

CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Plant for the Cure will be discontinued by the end of this month, but that doesn't mean you can't create your own cause-marketing program.

By Judy Sharpton

I've just read published reports of the discontinuation of the Plant for the Cure program. It seems cause marketing is yet another promotion opportunity that has seen limited development in the green industry. And that is cause for concern.

Ours is an industry with a unique relationship of trust and emotional contact with our customer base. No other modestly priced product carries the same emotional impact. Live plants naturally connect. We plant trees in remembrance of loved ones — both individually and in public gardens. We seek private and public garden spaces as places of solace and reflection. The most common expression of sympathy is a live blossom. For centuries, the symbol of athletic achievement was the laurel wreath placed on the winner's head. In modern times, Olympic athletes receive bouquets of flowers. And the most famous horse race in the world is "the run for the roses."

For our 80-percent female core customer base, live plants are even more of an emotional statement. All public events in women's lives are bedecked with live plants. The birth of a child is an occasion to plant a tree. A new job or promotion brings container gardens and cut flowers to the desk. A floral centerpiece anchors every holiday or other special-occasion meal. One woman I know recently received 60 daffodil bulbs to commemorate her 60th birthday; the package came with a card promising help from the giver to plant the bulbs. Such communal gardening activities are central to our product's appeal.

So how is it that our efforts to create cause-marketing programs around these very emotional attachments have been so limited?

MAKING THE BENEFIT MUTUAL

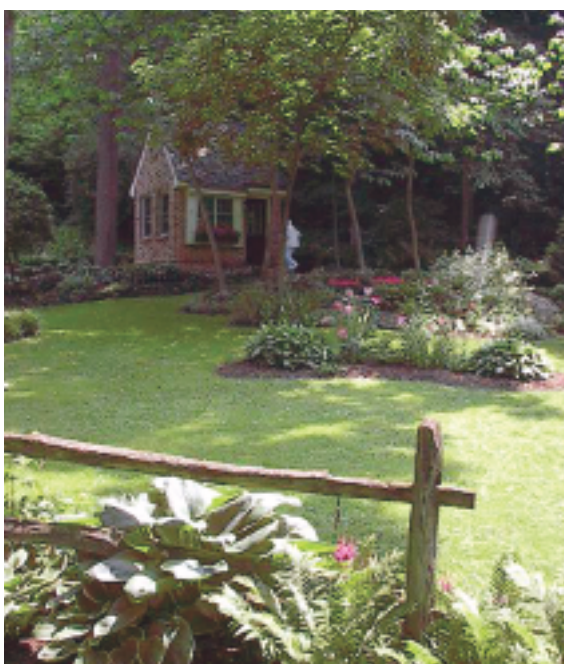
Part of the limitation arises from our willingness to donate freely to good causes without

any plan for mutual benefit. We're good-hearted souls, and we believe we will somehow be appreciated for our donation of plants to the local church's beautification program or the local school's nature trail. We have settled for thank you notes while fuming over the fact that one donation often leads to innumerable phone calls from all the other churches and schools in the neighborhood. We quickly learn there's no future in any public relations activities surrounding our good deeds because the article in the local newspaper leads to a deluge of requests for additional donations. Often the requests become downright unpleasant.

According to the Cause Marketing Forum, the core element of all successful cause-marketing programs is the mutual benefit of both the commercial partner and the non-profit partner (the cause). Much of our cause marketing carries little mutual benefit.

When Goldsmith Seeds initiated the Memories, Milestones and Miracles (MM&M) promotion to benefit breast cancer research, it was no surprise that the industry responded with enthusiasm. It seemed like the perfect match: No other health issue touches so many women in such an emotional way as breast cancer. Although heart disease is by far a statistically greater health risk to women, breast cancer carries the additional affront of disfigurement. Breast cancer is a particularly destructive disease, even if the victim survives. And we're all afraid of it. When I went through a particularly difficult year losing three too-young-to-die friends to breast cancer, my recourse was to become an aphaeresis donor for the Red Cross. I could imagine that the time spent in the donor's chair, my whole body wrapped in heavy blankets and a very big needle in each arm, was some kind of penance for the fact that I was still breathing.

The success of MM&M led to a larger effort with the Plant for the Cure Program. ♦



Camp Hill, Pa., was recognized as AIB winner in the under-10,000 category with a special mention for landscaped areas. Cause marketing holds great potential for generating plant profits. (Photo courtesy of America in Bloom)

Garden centers all over America sold pink plants and pink pins and felt good about offering their customers the opportunity to help.

According to Cindy Schneible, vice president of cause marketing for The Komen Foundation, "The Komen Foundation's national Plant for the Cure program will end as of March 31, 2003." Plant for the Cure is being discontinued. That fact is additional cause for concern, as many suppliers and retailers have invested in the success of this program.

According to a press release from Sunrise Marketing, which has managed the Plant for the Cure Program, "On March 1, 2003, Sunrise Marketing will launch Pink Ribbon Plants — a program designed to help

growers and retailers continue the fight against breast cancer." The release states that two plants from Goldsmith Seeds and two plants from Pride's Corner Farms in Connecticut are included in the Pink Ribbon program. The Web site listed in the press release is not yet active.

On a related note, Pride's Corner Farms is also the source for Sara's Superb Herbs, the sales of which support Easter Seals.

It isn't clear right now how Plant for the Cure will evolve. It is clear the program is in transition. Suffice it to say that Sunrise Marketing remains the source for information and promotional products for at least a regional breast cancer marketing program. Like many other people in this industry, Sunrise Marketing President Kurt Fromherz has a personal story about breast cancer in his family and an abiding commitment to this particular cause.

DO-IT-YOURSELF CAUSE MARKETING

With national cause marketing in a state of evolution and recognizing the opportunity to use cause marketing to connect with our female customer base, I strongly urge individual garden centers to consider their own cause-marketing plan of action.

There are several compelling reasons to do this: First, a good cause-marketing plan can do what any good marketing strategy should do — increase the perceived value of your product in the eyes of your customers. When you remember that I define your store as your primary product, it's easy to see how relating shopping in your store to supporting a cause of importance to your customers is a worthwhile marketing strategy. Second, cause marketing can improve your employees' attitudes toward their work. If they feel they are working for something important, you've enhanced their experience. Third, a cause-marketing strategy can be positioned during a season when you wish to increase store traffic. One of the best parts of Plant for the Cure was the opportunity to have an in-store event in October during Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Fourth, cause marketing is a great opportunity to connect with the local community. The garden centers that experienced the greatest sales



Chicago, Ill., was recognized as AIB winner in the over 500,000 category with a special mention for floral displays.

and PR success with Plant for the Cure did it with local connections. Such connections take more effort but pay off big. It is interesting to note that this local strategy is just what The Komen Foundation recommends; their Web site lists local affiliates. Finally, having a cause-marketing strategy in place is a proactive method for freeing yourself from the burden of donating to every cause.

So how do you go about developing a local cause marketing strategy? I suggest you start by reviewing information on the Web site of the Cause Marketing Forum. The site includes good definitions of just what cause marketing is and is not. It has links to research materials on the impact of cause marketing plus case studies and best practices. This group even sponsors an annual conference, and offers a free newsletter on cause-marketing issues. As with so much to do with marketing, our industry can learn from and transfer the expertise of others to our own budding efforts.

After you have an overview of cause marketing from the experts, I suggest you bring the topic to your staff members for discussion. Without their enthusiasm, nothing about a cause-marketing effort is likely to work; with their commitment, you could pull off a winner. Discuss issues they feel would be important enough to your customer base and important enough to your staff to make such a project worthwhile. Consider women's health but also consider other issues of importance to women: education, women's sports, the environment, homelessness.

Consider how each of these issues impacts the local community. Maybe there's a soccer league or a Girl Scout Troop you could support. They might welcome the opportunity to hold a cookies and plants sale at your

store. Maybe there's a library that would welcome programs on gardening for families. Maybe there's a local job-training program that could use an entry-level class in horticulture or landscaping. You could explore the Plant a Row for the Hungry program sponsored by the Garden Writer's Association.

Be sure to apply one of the definitions for cause marketing from the Cause Marketing Forum to your discussion. Both references on the site include "mutual benefit" as part of their definition.

You might even enlist the support of a core group of customers as your advisers in this endeavor. I certainly suggest a focus group to evaluate your plans. Invite the group (no more than 15-20 customers) to review your ideas and offer suggestions.

If Easter Seals makes your brainstorming list, you might want to check out what Sara's Superb Herbs has developed with retailers in the New England States. Once again, the emphasis is local and the program is simple. The Web site is www.superbherbs.net.

As you gather your staff for this brainstorming meeting, there's one cause-marketing opportunity I suggest you put on the table: America in Bloom. This community beautification program, patterned after Canada's Communities in Bloom, is one of the most promising opportunities our industry has ever seen. It is well-planned, well-tested and, best of all, it's local. (Find out more about America in Bloom on page 38.)

Go to the America in Bloom Web site (www.americainbloom.org) and request a packet of information to take into your cause-marketing meeting. It's a place to start, and you'll find the program meets the definition of mutually beneficial. You don't have to donate plants; you just have to convince your city or community that a beautification program is a "mutual benefit." Since the entire industry already believes in that cause and since the program has national support, this one should be no cause for concern.

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