

GROWERTALKS

Features

3/1/2022

Start Something Good

Katie Elzer-Peters



Good marketing helps a customer know what you offer, what you stand for, and how your products and services would be useful to them. That sounds downright helpful, doesn't it?

If your marketing is helpful—connecting customers to products and services they need—what happens when you attach a cause to your marketing messages? That's entirely up to you. When done well, cause marketing can benefit your business, your community (however narrowly or broadly you define community) and your staff.

As Mark Highland, owner of Organic Mechanics Soil Company, put it, "Cause marketing can be a great way for the cause to receive more attention and help from new people."

That's something we can all get behind.

What *is* cause marketing?

According to Engage for Good, cause marketing is defined as "commercial activity that aligns a company or brand with a cause to generate business and societal benefits." A common example of this in the horticulture world is funneling royalties from a plant to a charity. Other cause marketing activities include: donating a percentage of profits from a day's, week's or month's sales; point of sale fundraising ("rounding up for charity", pin-ups where customers make a small donation and then write their name or a message on something pinned to the wall); and buy one-give one campaigns (like TOMS shoes or Bombas socks), among other initiatives.

The Marriott corporation's involvement with March of Dimes and American Express' campaign for restoring the Statue of Liberty are two early and well-known cause marketing partnerships. If your business writes a check for \$10,000 every year to a nonprofit, that's charitable giving, not cause marketing. It's fantastic, but not what we're talking about.

Why start cause marketing?

There are so many reasons to explore cause marketing, the best of which is that you can harness the power of your business to make a positive difference in others' lives. On episode 219 of the podcast "Cause Talk Radio," A. J. Petitti, President of Petitti's Garden Centers, elaborates on this, discussing Petitti's cause marketing initiatives with the Cleveland Clinic Children's Hospital.

"One of the great things about cause marketing is that it isn't a huge financial burden for the company," he explained.

That's because you're using your business reach to aggregate many small contributions into a meaningful sum. It's exciting for the employees, too, he said. "It's a huge sense of pride for [employees] to be one of the top register fundraisers."

Whether your customers connect with the specific cause you're supporting or with the values that cause marketing communicates (i.e., "We care about our community"), "Cause marketing gives you another way to engage with your customers," says Natalie Carmolli, Media and Public Relations Specialist at Spring Meadow Nursery. "It's a shared point of entry beyond gardening."

Dozens of research studies show that a company's values do impact purchasing behavior and customer engagement, especially for Gen Z and Millennial customers.

Ready to get started? Here's how:

Tips for successful cause marketing initiatives

1. "Pick one thing and do it really well," says Anthony Hoke, founder of Plants with Stories and owner of Silver Falls Nursery in Oregon. "When you talk about royalties assigned to plants, we're dealing with cents not dollars. You have to move a tremendous amount of product to make a financial impact. Do one thing, do it well and promote it."

2. Only attach a cause to an exceptional plant. Both Natalie and Anthony brought up this important tip if your cause marketing venture is a royalty associated with a specific plant.

"You have to pick a winning plant for your cause or nobody will care," said Anthony. "At no point when I was talking with growers about the Elizabeth Ashley Hydrangea did someone say, 'Send me a thousand because it benefits a great cause.' Growers don't have the time or money to bring on new varieties unless they're replacing something in the market, or they're new and have been thoroughly trialed and tested."

He said that for truly great plants, a small royalty for charity won't dampen the grower's interest in adding to the program, but a charity program won't save an underperforming plant, either.

3. Choose a cause that's near and dear to your heart and connected to the fundraising or volunteer activity you're associating with it.

Natalie says, "When you're genuinely excited about the cause, everything you say and do comes across as much more genuine and people will respond to that. They'll be much more willing to get behind something if they feel like the person asking them is invested, too."

Here's how that happened with a plant most of us have seen, the Invincibelle Spirit Hydrangea, and Spring Meadow Nursery's associated Campaign for a Cure.

"At the time NC State brought the plant to Spring Meadow, the mother of Tim Wood, Spring Meadow's marketing manager, was undergoing breast cancer treatment," said Natalie. "Here was this exceptionally performing, totally new plant—a smooth hydrangea that was really tough and resilient, and happened to be pink. They decided to call it the Invincibelle Spirit and donate \$1 from every sale to the breast cancer research foundation."

Since the program started in 2010, Spring Meadow has donated over \$1.1 million to the cause.

4. Vet the charity you would like to partner with before approaching them. If your business is going to be publicly associated with another business, at the very least you'll want to make sure that the other business is ethically and financially up to standard. [Guidestar.org](https://www.guidestar.org), [Charitynavigator.org](https://www.charitynavigator.org) and [Charitywatch.org](https://www.charitywatch.org) gather and publish data about governance, the percentage of funds raised that fund programs (direct impact) rather than overhead, and

other stats.

5. Decide whether you want to create and manage a long-term program (such as plant royalties) or a series of regular, limited-scope activities. Either one is absolutely wonderful and which is right for you depends on your organization.

Claudio Vazquez and Amanda McClean—founders of Izel Plants, an online marketplace of native plants—are launching a long-term cause marketing initiative with North Creek Nurseries and Mt. Cuba Center, but have also gotten great results from a month-long project to benefit the Audubon Naturalist Society, a small nonprofit near their company headquarters.

“For a month we did a campaign that promoted certain products. The customers would get 10% off specific plants and we’d donate an additional 10%. We put a time limit on it to create a sense of urgency,” said Claudio.

6. Be clear about responsibilities of both parties (cause and grower/breeder/retailer). Who’s responsible for spreading the word about the initiatives? Are there any limitations on the types of PR done by the cause and by the business? What responsibilities does each party have in the way of educating the other about the work being done? In the podcast episode, A.J. described how the Cleveland Clinic staff visited their stores to talk with the front-line employees to get them excited about the impact that their fundraising work would have on the children at the hospital.

7. Spread the word! Don’t forget about the marketing part of cause marketing. Your fundraising activities will be more successful if you tell people the fundraising is happening. Get your local media involved, use social channels, add information to your website and include it in your email marketing program. It’s not about tooting your own horn; it’s about using your business to amplify the cause’s message and aggregate many small contributions to make a big impact.

8. Get your legal ducks in a row. The Better Business Bureau has some cause marketing recommendations surrounding communication about cause marketing activities, especially about transparent disclosure of how funds collected will be donated, and a maximum or minimum donation. You can learn more at give.org/charity-landing-page/bbb-standards-for-charity-accountability.

If you give cause marketing a try, be sure to report back with your results. **GT**

Katie Elzer-Peters is the owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a green-industry digital marketing agency. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com.

[CLICK HERE](#) to listen to A.J. Petitti talk about Petitti’s Garden Centers’ cause marketing initiatives to help the Cleveland Clinic Children’s Hospital.