

Forbes

LEADERSHIP

America's 20 Most Inspiring Companies

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What companies most inspire the consuming public? A little five-year-old consulting firm in Atlanta claims to have come up with a formula to answer that question. Terry Barber, CEO of the firm, which calls itself Performance Inspired, is touting a survey it released today called America's Most Inspiring Companies. Barber says his firm uses the survey as a publicity tool and a benchmark to serve its clients. At the moment Performance Inspired has only six clients, including the Cancer Treatment Centers of America, Georgia State University's executive education program and the southeast regional division of McDonald's. It runs workshops for managers and executives aimed at drumming up employee enthusiasm.

Though Forbes has covered the list in the past, I approached it with some skepticism. But Barber convinced me that it reveals something useful about consumer sentiment and the brands that are managing it well.

To put the list together, from July until November Decooda, an Atlanta data analysis outfit, collected 3,300 online questionnaires that had some touchy-feely language about inspiration. First the respondents were asked to imagine a fictitious inspirational company and then write about the values, behaviors and attitudes of that company, including how it would treat customers and the community. They then had to name an inspirational real-life company and describe how it measured up to the fictional company. "Be sure to talk about your feelings and attitudes toward the company, what you love most about the company, and what attributes of the company make it inspirational," said the questionnaire

The survey-takers ranked how inspirational they found the firm on a scale of one to 10. The surveys also asked respondents to write about what makes the company inspirational in comparison with the fictional company. From that text, Barber says Decooda analyzed the qualities people considered most important and the words they used. It mattered if survey-takers gushed at length, which gave the company a higher score, or gave only mild praise, which produced a lower ranking. Superlatives helped too.

Which company came out on top? Tesla, the \$2 billion (sales) publicly traded Palo Alto electric car maker run by billionaire Elon Musk. This is the first year that Tesla even ranked, in the five years that Performance Inspired has been running the survey. Barber says one of the reasons it made the No. 1 slot was the company's announcement in June that it was making all its patents open source, meaning it won't challenge competitors who want to use Tesla technology to build their own electric cars. Another thing consumers like: Tesla's investment in solar power. "Tesla's commitment to the environment was a big deal," says Barber. Tesla has set up 280 free "Supercharger" charging stations along well-traveled highways in North America, Europe and Asia. A number of the stations have solar panels that produce electricity and Tesla plans to expand the number of solar-powered stations.

The second-most inspiring company, according to the survey: Trader Joe's, the Monrovia, CA grocery chain with 418 locations in 39 states (half are in California). Respondents said they cared most about the company's "sense of understanding about their commitment to being healthy," says Barber. The stores stock plenty of

fresh produce, whole grains like quinoa, and an array of yogurts and other healthful items, though it also sells junk food like chocolate-covered potato chips. Barber says survey-takers also thought the company treated its employees well, even though wages are not especially high, with "crew members" earning an average of \$13.82 an hour according to salary reporting site Glassdoor. Trader Joe's also reportedly announced recently that it was dropping health care coverage for employees who log fewer than 30 hours per week. Still, TJ's workers wear Hawaiian shirts, because, says the company website, "We think grocery shopping should be fun, not another chore." That sentiment apparently spills over to consumers. "People find it an especially inspiring experience to deal with employees who are both knowledgeable and extremely helpful," says Barber.


In third place: Target TGT +0.36%, up from fifth place last year, even though the company suffered a massive data breach last December at the height of the holiday shopping season, when hackers stole information for as many as 70 million shoppers. Respondents liked the fact that the company apologized for its role in the breach. "Consumers appreciated the sense of ownership and responsibility and transparency and their ability to ask questions," says Barber. People also liked Target's philanthropic activity and employee volunteer program. Target gives education grants to K-12 schools for field trips, early childhood reading programs and art projects, in addition to donating books to school libraries. It also sponsors employee volunteer programs where workers renovate school libraries, read to students, donate food and respond to disasters.

One piece of news this year: Walmart, which came in at No. 3 last year, has dropped to 21st place as a result of the nationwide protests about working conditions and wages. “That has really tainted them as a whole,” says Barber. The vast majority of Walmart workers reportedly make less than \$25,000 a year.

There are also some weird rankings on this list, at least to me. Amazon is up at No. 10, even with all the controversy surrounding its

pricing war with publisher Hachette and its black eye in the media, including a put-down from popular comedian Steven Colbert. Yet it ranks ahead of Goodwill, a company with a long history of providing employment and job training to veterans and people with disabilities and other challenges. Chick-Fil-A is rated even higher, at No. 7, even though it has been blasted by the gay rights community for its chief operating officer Dan Cathy’s

anti-gay-marriage proclamations and donations by the company’s charitable arm to anti-LGBT organizations. “For those who are connected to them, they are incredibly inspired,” says Barber. In other words, people who bothered to write about Chick-Fil-A were those who admired its values.

Still, lists are always entertaining to read and this one seems to reflect the companies that inspire the people who follow them. 

AMERICA'S 20 MOST INSPIRING COMPANIES

1	TESLA	11	GOODWILL
2	TRADER JOE'S	12	WHOLE FOODS
3	TARGET	13	JOHNSON & JOHNSON (TIE)
4	TOMS SHOES	13	NIKE (TIE)
5	COSTCO	15	APPLE
6	FORD	16	COCA-COLA
7	CHICK-FIL-A	17	KOHL'S
8	GOOGLE	18	DISNEY
9	MICROSOFT	19	STARBUCKS
10	AMAZON	20	MCDONALD'S



GOODWILL