

# The Profitable Nonprofit: A Collegiate Perspective on Building the Social Enterprise to Move the World

By Ryan Tan

On January 12, 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake ripped through the heart of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Already the poorest state in the Western Hemisphere, the disaster took 230,000 lives, rendered 2 million homeless, and cost 14 billion dollars in economic damage. Port-au-Prince was leveled to the ground, with a sixth of government dead and nearly all infrastructure destroyed. Macroeconomic numbers appear ordinary at first, but simple reflection will define the horror the nation faced. Think about it: the average American family has 3 members, the average city bus a capacity of 40 passengers, and the average Facebook user a circle of 130 friends.

Now months after the calamity, Haitians continue to struggle; logistical concerns, safety issues, and economic considerations have hindered relief and reconstruction efforts from the beginning. Moreover, albeit a \$5.5 billion promise made at a donor's conference in March, little has been received or been put to effective use. According to the Economist, "the biggest solid pledge, a \$1.15 billion commitment from America, has been held up in Congress." The publication continues by saying that "much of the money may never arrive based on the record following other disasters." The international community, it seems, has a record of

failing to follow through, watching as storms tear through shoddy camps that surround Haitian ruin.

Haiti, unprepared to withstand the imminent, is not alone. Nature, as obvious as it is, is universal – active across city limits, national borders, and continental landscapes. The idea that natural disasters occur more frequently is contested, but the idea that disaster-prone areas have increased in density and decreased in readiness is not. This decade alone witnessed the extent of nature's fury. The Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the Great Sichuan Earthquake in 2008 are only the most publicized of the innumerable events civilization encounters on an erratically consistent basis. From landslides in Brazil to floods in the Philippines, society rests on one common ground: Pangaea.

## The Social Enterprise

The earthquake in Haiti was the final push. Natural disasters cannot be controlled; however, their impact can be. It was a cold day in January when this idea began taking root within the grounds of Boston University. The idea was to move – to move beyond self-defined constraints in a bid to challenge nature's fury, to move the world. The question – how? How can undergraduates pursue this mission? How



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can business majors genuinely move the world?

The answer – start something. Lay the grounds on which such a mission becomes possible. A few months of research and discussion later, the idea had grown – grown into a theory, a hybrid between business and philanthropy, founded on what's commonly perceived as a cliché college idea. The cliché? T-shirts. The theory? A social enterprise built upon it.

The idea of shirts, much like furniture and textbooks, is a light bulb that sparks all too often within the college campus. To the keen observer, a white lie discreetly presents itself through hesitation right before one hears the words "good idea." As reported by the Grasshopper Group, statistics put the number of 7 in 10 startups failing within two years, and fifty percent failing in five. Sure, the idea may be ordinary and the industry saturated;

however, statistics only reveal the macroeconomic. These numbers are achieved by individuals who divide the pie. Terrible ideas do not exist, but ideas that aren't properly cultivated do.

My perspective on shirts: simple entry, conceivable execution, and limitless potential. Reality is, collegiate grounds provide a sustainable market; collegiate grounds host a network for growth; and collegiate grounds pave where the present goes.

### **Moving the World**

Clothing has always been man's means of adapting to weather; however, beyond comfort, clothing has transformed into a means of expression, creating the expansive industry that thrives today. Shirts suggest character, principle, and identity. I believe that people will wear these t-shirts representing passion and belief. They will bear slogans such as "move the world" and logos like geographical puzzle pieces. People will wear to advocate and advance a cause. People will wear because it potentially translates to initiative. Profits from sales will then be given to institutions and organizations, such as the China Care Foundation or one providing access to clean water in impoverished regions. One t-shirt thus represents

one step or action toward alleviating the shortfall of money needed for surgeries of Chinese orphan babies.

The initiative is to move the world and the means to provide groups and individuals a channel to promote and support their cause. Whereas my cause is the effect of natural disasters, theirs spans poverty, health, and the environment. Sure, money alone cannot solve the world's problems; yet, aligning with and supporting organizations that are able will. A number of reports suggest that aid may be detrimental to genuine development. The same number of reports suggest otherwise. Financial contribution is by no means the reason why development initiatives fail. Initiatives fail due to lack of thought, improper implementation, and ultimately, surrender. Symptoms are recognized, but the fundamental disease is left untreated. More often than not, issues are just not publicized enough. On an individual level, a person may be unknowledgeable about an issue and how to address it. On a group level, a lack of awareness breeds a lack of thoughtful collaboration. And without thoughtful collaboration, there is no solution.

A world without poverty, where natural disasters do not cause significant harm and is disease-free is

utopian and therefore impossible; nonetheless, the road towards it isn't. Better infrastructure, access to clean water, and decent education are just three of many variables that need to become universal. These benefits of life, perceived simple and often unappreciated by the lucky few, remain unattainable or inexistent to a majority of the global populace. These necessities, commonplace to some, are neglected by the capable when the rest of the world suffers. I believe in the influence awareness can bring. I believe that acknowledgement, be it a knuckle-bump, a comment, or a conversation generated by seeing a well-designed shirt, has the potential to lead to an idea, a measure, and an initiative. Indifference may be the bane to genuine development, but unawareness – be it complete ignorance or partial understanding – is what hinders it. In today's flat world, issues are no longer independent or exclusive. Individuals must collectively take on the initiative.