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Mapped Out: Shari Boyer with a sponsored guide at GSG's office in Pasadena.

Firm Taps Business Pockets For State Beaches, Parks

MARKETING: GSG runs branded campaigns that link companies and causes.

By **JONATHAN POLAKOFF** Staff Reporter

Husband and wife Chris and Shari Boyer founded **Good Solutions Group** in 2003 to help California state parks raise money from businesses.

The Pasadena marketing firm, which specializes in what's known as cause marketing, has since grown to seven employees as their niche has become a more popular marketing option for businesses.

"There's an uptick in interest," said Shari Boyer, chief executive at GSG. "Corporations are seeing cause involvement as a growing priority."

GSG is currently running a campaign with **Farmer John**. The Vernon hot-dog maker is donating \$1 for every \$10 worth of its products sold at Vons supermarkets this month to install new barbecue grills at five state beaches including Doheny in Los Angeles County, and Huntington and San Onofre in Orange County. The company has pledged to raise about \$60,000 for the grills.

Farmer John executives see sponsorship of state parks as an opportunity to find consumers in a setting where their products are actually used.

"We want to be front and center when family and friends are together grilling," said Ian Lavallee, senior product manager at Farmer John. "And with everything going on with state budgets, we thought it would be a good idea to step up."

After the park service approves a design, Farmer John will have its logo prominently featured on signs at the beaches next to the grills.

It's an example of cause marketing, which has the goal of helping achieve a social good while boosting sales for a product.

GSG's first line of business is managing park-related campaigns like the one with Farmer John. The firm designs marketing campaigns for retail stores, with proceeds benefiting parks. In return for donated proceeds, parks give sponsorship recognition to brands on park signs.

The other line of business is creating park visitor guides. GSG sells sponsorship space in the guides to companies, and provides the guides to parks at no cost.

When Boyer launched the firm, then-called Government Solutions Group, she had no way

of knowing that budget cuts to parks would escalate to this year's \$22 million mark and that 70 state parks throughout California would be threatened with closure.

"Parks weren't in the mess they are in now," she said. "The need for this has grown."

Boyer said GSG had an 8 percent increase in revenue last year compared with 2009.

GSG's most prominent campaign this year was "Preserve Our Parks," backed by **Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Southern California**. One of every \$10 from Coca-Cola sales at **Stater Bros.** grocery stores during April and part of May was contributed to benefit parks in Southern California. The campaign also included an optional \$1 donation at checkout for customers not buying Coke products.

The campaign raised more than \$700,000 for parks in the region, including Malibu Creek State Park and Topanga State Park, with funds going toward maintaining trails. Also, some beaches got some of the money to hire lifeguards and conduct cleanups.

Boyer said companies donate from marketing budgets rather than using the donations as a tax write-off.

Direct impact

Aradhna Krishna, professor of marketing at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, said consumer interest in cause-related campaigns tends to depend on whether an issue impacts the consumer directly.

"It's a question of what's hurting consumers," Krishna said. "Where constraints are hurting their enjoyment, demand can increase. If consumers can specifically bring something back, demand can really grow."

Boyer said state parks draw consumers that are well-educated and have above-average income levels. California state parks draw an estimated 75 million visitors a year.

Those visitors are the audience for GSG's visitor guides.

After creating a guide, GSG shops it to a brand sponsor. A sponsorship across all California state park guides costs a brand around \$30,000. The company has about 800,000 visitor guides in California parks.

If GSG profits from the sponsorship deal, it shares 20 percent with that sponsored park.

GSG prints guides for state parks in 15 states nationwide, and also sells a national sponsorship package across all those states. The company also places brand sponsors in parks in all 50 states.

"The scale of it has gone up," Boyer said. "Budgets are a disaster everywhere."