

Levi-Strauss

In a report issued last week, the Human Rights Commission of the City and County of San Francisco noted that "Levi-Strauss has a reputation for involvement in social concerns and problems affecting their work force." That was a unique commendation, more sweeping than anything that is usually said about a business institution.



Raab

It is worth noting that in June, 1916, the following biographical comment was made about Levi Strauss, who had come to San Francisco in 1853 and founded the forerunner of the business which still bears his name: The biography said that Levi Strauss possessed "the ambition to make life expressive of the virtues that should adorn the Jew placed in a station of great responsibility."

There have always been businessmen who staunchly held that their only business was business itself—and that it was unfair to expect them to take special responsibility for social problems around them. A number of businessmen, however, have come to recognize that because of their special ability to influence events, they have a special responsibility to influence those events for the better.

Jewish employers and Jews of relative wealth and influence have, from biblical days, been specifically charged by their religious teachings with the special responsibilities of their privileged station. Jewish laws specify these responsibilities at length and in detail. Of course, not all Jews or Jewish businessmen have paid heed to their religious teachings, even if they knew about them. And whatever our impressions may be, there is no hard statistical information that Jewish businessmen, as a lot, have been more socially responsible than other businessmen, as a lot.

But it is nonetheless interesting to note the line between Levi Strauss, who achieved a particular reputation for social responsibility in San Francisco before his death in 1902, and the company which bears his name and holds a particular reputation for social responsibility in the city today. The Levi Strauss Co., for example, was the first major business establishment in San Francisco to establish a strong and deliberate policy of equal employment opportunity—and of affirmative efforts to recruit, train and upgrade members of minority racial groups. This was done with success and without fanfare, as have been efforts by that company to help minority businessmen get started.

The occasion of the Human Rights Commission comment noted above was an inquiry into the poor state of child care centers for working parents in San Francisco. There are long waiting lists and relatively few vacancies. The report indicated that the Levi Strauss Co.'s attempts to institute a child care program for their own employees might serve as a model for others. A building was renovated, and the Company provided an annual budget to establish a child care center. They found that while some employees used that facility, others found it difficult to bring their children to one center everyday, coming as they did from a 40 mile radius.

Consequently, the Levi Strauss Co. has opened its new center to the community, turning it over to a local agency to run, and has taken an additional tack. It became clear that a very large percentage of day care at present, in the absence of a massive federal program, is carried on in the homes of women who are paid to oversee six to 10 children every day while their parents work. In order that this care might have an educational as well as a custodial quality, the Levi Strauss Co. is beginning to experiment with a mobile instruction team who will visit day care homes with lending libraries of books and toys, and with information on how to deliver quality day care. Periodically, the women and the children will be bused to a central place where they will receive further training, and there will be a monetary inducement to participate.

These are, of course, just examples of why Levi Strauss has the city's pre-eminent business reputation for social responsibility. And it raises a troubling question. Levi-Strauss, over the years has been a "family business." It so happens that, in this case, the families have been Jewish. But, Jewish or not, family businesses have been capable of carrying certain positive traditions of social responsibilities over the years. After all, social traditions are primarily transmitted through families.

But family businesses are on their way out. It is startling how many Jewish family businesses have disappeared, to give way to public corporations. It's happened in San Francisco. And there is no indication that impersonal public corporations, with shifting management, can carry any traditions other than those related to the money-scramble. It's good to see Levi-Strauss still carrying a social tradition that was established in San Francisco over a century ago.