

## Leveraging faith to provide something of value for all

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If you're a Star Trek fan, you may be familiar with the so-called "Rules of Acquisition", a set of business proverbs that make up the sacred teachings of a hyper-capitalist race known as the Ferengi. These rules include such gems as "once you have their money, you never give it back", "greed is eternal", and "employees are the rungs on the ladder of success - don't hesitate to step on them". While these seem like just a clever plot device, anyone who has engaged in entrepreneurship or studied business in depth couldn't be blamed for seeing some truth in them.

Business in its most distilled form is a cold, hard science. Any legal action that makes profit easier is not just tolerated but encouraged. Sympathy one might have for stakeholders encountered along the way – suppliers, employees, neighbors, customers – is seen as a distraction at best and a fatal flaw at worst. You see this at its worst on the capitalist fringes, such as international drug/human trafficking, where no amount of human misery is allowed to get in the way of an extra buck.

However, commerce is first and foremost a transaction between humans, and being the complex creatures that we are, we have motivations that go beyond money. Aside from the aforementioned legal restrictions, the desire for fairness and compassion has been a powerful force keeping our negative impulses, and the harm they can inflict through capitalism, at bay. But what if we didn't just stop there – what if we infused the entire entrepreneurial process with values that brought out the best in us and improved the lives of everyone our interactions touch?

My Muslim faith has always been an important part of my life, and I have tried my best to live life by its values. I found myself in Silicon Valley in the early 1990's and immediately rode the startup wave. Two of my first ventures were Zabihah, the world's first Halal restaurant finder application, and Altmuslim, an online newsmagazine featuring Muslim writers that wrote for mass audiences. This was my first insertion of faith into my business life – building products and services that helped my faith community practice their religion and express themselves to promote understanding in larger society. While this was great for empowering my own faith communities, it wasn't exactly a value-driven enterprise. It was simply treating Muslims as yet another market segment to be catered to.

If my identity was one based primarily on values and not simply cultural identity, what did this mean for my work? How did it inform the way that I engage with others through entrepreneurship? Being ethical in commerce is nothing new – everyone is doing it in some form or another. Are there unique contributions that my own value system brings to the table, or am I just promoting another flavor of social impact? Does it even matter that I am a Muslim entrepreneur? Should I just be yet another ethical person in this space?

As I moved from doing my own startups to mentoring and investing in others, I started putting some more thought into this. Capitalism has rightfully been derided as a vehicle for amplifying profit at the expense of the masses. But I truly believe that capitalism is an amoral tool – it is heartless in the hands of some people and compassionate in the hands of others. If someone requesting my help just wanted to make money, there isn't really anything in it for me other than making a return on my investment. But if someone wants to start a business that has social impact embedded in its business model – bonus

points if that impact draws from my own value system – then I have much more to gain than making a return on my investment.

My next epiphany was to move away from businesses that cater just to Muslims to those that leverage our values and resources to provide something of value to the masses. “By Muslims for everyone” is our motto. This makes sense on two levels - first, there is no reason to limit the application of my values, most of which are universally shared, to just my own community. Second, in Western markets where Muslims make up less than 10% of the population, your business can be much more successful approaching 100% of the market.

An example is Saffron Road, a line of halal frozen entrees and food products that is available in tens of thousands of grocery stores across the US. As a founding board member of Saffron Road’s parent company American Halal, I was involved in the branding and launch of the initial product line. While the product is unabashedly halal, the brand value was positioned with universal themes to attract mass audiences. To this day, only a small percentage of Saffron Road’s sales are to Muslim customers - most are other Americans who appreciate the unique value and high quality of the product. This has become my primary strategy - create products and services that have mass appeal without sacrificing the values that make them special.

Similarly, the more I focus on applying my faith values in universal ways through entrepreneurship, the more I find myself working with co-founders, contractors, and companies that aren’t Muslim or Muslim-led but who nonetheless appreciate my application of faith values throughout the value chain. My business partners of other faiths truly keep me honest - they keep my values honest and discourage shallow attempts at appealing to identity. So long as I can keep them invested in our projects, I feel confident that the larger market will appreciate our approach as well. If the customer can tie their appreciation of our work to my faith, that’s great – Lord knows Islam needs as much good press as it can get. But even if they don’t, I’m happy that they are engaging in an economic ecosystem that I believe can make the world better.

As an investor, I seek out companies that can meet the criteria of sharia compliance (adherence to a specific set of Islamic guidelines) but that also reflect broader values consistent with my faith. For example, there is a hadith – a saying of the Prophet Muhammad – that says, “pay the worker his dues before his sweat dries”. For me, this means that companies I work with have to compensate their employees fairly, settle their accounts payable quickly, and generally treat labor with respect. While my motivation is Islamic, few would disagree with the broader social impact in my application.

At times it seems odd to me that even though I have incorporated my faith into my work from the very beginning, the nature of this application has slowly shifted from garage startups catering to my specific faith group to global investment in companies with mass appeal. On the surface it may not even be obvious that I adhere to any faith. But the fact is that I don’t look at any aspect of what I do – fundraising, product development, branding, financial transactions, and even interaction between employees – without reflecting on how my faith governs that process even if at an imperceptible level.

And that’s okay. As any committed person of faith will tell you, the biggest spiritual gifts are usually the ones most deeply buried.