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Firm creates symbiosis between advertisers, state parks

Pasadena-based Government Solutions Group's sponsored programs help fund sites in several states. The money has been used for such projects as planting trees and creating playgrounds.

By Sherine El Madany
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Outdoor enthusiasts Shari and Christopher Boyer quit their marketing jobs to start Government Solutions Group. (Glenn Koenig / Los Angeles Times / June 30)

State parks bring to mind walking, biking or just relaxing amid beautiful scenery. But outdoor enthusiasts Shari and Christopher Boyer see something else: an efficient marketing tool for businesses.

“Parks are about going out, having fun with your family, hiking,” said Shari Boyer, chief executive of a small Pasadena company called Government Solutions Group Inc. “To associate your brand name with something positive is a unique experience, which is exactly what brand owners are looking for and what parks are in need of.”

The couple's brainstorm, which caused them to quit their marketing jobs and start their own company in 2003, is a program known as 20% For Parks, in which state parks give Government Solutions Group the right to sell advertisements in welcome kits given free to visitors. In return, 20% of advertising revenue goes to cash-squeezed state parks to help protect natural resources and create recreation opportunities.

Inside each welcome kit's keepsake envelope -- approved by each state park agency and handed out at entrance gates by park rangers -- is a large fold-out map, park highlights, suggested road trips, calendar of events and other information.

The kits are produced at no cost to the states, taxpayers or park visitors and are distributed in 11 states that host some of America's largest state parks, including California, New York, Texas, Florida and Ohio. The Boyers hope to add about three states next year.

"Parks are that uncluttered advertisement element where there is little to no advertisement," said Christopher Boyer, Government Solutions Group's president and chief operating officer. "People who go to parks have a very relaxed mind-set, so they are open to ads, whereas they fast-forward commercials on TV because there's an overload on advertisement."

Money raised by the 20% For Parks program has gone toward such efforts as planting more than 1 million trees in California state parks, creating seven playgrounds in New York state parks and providing four vehicles to state parks in Utah and Colorado.

"Gone are the days when advertisers put their brand on a wall. They're looking for programs," Christopher Boyer said.

California has been working with Government Solutions Group for five years.

"They help raise private funds for donations that allow us to do things we wouldn't otherwise be able to do," said Ruth Coleman, director of California State Parks.

"The economy is in really bad shape," Coleman said, "and the budget cuts mean that we either have to reduce our parks or find alternative solutions." Government Solutions Group "has been helping us find these creative public-private partnerships."

One of the partnerships is the Reforest California program, which has raised slightly more than \$600,000 to plant trees and put up fire education signs in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, about 50 miles northeast of San Diego. The park was devastated by fire in 2003. Chino Hills State Park also is among the beneficiaries of that program.

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Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Southern California participated in Reforest California by making a donation for each customer purchase, said Terence Fitch, vice president and general manager of the bottler, adding that the program made consumers more involved with the products.

The reforestation effort fit with the company's shifting focus from traditional to cause marketing, Fitch said. "It's absolutely the right thing to do," he said. "It benefits all people involved: employees, customers and consumers."

Others participating in the company's various programs include grocery chain Stater Bros. Markets, Nestle, Cascadian Farm, Odwalla Inc. and Geico, the Boyers said.

"State parks visitors are highly active, very green and concerned about the environment, and very loyal about parks, which makes them a good target audience for participating companies to get their advertisement messages through," Shari Boyer said.

Passionate about the outdoors, the Boyers took their expertise in corporate marketing and applied it to parks. They saw "an opportunity that was untapped" to deliver results to advertisers while funding a cause that benefits society.

Producing each year's welcome kits takes six to eight months and costs about \$800,000, said the Boyers, who employ six full-time staff members and contract with freelance writers, editors and cartographers. The kits are distributed in May and are updated annually.

As part of the company's exclusive deal with the parks, no competitors are allowed to produce similar kits. Government Solutions Group expects to have distributed 6 million welcome kits by the end of 2009, up from 4.5 million in 2008.

But as companies struggle amid financial turmoil, marketing budgets have become tighter, challenging programs such as 20% For Parks.

"The financial crisis did impact us, but we're going to have a positive year. It's just a matter of not growing as quickly as we would have," Christopher Boyer said.

Consequently, they are scrutinizing every dollar spent.

“We’re more concerned about costs, and the whole business is a little more precise,” he said. “Ultimately, the less money we spend, the more profit share parks get.”

Still, Government Solutions Group has managed to see some green, just like the parks it sponsors. Revenue this year has reached \$2 million, short of what the Boyers had projected but up sharply from last year’s total \$1 million.

“Despite the current state of the economy, our revenues have almost doubled this year because we are looking away from traditional marketing,” Christopher Boyer said. “People are looking for authentic and unique marketing programs, and we provide that.”

Shari Boyer said her company’s programs have provided \$4.4 million in cash and services for America’s state parks in the last four years, saving the parks as much as \$150,000 a year in printing and other costs.

“Corporate social responsibility is a big buzzword right now,” she said. “And with what’s going on with state budgets, there’s a real opportunity for a company to step up and do something.”