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June 1, 1999 By Sean Strub

I have been interested in issues of corporate social responsibility since I started investing in start-up ventures. With my current businesses, including *POZ* and Community Prescription Service (CPS), I have tried to show that there's a place in the capitalist system for activist entrepreneurialism.

But even with the best intentions, there's always going to be some tension between seeking profit and serving a political agenda. This tension can be healthy, but its presence leads some people to criticize for-profit business owners for "selling out" or making money from those in disadvantaged circumstances.

To those who accuse us of profiteering off people with HIV, I point out that the profits from CPS—along with my savings and my viaticated insurance policies—helped create *POZ* in the first place. Since our founding, we have given to HIVers four million free copies of the magazine—by far the lion's share of the total printed. The profits from *POZ* helped launch *POZ en Español* and *MAMM* magazines. And if these publications ever become profitable, I plan to invest those funds in another project of value to the community.

These businesses not only provide jobs for people with HIV but also give us a stronger voice. It's wrong to assume that for-profit enterprises cannot have a social conscience or play a progressive role or that not-for-profit organizations are, by definition, more saintly than for-profits.

Creating jobs and economic opportunity is itself a progressive value. People who work in environments where community service, integrity and a commitment to social change are respected can find greater purpose and satisfaction in earning a living. I'm proud that many *POZ* staffers describe their work as deeply fulfilling, even though the company is under-resourced and the work sometimes overwhelming.

POZ is just one example of a for-profit that has reached beyond traditional corporate boundaries. A few years ago, I consulted with Direct Access Diagnostics, the marketer of the first home HIV test. Elliott Millenson, the developer of the test and the company's founder and CEO, entered into an agreement with the National AIDS Fund and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS to contribute 50 cents per test kit sold, to be distributed through the organizations' grantmaking processes. This was radical, especially since Millenson first had to persuade his company's corporate parent, the drug giant Johnson & Johnson, to agree.

Millenson and others, including me, have tried to pioneer a new kind of corporate model. We want our companies to be profitable, of course, but also to fulfill a valuable mission. No level of generosity makes a business immune to criticism or scrutiny of its practices, but neither should efforts to give something back be dismissed because the company benefits as well.

These models of corporate and community interaction and philanthropy should be encouraged, particularly because many not-for-profit groups are having an increasingly difficult time raising funds. Building givebacks into product marketing could become an important source of income for not-for-profits. It is estimated that the HIV drug market will exceed $5 billion by the year 2007 in the seven largest national markets—imagine if a percentage of that revenue was earmarked as a contribution to groups advocating for people with HIV. The impact could be astounding. When returned to the community, profit has the power to lift people up, to educate, inspire and enable them to build better lives.

Of course, enterprises and individuals who hold themselves up as activists— especially those embracing a leadership role while seeking profit—are in effect asking the community for a special status. And so they must be prepared to be held to that higher standard, engage in continuous self-reflection and have a thick skin.

I've thought much about these issues recently because of some pretty big life changes. A few months ago, I stepped down as president of POZ Publishing. I remain the chairman, but I don't have the same day-to-day involvement or responsibilities that I've had for most of the past five years.

As a for-profit business operating in a world full of nonprofits, we occupy an unusual niche. We have made mistakes, to be sure, and we've tried to accept responsibility for them. But our core mission hasn't changed since we started: to provide information and inspiration that can help people facing chronic illnesses live as well as possible. Perfection is a direction, not a destination. If, in the end, if it can only be said that we tried very, very hard, that will be enough for me

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