

**Do consumers want more cause marketing or more cause conscious corporations?**

by Kristin Ivie

For the last 17 years, Cone’s Cause Evolution Study has monitored what consumers expect companies to do in support of social and environmental causes. This year's study shows that consumers continue to see corporations step out in favor of a cause, and their purchasing and employment decisions are increasingly influenced by how corporations align themselves with a cause.

A few data points that speak to this:

• 88 percent of Americans think it's acceptable for companies to involve a cause or issue in their marketing.

• 83 percent wish more products, services and retailers would support causes.

• Twice as many people since Cone's first study 17 years ago say they have bought a product because it was associated with a cause (now at 40%).

As you might have guessed, Millennials (along with moms) are leading the cause marketing charge. While not quite the purchasing power of moms, our cause-conscious generation is growing deeper pockets and garnering greater influence over corporations. Millennials now have about $40 billion in discretionary income, and this number will continue to grow. A company’s social efforts has a greater influence on where Millennials work, what stocks they invest in and what products they buy than it does for the general population.

And it's good for causes too. Eighty-six percent of Americans say purchasing a cause-related product does not replace a donation they would normally make. People said they also want corporations to give them the opportunity to advocate for an issue or volunteer, up 8% and 11% respectively over the last two years. So it’s possible that cause marketing will not only result in a one-time purchase-related donation to a nonprofit, it might also be a channel by which new long term supporters are introduced to a cause – a perk that, in time, might be more valuable than the cash.

The Cone study stats might seem to have made a marketing executive’s decision easy, but supporting a cause is not a fool-proof plan. Just ask KFC. Some cause-brand alliances have generated more controversy than goodwill because they seemed inauthentic or inappropriate. Susan G. Komen and KFC might regret ever having formed a partnership after their campaign to raise $8 million for breast cancer (by selling 16 million buckets of fried chicken) was met with [criticism](http://www.socialcitizens.org/blog/do-consumers-want-more-cause-marketing-or-more-cause-concious-corporations) from women, health advocates and nearly anyone who could connect the dots between increasing fast food consumption to increasing obesity to increasing the risk of breast cancer (an oversimplification, but you get the idea).

While it’s nice to see 88 percent of people think cause marketing is acceptable, I’ve definitely heard from the 12 percent. Some, especially in the nonprofit sector, feel a little queasy about cause marketing. They want to keep their causes pure and see corporate influence as selling out. They don't want corporations to use needy causes to try to buy the love of cause-conscious consumers, especially when the amount they are donating is a little drop in the bucket of the increased profits they expect to gain from a white-washed image.

Even if the survey indicates that consumers will respond well to more cause marketing, in reality, it may really be telling us that what people want is organizations that create value for others and are good corporate citizens, not organizations that might be generally harmful to society but then put a special package on their product and market it toward people's heartstrings a month or so out of the year. Millennials might love cause marketing, but they also love authenticity, so they might be the first to smell a brand-cause mismatch and walk away with their $40 billion of discretionary income.

Are corporations sometimes just doing the right thing? I think yes. It's easy to vilify large corporations and assume impure motives, but we have to remember they are run by people too - people who care about profits and serving their shareholders' interests, yes, but also who legitimately care about causes and making the world a better place. Can we blame corporations for wanting to give back and improve their image at the same time, and does one negate the other? The critical point that distinguishes a PR win from a Kentucky Fried flop seems to be the thoughtful matching and framing of the cause support.

One group that wants to encourage corporations to raise both the level and quality of corporate philanthropy is the Committee for Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy. CECP CEOs believe that when corporations design social benefit programs, they should mirror business initiatives in striving to have programmatic effectiveness, fiscal accountability, and good stewardship. Taking this a step further, B Corporations are trying to provide consumers with a holistic good corporate citizen to purchase from, invest in and work for. Recognizing the occasional conflict traditional businesses face between what’s best for shareholders and what’s best for society, B Corporations would be a new sector in our economy with distinct standards and tax status.

What do you think about cause marketing? Is it fair for us to expect corporations to give back – and to give back in a way that we think is appropriate? And should nonprofits be expected to decline corporate donations when they see a mismatch with a potential brand partner?