

# What do you stand for?

## Cause branding at the crossroads this season

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October was Breast Cancer Awareness Month and you couldn't miss it. It seemed that almost everywhere you went, whatever magazine you read, across the airwaves, our culture had “pinked out.” Hundreds, even thousands of items were ribboned, and proceeds from their sales were donated to the cause. Did you buy something? I did—Yoplait yogurt, because I like the taste and because I like the company's commitment to the cause. (Yoplait is also a client of mine.)

Yet, how many in the sea of products and services made any impact on the breast cancer cause or deepened customer loyalty with their intended targets, ultimately providing the competitive advantage corporate sponsors desired?

Cause marketing is at a tipping point. We know. Over the last two decades, we've helped to create the cause movement—first, through our work with clients, from the Reebok Human Rights campaign, the Avon Breast Cancer Crusade, and the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women campaign. We also helped to pioneer the cause movement

through our research: since 1993, we've found that consumers act with their hearts, their “hands,” and their purse strings.

Now, 24 years after the first “official” cause-related program launched with the American Express Statue of Liberty campaign, cause-associated products, services, and companies are found everywhere. What's a shopper, employee, company, or nonprofit to do? How are we to distinguish between sincere commitments and marketing promotions? The cause landscape is changing, and with great implications for all.

When you think about giving to a charity through purchases, campaign engagement, or corporate partnership, be curious and ask: “How can our actions have the

greatest impact?” The findings from our latest research, the 2007 Cone Cause Evolution Survey, offer new insights to help answer this question. Cause is here to stay, and if conducted authentically, it can have a great influence on the purchasing, employment, and overall loyalty of customers and employees.

For example, 87 percent of Americans are likely to switch from one product to another, price and quality being equal, if the other product is associated with a good cause—a 31 percent jump from our 1993 study. This is the good news.

But, for the first time in more than a decade, some of the findings aren't as rosy: only 30 percent of Americans told a family member or friend about a product or company after hearing about its commitment to social issues—a 30 percent decline from 2004. And, only 36 percent of Americans purchased a product from a company during the past year after hearing about its commitment to social issues. That's a decline from 43 percent in 2004.

So, what does this mean? The marketplace is filled with cause messages and products. Con-



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# 4.8%

The percentage by which U.S. corporations increased their giving, on average, in 2006, according to the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy

sumers don't take notice like they once did. The "ribbonization" of America is upon us. It is no longer enough for a company to attach a ribbon to a product or service, linking it to the cause of the moment. In many instances, consumers just don't notice the connection. So, word-of-mouth communication—the most valuable currency in the marketplace today—has dropped.

How to break through? Develop programs that are authentic, sustainable, transparent, and well communicated. Consider Yoplait's approach. The company built a deep, nine-plus year commitment to eradicate breast cancer, creating awareness and raising funds for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation's for the Cure initiative. Beyond its highly successful pink-lidded Save Lids to Save Lives program, Yoplait knew it must evolve its cause work to continue to secure and create loyal customers. Lids were a first step, and next it expanded its efforts to support the 100+ Race for the Cure events across the nation.

Then the company went even farther. My firm, Cone, joined Yoplait's efforts at that point. We helped to create Yoplait Champions, highlighting extraordinary women and men working in the fields of breast cancer prevention, awareness, and survival. Adding the voices, networks, and passion of spirited individuals, Yoplait sought to humanize the issue with sensitivity and impact. Over the last nine years, Yoplait and General Mills have donated more than \$18 million to Susan G. Komen for the Cure.

But perhaps more importantly, the Yoplait campaign helps to highlight individuals who inspire others to continue their work for the cause, such as singer/songwriter Soraya Raquel Lamilla Cuevas, who lost her mother, grandmother, and aunt to the disease before she was diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer, herself, in 2003. Instead of sitting on the sidelines, she created a breast cancer education outreach campaign to touch minority communities. During the three years of her treatment, Soraya also served her community. Sadly, in May 2006, Soraya passed away at the age of 37.

Contrast that type of community building and cause commitment to a decision by many other com-

panies to support Breast Cancer Awareness Month as just another promotion to boost short-term sales. As our 2007 research shows, short-term promotion is no longer enough to gain long-term brand and business benefits and impact the cause. The commitment has to be authentic and sustained, for both company and cause to realize results.

What we've found is that Americans, as consumers, employees, and citizens, desire companies to give back in an authentic way, over the long term, to relevant social issues. What is key is that the support must have real impact on an issue over time. The cause should allow various levels of engagement for consumers, as well as employees and community members. Then, the impact should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders. Today, with the Internet and new media, there are exciting new ways to do this.

Leading-edge nonprofits, such as the Komen foundation, the American Heart Association (a Cone client since 2003), the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, CARE, and New York-based Safe Horizon (also a Cone client), all are refocusing their brands and programs to forge stronger and more impactful corporate relationships. This will allow them to reach a broader group of supporters, create new revenue streams, and infuse their organizations into people's everyday lives. They are responding to corporate requests to create and execute more focused, innovative, and impactful programming for mutual benefit: helping society and helping corporations demonstrate their values in action.

The bottom line? Cause is no longer a "nice to do." It is a "have to do." Doing it strategically is the golden key. What do you stand for? ▲

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