

## Cause Marketing

By STACIE ZINN ROBERTS



Doing good deeds and supporting worthy causes is good for your farm's bottom line — this according to Guy Dawson, executive director of the Cause Marketing Chamber of Commerce based in Las Vegas, Nevada. If you've ever sponsored a little league team or 4-H competition, taken an ad out in a community event program, or donated to charity in the name of your company, you weren't just being a good neighbor. You were engaging in "cause marketing", a marketing term to describe the act of donating to charity while also promoting your business or brand.

"Cause marketing is a way to differentiate your product especially when your product's benefits or features are the same as competitors," Dawson said.

This should make a lot of sense to Texas sod producers. If you're competing against three other farms down the road who also grow and sell a commodity grass like Tifway 419, participating in cause marketing is one way to make your farm stand out. Cause marketing creates the impression that your farm cares about the community and gives customer's something other than price to base their buying decisions upon.

Research supports this view. A 2018 study that found nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of consumers around the world will buy or boycott a brand solely because of its position on a social or political issue.

This raises an important point. It's critical that you support causes or issues that are not only align with your own personal values but also those of your customers. It's best to avoid controversial causes (political issues and the like) when donating money from your business. Save those for your own personal or anonymous donations. Instead, focus on local nonprofit organizations that benefit your community directly or that raise money to fund research that fights disease.

Do your due diligence to be sure the non-profit you're donating to is well run and legitimate. Know who you're donating money to, what they stand for, and how your money will be used. Pick one or two charities so as not to dilute your message or look like you're trying too hard to get attention. Be authentic and show you care by dedicating to just a few causes that are close to your heart or the hearts of your customers.

Once you have decided on a charity or two to support, make it a part of your company culture. Encourage your staff and customers to make donations. Publicize your community engagement on your social media and website. Promote it in your newsletter. Give employees time off to volunteer for work parties or events associated with the charity. Donate swag such as t-shirts, hats, drinkware, pens or stickers with your logo on them for prizes at charitable events. Set up donation boxes for the public if you have a retail center.

But what if your farm's ownership prefers to make anonymous donations to causes? In the case of strong personal views that could be considered controversial, (such as politics or religion) anonymous donations may be preferred so as not to offend potential customers with opposing views. But for most mainstream donations like children's charities and sports teams, staying anonymous can be to your detriment. Instead, think of it this way: By publicizing your donations you're telling your customers not only that you care, but that by doing business with your farm they're helping you raise money that, in part, supports your charitable giving. You're giving your customers the ability to feel good about giving you their money. Publicizing your donations also brings attention to a local cause which validates its worthiness and encourages others to follow your example with a donation.

In the end, it's about creating good will. Dawson points out that should your company ever find itself in the court of public opinion, having already invested in community engagement could buy your farm the benefit of the doubt. Customers may be a lot more willing to forgive a misstep if they know you're trying to do good.