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How a "cause" can help your marketing bottom line

By Brian Reich

How a "cause" can help your marketing bottom line

If you're in charge of marketing for a company, then you spend most of your time looking for some tiny advantage, something to generate buzz and differentiate your offering from the crowd of other marketers.

The audience, meanwhile, cares little about who is doing the marketing or even what technologies you use. They're looking online for the most relevant story or entertaining clip, the website that can answer a question they have or the product that meets a specific need.

While your objective is to build a relationship with your audience, have them remember your brand and talk about you with their friends, they want to find the best information, experiences and stuff quickly so they can move on to something else.

But how will you stand out? What will drive the transaction that you want?

More and more, your bag of marketing tricks includes sophisticated social media elements, such as blogs, podcasts, video and social networks. But a company can stand apart in a relatively low-tech way as well by aligning with a cause.

Pioneering companies are showing their support for a relevant social issue and drawing the attention of their audience in the process. Marketing success around causes takes more than just a donation or public announcement. A company's commitment has to be genuine and represented across the total operation of the business. But once a company has achieved that, the challenge simply becomes demonstrating the relationship between your company and a nonprofit or charitable partner in a way that the audience can relate to and appreciate.

Simply put, when that audience sees that the company has a deep commitment to a cause, they are more likely to pay attention to your overall messages.

Don't take my word for it, look at the numbers. The 2007 [Cone Cause Evolution Survey](#) showed:

- More than two-thirds of Americans say they consider a company's business practices when deciding what to buy. Moreover, Americans' expectations of companies are at an all-time high, with 83 percent saying companies have a responsibility to help support causes, and 92 percent acknowledging that they have a more positive image of a company that supports a cause they care about.
- Eighty-seven percent are likely to switch from one brand to another (price and quality being about equal) if the other brand is associated with a good cause, an increase of more than 31 percent (up from 66 percent) since 1993.

Not surprisingly, advertising and the internet are the two main ways Americans prefer companies to communicate their social issues and practices (45 percent and 41 percent respectively). Americans are also using technology proactively to learn about and support social issues and causes. In fact, more than one in five (22 percent) have used the internet or other technologies to engage in grassroots activism. Others are searching for information on issues (37 percent) or are forwarding important messages to family and friends (38 percent).

In an age where technology has given the audience near complete access and control over the information they receive and share, no matter where it originates, the challenge for companies in marketing their commitment to a cause has changed as well. Most companies still do the equivalent of simply adding a ribbon to a package: they add some content to their site or make a donation in return for a purchase or other activity a user makes.

To be successful, however, companies need to clearly and consistently share the societal impacts of their efforts; they need to provide hands-on, cause-related experiences that the user can explore and understand, and they need to demonstrate their commitment over time, not just when they think the media will be watching.

Too often, the decisions that companies make when it comes to online marketing are dictated by "shiny object syndrome," a terrible affliction that results in a marketing path based on whatever is newest or generating the most buzz of the moment, instead of what will truly be effective.

For example, when a company learns that 70 million people use MySpace, they say, "Wonderful! We'll launch a profile." Or when a CEO hears that the leadership at another company is starting a blog, she demands, "We must do that too."

These decisions are often made without consideration for what the audience will respond to, and what will help meet your communications goals. Cause marketing



has fallen into this category of late as more and more companies tried to tack a charitable component onto a campaign in hopes of attracting an audience.

Take for example a recent promotion by Bayer, which artfully moved audiences through a series of fictional social networking, blog and wiki spaces to promote the painkiller [Aleve](#).

For each person who clicked through to the end of the promotion--a mystery adventure game that takes at least a minute to complete--Bayer said it would make a donation of \$5 to \$10 to the environmental nonprofit group Conservation Fund. But they didn't tell users until they had completed the game.

"The charitable donation at the end of the game is viewed as a way to get people to stick with it and to share it with one another," Jay Kolpon, vice president for marketing and new business development at Bayer HealthCare, was quoted in the [New York Times](#) as saying. "When you got through this kind of consumer engagement, more than 30 seconds, it is really important to have a payoff. We wanted it to be almost a surprise."

In this article, we will look at how organizations can use causes and commitment to provide information about serious issues, and enhance their online marketing. The organizations that we highlight have used a variety of online tools to communicate, resulting in successful marketing for each.

By comparison to what Hollywood marketers, the sports industry, or even major retailers are doing with their creative opportunities online, the efforts of these groups are pretty minimal. But the impact that their campaigns have had were significant as were the lessons that can be gleaned from them for your marketing efforts.

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Dove real beauty: be the cause

You are probably familiar with the Dove Real Beauty campaign. The campaign is best known for its real-women models and more recently a 75-second viral film showing the transformation (they say "evolution") of an average looking woman into a supermodel.

The effort gave Dove an opportunity to position itself as selling more than soap; they now give permission for women to feel good about themselves and to look and act beautifully, however they choose to define it. More importantly, Dove is teaching 8-12-year-old girls about the importance of identifying beauty within themselves, focusing on the pre-teen years before the peer pressure to be like the mythical supermodel drives them to unhealthy habits.

On the functional end, the campaign for Real Beauty website employs all of the right strategies and tactics. It has a compelling call-to-action, it positions the educational resources on the site as the main focus, and it's easy to send the website to a friend.

More than a year after it launched, the site continues to be updated, in part by soliciting recommendations for campaigns from the audience. And, there are discussion forums and action kits where parents and kids can discuss their anxieties and find peers who share the same feelings.

This site has generated major buzz, and deservedly so. It is authentic, genuine and true to the Dove brand, while also tackling a serious issue with confidence and appropriateness. In short, Dove is sending an important message to young women and backing it up with meaningful support. They will sell more product as a result of this campaign, but that's not all they accomplished. Dove also made it clear to the user what is most important about their campaign effort: them.

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Timberland Make it better.

WE STARTED OUT AS BOOTMAKERS, but we're about much more. Like you, we care about the strength of our neighborhoods, the well-being of our environment, and the quality of life in our communities. We believe in making a difference and invite you to join us.

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Our efforts span the environment, labor relations, service and community investments.
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Learn more
WHAT KIND OF FOOTPRINT WILL YOU LEAVE?
Every Timberland shoebox now carries a nutrition label. So you know exactly what went into making the shoes you put on your feet.

New Tools
At Timberland, our mission is to equip people to make their difference in the world. The following two resources can help you do just that:
Our Service Tool Kit provides you with information and tools to help you plan and execute a community service event for 25-1000+ volunteers.
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Our Community Investment Guide offers details on how we approach community investment.
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WHAT KIND OF FOOTPRINT WILL YOU LEAVE?
Every Timberland shoebox now carries a nutrition label. So you know exactly what went into making the shoes you put on your feet.

BECAUSE WE'RE AN OUTDOOR BRAND, WE HAVE A STRONG COMMITMENT TO ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP. OUR EFFORTS ARE FOCUSED ON ENERGY, CHEMICALS AND RESOURCES - AREAS THAT MOST AFFECT OUR COMPANY'S FOOTPRINT.

THROUGH OUR CODE OF CONDUCT, WE WORK WITH SUPPLIERS TO ENSURE THAT OUR PRODUCTS ARE MADE IN WORKPLACES THAT ARE FAIR, SAFE, AND NON-DISCRIMINATORY.

WHERE IN THE WORLD THE SHOES WERE MADE. FACTORY LEVEL.

Our Footprint	Notre Empreinte
Environmental Impact	Impact sur l'environnement
Energy to Produce (per pair)*	3.1 kWh
Energie utilisée (par paire)*	3.1 kWh
Renewable energy (Timberland-owned facilities)	5%
L'énergie renouvelable (sites appartenant à Timberland)	5%
Community Impact	Impact sur la communauté
Hours served in our communities:	118,778
Nombre total d'heures données :	118,778
% of factories assessed against code of conduct**	100%
% of factories evaluated per leur conformité au code de conduite **	100%
Child labor**	0%
Main-d'œuvre enfantine **	0%
Manufactured / Fabriqué à	
OSI Vietnam, Vietnam	OSI Vietnam, Vietnam
* Figures based on global footwear production for 2008. ** Informations fondées sur la production totale de chaussures en 2008.	

AN AVERAGE 10 CUBIC FOOT REFRIGERATOR USES 11.4 kWh PER DAY.

THIS REPRESENTS THE TOTAL NUMBER OF HOURS OUR 6,298 EMPLOYEES SERVED IN 2008. WE OFFER OUR EMPLOYEES 40 FRIDAY HOURS A YEAR TO SERVE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES. IN LINE WITH OUR MISSION TO EQUIP PEOPLE TO MAKE THEIR DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD.

ALWAYS THE SAME - ZERO.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT WWW.TIMBERLAND.COM/CSREPORT
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Timberland: serve the cause

Philanthropy is fundamental to Timberland's corporate culture, and it is evident in everything they do. Employees can apply for up to six months of paid, full-time leave to work for a nonprofit. Timberland has a model-setting partnership with City Year, one of the nation's leading national youth service organizations, through which the company donates uniforms to corps members, and sends employees to volunteer on projects.

Timberland also wholeheartedly embraces the idea of integrating social justice into its business model by directing a percentage of sales from its infant booties to Share Our Strength, an organization that raises consumer awareness about children's hunger, partnering with the Student Conservation Association, the nation's leading provider of conservation service opportunities, and the Harlem Children's Zone, a non-profit organization that enhances the quality of life for children and families in New York City.

Timberland is best known for its footwear, apparel and accessories, but learning about the company's investment in the community is a part of the purchase process as well. Their website creates an experience beyond shopping, directing traffic to Timberlandserve.com, a micro site focused on the company's community work. The site lists volunteer opportunities across the country and provides resource kits to help organizations raise money, organize and operate.

Additionally, Timberland's new environmentally-friendly packaging and labeling initiative, which includes boxes that use 100 percent recycled post-consumer waste fiber, soy-based inks and no chemical glues, will be demonstrated online. Just as their boxes will feature a "nutritional" label to inform consumers about the environmental and community impact created by the manufacture of that product, users will be able to calculate their impact online

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The screenshot shows the American Heart Association website with a navigation menu on the left and a main content area. The main content area features a large image of people walking with a 'start!' logo and '2007 PLATINUM' text. Below this is a section titled 'A healthier workplace helps employees live healthier, longer lives.' and another section about 'Test your memory skills with Start!'. There are also links for 'Learn More', 'Download the Application', and 'Current Recognized Companies'.

The screenshot shows the 'start! MEMORY MATCH!' game interface. It features a 4x5 grid of green cards with faint patterns. To the right of the grid is a digital pedometer showing 'MORE W' and a 'YOUR TIME' display. At the bottom right, there is a small graphic with the text 'Heart disease is the #1 killer of Americans. STOP HEART DISEASE BY WALKING WITH START!' and buttons for 'START OVER', 'EXIT', and 'PAUSE'.



Start: facilitate the cause

In 2006, 65 percent of American adults were overweight or obese and physical inactivity was acknowledged as one of the leading risk factors for heart disease and stroke. With research showing that even moderate amounts of increased activity in any form could have an enormous impact on the quality and length of life, the American Heart Association (AHA) saw an opportunity to prioritize "adult inactivity" as an issue to combat.

This meant creating awareness, raising funds and engaging people in healthy behaviors. The result was Start!, a campaign designed to reach adults focusing on simple lifestyle changes and providing innovative tools and resources to implement these changes. Start! promotes walking – the activity with the lowest dropout rate – as the gateway activity to living longer, stronger, healthier lives. The premise is simple and based on solid scientific evidence that for every one hour of regular exercise, individuals can gain two hours of life expectancy. And a big part of what was communicated happened online.

The [site](#) offers users a basic online fitness and nutrition program, allowing them to track daily physical activity such as walking or biking and track daily caloric intake. Users can also receive daily tips, weekly articles and recipes. More than 43,000 individuals registered for Start! and to date, the group has walked nearly 6 million minutes and more than 350,000 miles.

To help expand the reach, the AHA enlisted the online support of some of their sponsors as well. Healthy Choice, for example, launched the Start! Making Healthy Choices, which includes videos, recipes and other tools to make it easy for users to commit to a healthy diet and start making the changes to their life.

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Alliance for climate protection: teach the cause

The Alliance for Climate Protection was founded by Al Gore to lead a 3-5-year campaign to convince people from all walks of life about the urgency and solvability of the climate crisis. The Alliance is creating a campaign that surrounds people in their daily lives, through the power and reach of mass media, online and through partnership businesses and organizations to deliver this important message.

The first piece of the effort was the launch of an in-depth website, in coordination with the Live Earth concerts, to help people take meaningful, measurable action to address the climate crisis. The [site](#) presented dozens of recommendations for how people can take action to reduce their carbon footprint in a way that engaged users who have significant interest in learning more about how to address the climate crisis but little working knowledge of the terminology of the environmental movement.

The centerpiece is a collage and tag list to allow users to explore content based on their interests instead of being directed down a specific path of action with traditional navigation. The campaign also featured online, social media and mobile components that reached audiences worldwide as well as event tools and a [carbon impact calculator](#).

The site features more than 200 individual pieces of written and video content and a series of podcasts featuring noted environmental journalist and advocate Simran Sethi. Content was distributed through MySpace, CurrentTV, Participant Productions, Zwinky and MSN.

Conclusion

The rapid technological and societal change that we are currently experiencing (and will surely experience for some time to come) has created new challenges for marketers. Cause marketing has been around for more than 25 years, but the need to find new opportunities for reaching and engaging audiences has raised its profile even more as of late.

Cause marketing allows a company to align its core value(s) with a consumer passion and the right cause partner to raise awareness (and sometimes funds) to positively impact a societal need.

In other words, change the world. And we know it works.

It is a proven strategy to differentiate a brand and build relationships with core customers and target consumer segments.

Executing an effective cause marketing strategy begins with aligning yourself with an issue or cause and picking a good non-profit or similar partner, but it doesn't end there. Online, you have to do more than just post some information, a logo, or send an email to show your commitment.

Users expect to immerse themselves in an issue. They want to have some choice in what issues the companies with which they're involved invest both their time and dollars. They want to see that their efforts are having a real, measurable impact. So, it's not just about cause marketing. You can't just put a ribbon on top of the box and call it a day.

The same tenets of good marketing and communication apply here as well, online or off, cause or no cause. The projects we outlined above didn't do anything super revolutionary, they told stories, they made activation easy on the user, and they aligned their interests with their audience. If you can do that, you will succeed.

Brian Reich is director of new media for [Cone](#), [Read full bio](#).

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