

Camp With Purpose

Four ways a for-profit organization can give back

By Nicki Fleischner

“I’ve learned that you can’t go through life with a catcher’s mitt on both hands. You need to be able to throw something back.”

—Maya Angelou

Camps come in all shapes and sizes—day or residential, full or partial session, specialty program or broad-based—but they all share a dedication to “throw something back.” They strive to help children develop into the best versions of themselves. Camps create communities built on inclusivity, kindness, and respect.

But there is an exciting opportunity for for-profit camps to do more—to be explicit in weaving purpose into the fabric of their programs and to give back to communities beyond

the campers who are directly served. More and more, an intentional purpose-driven approach to business is not only “good practice,” but something actively sought by camp parents and staff members.

Numerous studies and surveys point to the importance of incorporating **purpose** into business, especially for millennials and Gen Z—two generations of particular relevance in camping today (most new camp parents are millennials, and most staff members are Gen Z). A few standout stats:





Whatever the project, participation should be meaningful—not mandatory like fulfilling a school requirement.

- 70 percent of millennials actively consider company values when making a purchase. (Forrester’s 2018 Data Digest)

- 83 percent of millennials are more loyal to a company that helps them contribute to social and environmental issues. 75 percent would take a pay cut to work for a socially responsible company. (2016 Cone Communications Millennial Employee Engagement Study)

- 94 percent of Gen Z believes companies should address urgent social and environmental issues. 65 percent want to personally create something world-changing. (2017 Cone Gen Z CSR Study).

Deloitte’s 2019 Global Millennial Survey sums it up best: “Millennials and Gen Zs want all of the talk business gives to purpose to become meaningful action, and for business leaders to serve as agents for positive change.”

Get Started

There are many ways to embark on this work, but in a year of uncertainty, and when many camps are hurting financially from a stalled 2020 season, here are four doable ideas to get started today.

1 Integrate a service project into your program. An easy place to start is to look into local organizations, such as a daycare, community non-profit, nursing home, or a civic-oriented institution like a library (likely all of which were negatively impacted by COVID-19). Reach out and solicit *their* input on meaningful, appropriate, and fun ways to





Starting a community garden is a project that campers can participate in annually.

involve campers (this shouldn't feel like mandatory community service at school). Looking for some ideas? For young campers, something simple like decorating cards for seniors or placemats (often needed by food banks) in arts and crafts. For tweens, a "litter rave," in which they dress up and blast music while cleaning a public space. Older campers can benefit from an

ongoing, more involved project—like starting a community garden, presenting a mini-carnival, or running a specialty activity in partnership with a local, kid-focused non-profit. Make these service projects an annual tradition—something campers look forward to just as they might a full-camp activity or theme day. Have the service opportunities build and grow as the kids also progress through their camp careers.

Implementation tip: Research shows that service-learning can increase kids' awareness of diversity, and commitment to values like justice, but research also shows that some projects can reinforce stereotypes kids may hold about those being served. Teaching Tolerance ([tolerance.org](https://www.teachingtolerance.org)) has some great guidance about how to get the most out of service-learning in "Service-Learning and Prejudice Reduction." Want more service ideas? The website, Kid World Citizen, highlights "35 Service Projects for Kids." Visit <https://kidworldcitizen.org/>.





2 Partner with non-profit camps.

There are many, fantastic, camp-related non-profits out there. Find one that resonates with the community and the camp's specific mission, and work on building that relationship in a thoughtful way. Generally, for-profit camps can be of genuine help in three ways:

- **Fundraise.** Some camps successfully host in-summer swimathons, or have silent auctions on Visiting Day, with proceeds benefiting a non-profit. If it feels uncomfortable to ask parents to dig into their pockets mid-summer, off-season days like #CampTshirtDay are great opportunities to spotlight organizations and give back. At my camp, which is residential and for-profit, the camp donated \$5 for every person who submitted a T-shirt Day photo.

- **Provide volunteers.** Most non-profits run on tremendous volunteer power. Spread awareness among your own staff members who might be looking for new opportunities and encourage them to get involved. You might even create a program to sponsor a select number of staff members to volunteer at a non-profit after your own camp season is over, as several non-profit camps have shorter sessions in late August. Having staff members gain non-profit experience is an investment in your business, as they will undoubtedly learn and grow.

- **Spread awareness.** It sounds small, but just being an ally and vocal about an organization makes a difference. Share posts on social media. Consider having someone from a non-profit camp talk to staff members during orientation. Some non-profits specialize in one area—whether it's sustainability, diversity, or working with campers with special needs. Their expertise will strengthen your own camp community while simultaneously raising awareness about their organization.

3 Host donation drives.

Potentially the most streamlined suggestion, donation drives on opening and closing days are a great way to both reduce waste and contribute to causes that matter. "Cans for Campers" is an opening-day tradition in which families are encouraged to pack their campers with a canned or non-

perishable good for donation to a local food pantry. Other great organizations for closing-day drives (when, presumably, there are a number of items being discarded) include:

- **Soles 4 Souls**, which collects unwanted shoes and clothes and distributes them worldwide to people in need.
- **Level the Playing Field**, which has the goal to "get kids off the sidelines" by putting used sports equipment into the hands of low-income kids and sports leagues.
- **Materials for the Arts**, New York's largest, creative reuse center, which gives art and theatre supplies to support the arts across NYC.

Implementation tip: If the above organizations aren't a match, a local public school or daycare might be an option. To increase the success of your donation drives, send regular

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■ **Reuse, reduce, recycle art projects.** Camp is an easy place to get creative. Encourage staff members to make a pile of (rinsed out) used cartons or boxes that otherwise would head for the dumpster, and then develop an activity from it, with kids rummaging through to inspire their next project. Whether the project is piggy banks made out of milk cartons and soda bottles, or decoupage with old newspapers, Pinterest is chock-full of ideas.

■ **#FridaysForFuture.** A global climate movement that is spearheaded by Greta Thunberg, #FridaysForFuture is a viral day of action for young people.

communications to families ahead of time, and highlight the impact of their donations. Be specific as to which items are and are not appropriate to donate, and make drop-off as easy and clear as possible (think big containers, bigger signs).

Bring #FridaysForFuture to your camp in small, doable ways. Maybe on each Friday a camper shares a favorite sustainability tip (like turning the water off while brushing one's teeth), or campers take a weekly nature walk and share what they love most about the wildlife at camp.

4 Infuse sustainability into camp life.

Sustainability has been the subject of many camp articles, but environmentalism is a central tenet of business with a purpose, so it definitely warrants a shout-out!

Favorite, easy-to-implement ideas I've seen include:

■ **Composting and Terracycling.** Many camps are located in rural areas, and many farms offer compost pick-up services. Identify farms in your area that might be open to a partnership. At my camp, there are empty bowls on every table, and campers are encouraged to dump compostable items in the bowls at the end of each meal, which involves the campers in the process. Of course, many items cannot be composted or recycled, which is where Terracycle comes in. It is a social enterprise that sells zero-waste boxes, which can be filled with things like electronics, plastics, fabrics, you name it.



My camp empowers a future generation of leaders, showing that their words and actions matter. Campers are ready, and parents and staff members are eager for camps to be direct and bold in a purpose-driven approach—however we choose to do it. **CB**



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