

Cause Marketing Much Ado About Everything

Cause-related marketing is one of the most powerful marketing tools in existence today, yet in smaller markets it is often over-looked and under-valued. Cause marketing is a relatively new industry in itself, begun in 1984 when American Express assisted the restoration of the Statue of Liberty. When executed well, it positions an organization as a good corporate citizen, a task that goes far in communicating the business's benevolent mission.

In a study conducted in the late 1990s by Cone Communications and Roper Starch Worldwide, 78% of the consumer adults researched said they'd be more likely to buy a product supporting a cause; 66% said they'd switch brands to support a cause; and 54% said they'd pay more for a product to support a cause. Those are compelling stats, speaking to the power this marketing discipline holds to boost corporate branding efforts. When product differentiation is called for, cause marketing may well be the key, as it provides a feel-good reason for the consumer to buy, builds relationships, and enhances a corporate image. It also serves to inspire your employees.

While big corporations pour billions of dollars into charitable causes, smaller businesses can adopt the cause model on a local level. But it's crucial to design a cause program well.

Here are some tips:

Choose your charitable cause with utmost care. Unless you're careful, you can contribute money to a charitable organization that already has a full slate of sponsors and get lost in the crowd. The best way to choose is to conduct a diligent search for the perfect charitable match, preferably one that appears to be a "rising star." I once worked with a large non-profit service organization that, after a year-long search, adopted the fledgling Alzheimer's Association. Because we were one of the first to get on their bandwagon, we received a plethora of much-needed free publicity for our involvement – PR we could not have otherwise afforded. To add to this, the actress Shelley Fabares, who was the association's national spokesperson at that time, delivered an inspiring address at our national convention. The goodwill generated by this union was outstanding, and it infused our group with new energy and a greater sense of purpose.

For synergy's sake, **marry your sponsorship with your product or service**, taking your consumers' demographics and their interests into consideration. For instance, a diaper manufacturer would be wise to take up the cause of a children's charity. A circus might underwrite an animal rights effort. On a smaller scale, a local pediatric practice might step up to the plate and be the exclusive sponsor of a local children's home.

Be sure it's a cause you and your employees actually believe in and **be willing to give more than a corporate check**. Unless you want to look like brazen opportunists, you and your employees should roll up your sleeves and actually work, if possible, to impact the cause you've adopted. Volunteering is a great way to bond with employees, too.

Be diligent about checking out the financial stability of the charity you choose. If you uncover later that, say, the director is pulling in a million dollar salary and a scandal ensues, your company's name as a sponsor will be attached to it.

If your company is large enough to embrace cause marketing on a large scale, there are a few great resource companies available who wholly specialize in this discipline. You may e-mail me for this information. If you want to adopt a charitable cause at the grassroots level, let your ad agency or marketing company know your wishes and they can outline a plan to get you there.