

Don't Just Save a Tree, Replant a Whole Forest



By Gennefer Snowfield | July 16th, 2009 [0 Comments](#)



Conversations in Cause Marketing: A 3p Series



A “plant-a-tree” campaign doesn’t necessarily leap to mind as the pinnacle in innovative cause marketing. In fact, when I first heard about [Government Solutions Group](#), a company that facilitates cause-related marketing between brands and state parks, it conjured images of elementary school students filing into fields with their seedlings tucked inside paper cups for a group planting. I had no idea of the magnitude of GSG’s work and how strategically sound their programs are in authentically uniting brands with a cause that literally touches every community, every generation and just about every environmental issue you can think of from water to wildlife. Shari Boyer, CEO, took some time to expand my view on state park programs, and share her unique insights on how to effectively align your brand with a cause that’s as close as your own backyard.

Government Solutions Group (GSG) facilitates cause-related marketing partnerships between corporations and State Parks agencies from 11 states. How did develop this particular niche?

We have been working with state parks since 2004, primarily focusing on helping the parks reduce costs, improve communications and increase revenue through the Park Visitor Welcome Kit. Soon many of our clients started asking us how they could become more deeply involved with parks, which we call “America’s Backyard” because they are our beloved, close to home recreational spots. At the same time, awareness of the environment was growing, and park budgets were being cut, meaning parks needed to work with the private sector to continue to provide visitor services. So, it was a lot of factors converging at once leading us into using parks as our primary cause.

Can you share with our readers some of the initiatives you have coordinated and the impact you have been able to make?

In the [Reforest California](#) campaign, we worked with Coca-Cola and Stater Bros. markets to raise enough funds to donate over 1 million trees to the state parks in southern California that were burned in recent wildfires. This amounts to the largest single donation ever made to the California State Parks, over \$600,000.

In the Nestle Juicy Juice “Play with Us” program, we partnered Juicy Juice with the New York State Parks to build playgrounds in 7 high visitation state parks, providing new opportunities for families with children to enjoy their state parks.

Through the **Odwalla “Plant a Tree” program** we created, Odwalla has donated over \$150,000 worth of trees to state parks across the country, and generated significant positive press for state parks.

The American Express program raised funds to build a solar installation that now powers the largest State Park in California, Anza Borrego.

In total, the work that we have done amounts to over \$4,000,000 in value to state parks.

Do you seek out partners or do they approach you as part of their corporate responsibility programs?

We generally seek out partners based on who we think would be a good fit with parks. Now that the word about successful programs is spreading, companies reach out to us. Because our programs provide such an authentic cause and have been so successful, we are seeing an increase in programs from two sources — new companies looking to build unique programs and existing clients that want to expand their cause marketing programs.

What is your “20% for Parks” program? Is this an off-the-shelf package that any company can get involved in from a CSR standpoint?

The “20% for Parks” program is only available to companies that partner with GSG to benefit state parks in some way. GSG’s Park Visitor Welcome Kit, is the easiest way to get involved, and all companies that participate will be part of the “20% for Parks” program and website, and they will have the right to use the logo on their packaging and messaging. For the Park Visitor Welcome Kit, 20% of the profits from the program are donated back to state parks. In many of our programs, MORE than 20% of the profits are given to parks, but our commitment is to give at least 20% back to parks. It is a key operating principle for GSG, and a fundamental part of all of our programs.

Tell us more about your recent campaign with Coca-Cola to aid the wild-fire burned state parks in California called “Reforest California.”

Coca-Cola is a leader in CSR, but many of their efforts have remained under radar. Reforest California was a way for them to authentically communicate their commitment to the environment and to local communities. The program motivated consumers to **“Join the Million Tree Challenge”** and donate along with Coca-Cola to make a huge impact on local state parks. Everyone in Southern California has been affected by wildfires, and the cause struck a cord with both consumers, and the Stater Bros. employees that gathered the donations at their stores. The program was timed around Earth Day and included an employee volunteer event at Chino Hills State Park for Coca-Cola and Stater employees. The final result was the donation of funds for 1,083,000 trees, surpassing the million tree goal. It is the largest donation ever made to state parks, the largest reforestation program in the state and a great example of how the public sector and the private sector can work together to create benefits for all.

What do you think is the most important element in implementing a cause-related marketing campaign?

Connecting the cause to the target consumer. There are SO many great causes around, and the key is to find one that fits with the brand and motivates the brand’s target consumer. State parks are a great cause because they are literally in our back yards. There are over 2,000 state parks in the US, and they see over 730 million visits a year, from very active lifestyle consumers who are also very eco conscious – an excellent target audience for brands. Parks are close to home, easy to use, and beloved by park visitors, and companies that support parks gain the loyalty of this attractive audience. Now, with more Americans staying close to home for vacations, parks are even more important.

How do you distinguish cause-related marketing from corporate social responsibility? Where do you think they overlap?

CSR encompasses everything that a company is doing internally AND externally to be socially responsible. Cause marketing is what is done externally. They overlap when a company includes a cause as part of their actions externally to be socially responsible. The Coca-Cola Reforest California campaign is a perfect example of the overlap. The campaign did not mention all of the great examples of CSR within Coca-Cola such as its LEED facilities and recycling achievements, but it signals to consumers that Coca-Cola is the kind of company that does the right thing externally, which means they are probably doing the right things internally.

I often write about the importance of aligning your cause marketing campaign with a company mission. Do your clients typically have a connection to the state parks you support either with their location or commitment to the environment? Do you think it’s important that the campaign is tightly integrated with their brand?

Yes, in a broad sense, state parks represent the environment that is close to home, so any company that has environmental responsibility as part of their mission has a connection to working with parks. Also, as mentioned, state parks are EVERYWHERE, right outside your door, so they lend themselves well to campaigns that affect local communities. Yes, I think it is important to relate the cause to the brand, and state parks offer so many ways to do that because they cover the environment, water, wildlife, recreation, historical sites, open space, natural play areas and learning opportunities that we know are so important for children (our next generation), forests, etc. Many different companies can have state parks as a cause and not feel like they are doing the same thing as another company.

How does your agency get involved with synchronizing your cause efforts with your clients' other marketing initiatives?

We always tie the cause programs we create with the overall marketing objectives of the brand. We do that in many ways: look and feel, targeting the key consumer target audience, using the cause messages on other marketing efforts, driving consumers to websites that communicate the brand personality. In some cases the causes we create have infiltrated the other marketing initiatives because of their success. Odwalla is a great example: the "Plant a Tree" campaign has become so successful that they are looking to expand it into many other marketing areas in 2010, including retail, social media and web.

Can you give us an example of a fully integrated campaign you developed and the results you were able to achieve?

The Reforest California campaign is a great example because it included retail promotion and consumer activation, in park messaging, web, social networking, PR, event sponsorship, employee involvement, and trade. The program was a success on all levels, generating excellent ROI, over 124MM impressions from PR effort, key account development, and consumer results.

Do you have any plans to expand into other areas besides state parks?

"local" causes. Given the dramatic shifts in our economy in the past year, many people are focusing more and more on their local communities and causes.

What advice would you give a brand seeking cause marketing opportunities?

Support a cause that conveys the image you are seeking as a brand, and what matters to your target consumer, BUT make sure you also get something out of it. There are no free lunches, and there isn't any reason a brand can't support a cause but also deliver a positive ROI. At GSG we are highly focused on delivering a positive brand experience AND a positive ROI.

If you plant it, they will come...

I really like these programs for cause marketing efforts because it actively engages consumers to get involved rather than a passive, transaction-only donation. As Shari pointed out, people have a personal connection to parks, and through localized cause initiatives like this, they are able to join in and see the results of their contributions. And if home is where the heart is, these close-to-home campaigns reinforce brand affinity every time they take a stroll through a tree-lined park, watch their children playing, or participate in community activities. It's an omnipresent reminder of the investment a brand has made in their quality of life, and a gateway for awareness of important environmental issues. Above all, a campaign like this is relatable, and if you're going to relate your brand to something, what could be better than a place that conjures positive memories for consumers?

Photo caption: *State dignitaries and private businesses join forces to plant the first of one million trees in an effort to "Reforest California" in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2009. More than \$600,000 was raised by Stater Bros. and Coca-Cola from consumer and employee donations in six weeks. From left, Del Waters, Director, CAL Fire, Ruth Coleman, director, California State Parks, Mike Chrisman, secretary for Natural Resources, State of California, and Jack H. Brown, chairman and chief executive officer Stater Bros. Markets. Photo, Reforest California, Susan Goldman, handout.*

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