to national stardom in the wake of the Hurricane Harvey flooding in 2017. McIngvale opened his stores to people needing shelter, and encouraged anyone with a commercial license to use the company's 24-foot cube trucks to rescue survivors.

"People said it was miraculous what I did," he said. "To me, what was miraculous was that people thought that was a big deal. What was I going to do? My people were drowning. We had a couple of trucks totaled out, \$60,000 apiece. We can always make that money back. But you can't save people's lives but once." Later that fall, the company also hosted a Thanksgiving feast for the community

that included no less than 2,450 pounds of turkey, 2,450 pounds of ham, 1,200 pounds of mashed potatoes and 6,000 dinner rolls, among other items.

McIngvale did it all because it was simply the right thing to do, he said. But along the way, he's discovered that "if you do good, you get good back."

"A thousand people walk in the store every day and say, 'We heard what you did during Hurricane Harvey. We don't care what the price is. We're not going anywhere else.'"

As thought-provoking as McIngvale's story was, he was just one in a trio of speakers for "Investing in Social Responsibility: How Retailers are Doing Well by Doing Good." Moderated by Anne D'Innocenzio, national retail writer for The Associated Press, it also featured Dave Schneider, vice president and chief marketing officer for Red Wing Shoe Company, and Marc Brown, senior vice president of store operations with The Home Depot.

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— Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale, Gallery Furniture**



The Home Depot's Marc Brown shares the company's efforts to help homeless veterans.

Each spoke of the various ways their companies found alignment with good deeds. But they also talked about doing these things without fanfare; when it's standard operating procedure, it isn't a gimmick.

"One of my mentors was W. Edwards Deming, and he said we all have a responsibility for the well-being of the community, so we've been doing that since 1981, when we started," McIngvale

said. "That really hasn't changed. If anything, it's grown over the years as we've seen more and more social problems in Houston. We continue to do what we do ... I'm about half capitalist and half social worker." The company has given away 30 households of furniture for people whose lives have been dramatically affected by fires, floods or other disasters every year

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for the past 36 years. Last year, with Harvey, they gave away 200.

At The Home Depot, Brown spoke of a significant initiative that dates back to 2011. That's when the company recognized the extent of the homeless veteran population nationwide.

"Many people don't know it," he said, "but on any given night, it's estimated that there are 39,000 veterans that are homeless." A variety of other great organizations are taking care of food and water, "and shelter usually comes next," he said. "That's right in our wheelhouse. It makes a lot of sense for what we do as a business, so it's where we turn our focus."

The company doesn't typically broadcast its efforts, but it made a commitment to work with a variety of partners and give \$250 million to the effort, and already has reached \$227 million. In addition to that corporate initiative, The Home Depot Foundation gets behind local associates with ideas for helping other associates in need and improving their own communities. And when a disaster happens in one of those communities, the retailer has learned to be a good neighbor — because it carries many products involved in rebuilding, The Home Depot does well to be the last ones open before a disaster hits, as well as the first ones open in the aftermath. "You can get a black eye if you're not there for your community when they have those needs," Brown said.

Red Wing Shoe Company, meanwhile, also aligns with what it knows best. In this case, it's footwear. As part of the company's DNA, Schneider said, Red Wing has held numerous events across the country near Thanksgiving each year,

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getting homeless people into the right footwear to survive the elements. Last year there were 26 events, in which 3,000 pairs of shoes and 4,000 pairs of socks were given away. But it's not something the company publicizes.

Sure, it might create some goodwill, but that's not what it's really about. Besides, it makes sense in another way: It gives the company the added bonus of depleting inventory.

"At the end of the day, we're for-profit businesses, and we can't apologize for that," Schneider said. "Footwear is an inherently inventory-intense business. We have 279 styles of Red Wing footwear, I've got 13 size runs, and a lot of inventory and a lot of dynamics around forecasting for our business. We don't always get it right. So what should we do with that excess inventory? We should give it away." Exactly how much depends on need, as well as what the company can legitimately provide, he said, but "We always give something."