

The Street

Panera Cares: Social Action Baked In

By Miriam Reimer, September 9, 2011

NEW YORK ([TheStreet](#)) -- **Panera Bread** ([PNRA](#)) Chairman and former CEO Ron Shaich reveals to *TheStreet* how Panera Cares, its "café of shared responsibility," not only respects the dignity of those less fortunate but helps build brand equity and form deeper community relationships.

Inspired by a segment of "Making a Difference" on *NBC Nightly News*, in May 2010 Shaich launched Panera Cares, a pay-as-you-can café. The menu offerings are the same as in a traditional Panera Bread restaurant, of which there are nearly 1,500 in the U.S., but there is no cash register -- just a cash donation box, where customers are encouraged to pay what they are able to pay for the food they eat.

Shaich says "it's not a business model," but 20% of guests who come in to Panera Cares pay more than the suggested donation, 60% leave the suggested donation, and 20% leave less or nothing.

"It's a model to help the community," Shaich says, "and the reason it's working is that people get it, people are fundamentally good, they're not being gamed, there's no other agenda -- it's completely transparent."

There are currently three Panera Cares locations: Portland, Ore., Clayton, Mo. and Dearborn, Mich.