

Adding Cause to Branding

By Kartikeya Kompella

The benefits of being perceived to be socially responsible are varied and many. Understandably brands want to be perceived as socially responsible. Being associated with a good cause is a quick way for a brand to begin the tag of being seen as 'socially responsible'. This shows the brand to be responsible and caring and these are indeed good qualities for a brand to have. While some brands are inspired by a genuine sense of social responsibility many brands look at the image of being socially responsible as helping in building brand stature. The conscious employment of resources by a brand to aid charitable causes in order to develop image, associations and identity benefits is called cause related branding.

There are 5 main reasons why brands associate with charitable causes other than from a socially responsible perspective:

1. *Builds brand preference*: Marketing sense states and some research studies confirm, that ceteris paribus, consumers would prefer buying a brand that is associated with a good cause than from other brands.
2. *Justifies a premium*: Consumers often do not mind paying a premium for a brand that is known to be generous to a well-known charity as consumers feel that the brand deserves the premium. The knowledge that a part of the money paid to a brand is going to a good cause adds to the positive emotional component of the brand.
3. *Reduces negative connotations associated with the brand*: Liquor and tobacco brands often associate themselves with causes as a means of negating a part of the disrepute associated with their industry.
4. *Provides the brand with desirable values*: Brands that are seen to possess a very commercial and greedy image may wish to develop a softer image by showing a softer nicer side by donating to charitable organizations.
5. *Useful for raising money*: Brands that plan to approach the money market for raising money from the public often show the warm side of their personality by publicly supporting charitable

causes. Investors who are not doing extensive research on the brand may invest because they believe a brand with good intentions can be trusted.

As is obvious from the advantages mentioned above, cause related branding has a lot to offer brands and therefore this route is being used by many brands. There are several successful examples cause related branding working wonders for brands it must be understood that a poorly developed cause strategy will lead to no little or no benefits for the brand. The days when a brand could merely tie up with a well-known charity and earn brownie points are over and the intricacies involved in making cause related branding work are worthy of careful consideration.

In branding, adopting a strategic perspective is critical. In cause related branding it becomes even more critical as the process of establishing an association with a cause takes significant investment of time, effort and money. Reaping the benefits of the association takes time and delinking from a cause can have strong negative repercussions for a brand and the involvement of the highest echelons of management need to be involved in decisions involving cause related branding.

There are three levels of decisions that brands need to look at and the implications of each category of decisions is to be understood before planning for any kind of cause related branding:

1. *Deciding the category:* There are a wide range of categories of causes ranging from care of deprived children to restoration of dignity of seniors. Categories are wide and can encompass a wide range of sub categories. Within the cause category of care for senior citizens there are sub categories addressing issues such as care for abandoned elders, medical treatment of senior citizens, etc. It is important to choose the right kind of category and sub category as a prelude to deciding a relevant issue to back within this category.
2. *Deciding the specific issue:* Categories of causes comprise of different issues. Issues are specific such as programs to aid restoration of dignity of senior citizens that feel deprived of dignity following their old age. Focusing on specific issues is

important for brands as it helps fine-tune the values that flow from the association.

3. *Deciding the specific institutions:* Unless the brand is willing to create a trust that handles the responsibilities of the cause it will have to depend on institutions to run the operational aspects involved in the execution of cause related activities. Aligning with an institution that caters to a specific cause can provide a brand with strong associations however there are times when brands need to ensure that they are not overshadowed by charities that are stronger brands than their sponsors.

These are some of the aspects that need to be studied before a brand decides to associate with a charitable cause.

1. *What is the relevance of the cause to the brand's consumer segment?:* Association with a charitable cause does not immediately mean that consumers will immediately hold the brand in high esteem. Consumers must find the cause relevant to their value system before the brand receives any approbation. For example: Not all consumers may be equally supportive of a cause that looks at providing food and shelter to immigrants/refugees. These consumers may be more supportive of causes that benefit their countrymen.

2. *How different is it?:* Many people are inured to causes and even associations with a good cause like Cancer Care may neither draw much attention to the brand or to the cause nor would the association be very memorable. Finding a cause that is relevant and yet different would help in enhancing the memorability of the brand and cause. For example: A trust that looks after veteran entertainers suffering from terminal diseases can be seen as a worthy cause to support as it appreciates people who once entertained and gave others happiness.

3. *Can the cause be owned?:* It is normally difficult to own a cause, as this would require immense investment of resources. A niche cause like the one mentioned in the above example may not require huge investments and may not see many other brands supporting this cause. The task of guarding the cause associations may not be very tough nor may the cost of running such a trust be very high.

4. *Will it hold enduring relevance with this segment?:* Some causes are contextual. These causes appear to touch a sensitive chord with consumers and then suddenly seem to lose their

appeal. Often charities in India catering to cyclone victims suddenly find their support waning in the wake of a fresh new tragedy in a different part of the country. Public sympathy often veers towards the more current tragedies.

5. *How will the relationship be positioned?:* The nature of the brand's relationship with the cause can influence consumer perceptions of the brand. A brand that extends its relationship beyond the financial support to also provide investments of time and talent would most likely stand to gain greater credibility from the relationship than would a brand that only provides money. Brands that appear to only offer financial support may be seen as 'forced' or 'insincere' and this could in some cases prove counterproductive.

6. *Controversial issues:* Brands need to be careful while handling causes associated with controversial issues. For example: A 'euthanasia' support foundation campaigning for change in legislation towards euthanasia may be seen by some as a worthy cause but association with this cause may lead to the brand supporting it being embroiled in controversy at some stage of its association if public opinion suffers from the occasional mood swing. While some brands court controversy through short-term associations with controversial causes this could be risky as well as counterproductive as the issue could turn ugly and taint the brand or it could grow far bigger than the brand.

Cause related branding works best when it is driven by the core values of the brand. Like anything else that is forced, cause related branding could prove counterproductive if it is not a 'natural' facet of the brand. When it is not 'natural' to the brand then the cause related activities are de-prioritized and lose focus often with corresponding effect on the brand.

In an increasingly cynical world, the value of genuinely sensitive acts is extremely high. There are several cries for brands to show greater responsibility and to share a small part of their wealth with the less privileged. The current economic strife created by schizophrenic brands that show dissonance between their different actions has led to lower levels of consumer belief in brands. Cause related branding performed with genuine intent can help restore consumer trust and build brand equity.

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