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Cause Related Marketing:
Reflections on the First Twenty Years

Göran Svensson and Greg Wood

Cause related marketing is an intriguing concept in which one finds a cause and intertwines one’s marketing push to sell both the cause and one’s products. During this first twenty years, developing a partnership had gone from charities seeking out companies to companies seeking out charities. The concept, in its pure form, appeared to be a rare approach, where both shareholder and stakeholder value was increased in combination. All parties appeared to benefit in this relationship.

Introduction

Cause related marketing emerged in the United States of America in the late 1970s as a new way for corporations to increase sales whilst appearing to enhance their focus on social responsibility. It spread to the United Kingdom where such companies as Cadbury Schweppes trumpeted its benefits (Murphy 1997). Cause related marketing taps into the social consciousness of the consumer in a way that makes it a powerful tool in the hands of marketers who know how to capitalise upon it. By 1996, Cone (1996, p.104) considered that it had gone from what was once a successful promotions tool to being “a highly sophisticated marketing

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strategy". In the United States it had grown from virtually nothing in 1983, to US$400 million in 1995 (Mehegan 1995) and was estimated to be worth US$500 million in 1997 (Ptacek and Salazar 1997).

How does it work? In essence, it appears quite simple. A company builds a partnership with a worthy and, usually, notable cause and each promotes the other in a carefully calculated commercial venture designed to enhance each other’s financial viability. The cause receives money from sales of the company’s merchandise; the company increases sales; the consumer feels good about donating in another manner and everyone appears to win.

Defining Cause Related Marketing

Cause related marketing has been variously described by such terms as ‘civic marketing’ (Michaels 1995) and ‘public purpose marketing’ (Ahramahs 1996). The generally accepted term in the literature is ‘cause related marketing’ (CRM). Carringer (1994, p.16) defined it as,

“...the joining together of a not-for-profit charity and a commercial company in an effort to raise funds and awareness for the cause while building the sales and awareness of the for-profit partner.”

Ptacek and Salazar (1997, p.9) added to the concept by saying that:

“Its goal is to increase incremental sales and corporate image while contributing to the non-profit. Make no mistake about it, CRM is about sales, not philanthropy.”

Mehegan (1995, p.32) contrasted CRM with philanthropy when he said,

“Philanthropy derives from a corporation’s pre-tax income, while CRM usually comes out of the advertising and promotion budget. In addition, while companies expect nothing in return for a charitable donation (except the tax write-off), they demand tangible sales results from CRM.”

CRM is generally transaction based. It relies on the purchase of a product from a for-profit company and for some of the money from the purchase price of that product to be then channelled from that sale to the cause with which the product is linked (Davidson 1997). This is where CRM differs from sponsorship.
Sponsorship is when a company donates money to a cause in the expectation that sales will be generated from consumers. On the other hand, CRM is when sales are driven by the consumer in the belief that the company will donate money to the cause. With sponsorship, the company cannot be sure that the money spent will result in greater sales for them as it is difficult to measure the cause and effect of such a situation, however, with CRM the company only donates a percentage of the sales generated. Sponsorship is given pre-purchase whereas CRM relies on giving post-purchase, thus, with CRM money is only given by the company after money has been received from the consumer. The company targets the consumer by using the charity as the ‘incentive/hook’ to buy the product. If the consumers do not buy, then the charity does not receive. Wooing consumers is critical to all parties in CRM.

The concept, in its pure form, appeared to be a rare approach, where both shareholder and stakeholder value was increased in combination. All parties appeared to benefit in this relationship.

**History of CRM**

CRM was conceived in the mind of Jerry Welsh of American Express. When trying to raise awareness and use of the company's card, he hit on linking the card to a worthy cause. He started first with tying the card use to the support of local arts programmes in San Francisco. Amex was so pleased with the efforts in this first venture, that they decided to expand the idea nationally. What better American icon to support than the restoration of the Statue of Liberty? The company contributed towards the restoration fund (Davidson 1997). The contribution was based on 'donating a dollar for every new card account opened and a cent for each use of an Amex credit card, during the last quarter' of 1983 (Andreasen 1996). Amex gave US$1.7 million to the cause and it was reported that its business volume rose 28 percent whilst the campaign was on (Ptacek and Salazar 1997). CRM was now seen as a viable option for companies.

CRM was raised to a new level of awareness in the AIDS/HIV campaigns of the early to mid 1980s. When such high profile figures as Elizabeth Taylor began to support research into the disease, the cause was on its way, not only raising the consciousness of the American people, but also the funds needed to fight the
disease (Davidson 1997). The tactics of brash, up-front marketing by the AIDS lobby inspired breast cancer activists to follow suit. Their issue was much more acceptable to corporate America and successful lobbying and campaigning meant that money started to come in for it too (Davidson 1997).

Companies involved in CRM jockeyed initially to align themselves with a cause. As all the major causes being taken, the focus turned to finding a disease with which one could align. Jenny Craig found that its major consumer group had exactly the same profile as women who were the primary group to suffer and die from breast cancer. The match was inescapable, so Jenny Craig targeted this disease (Miller 1993). They were not alone: BMW, Cosmopolitan (UK), Estée Lauder, Ford, Gillette, Ralph Lauren and Revlon also saw a synergy for their product in the breast cancer cause. As the market became more crowded companies actually looked for niche markets within a disease that they could target. Avon commissioned Cone to find them their own niche in the breast cancer market. Cone came up with education and early detection. This fitted extremely well with Avon’s customer base and US$22 million was raised for breast cancer research in the first four years of the programme, at a cost to Avon of only US$500,000 per year (Davidson, 1997).

Why the penchant with women’s causes? Davidson (1997) claims that consumer manufacturers, banks and credit card companies began to realise that women were an important market and hence, started to target them with their advertising. Market research revealed some interesting differences between male and female consumers. It was found that women were the major decision makers re family health and as a collective group they were more passionate about health issues than men. The market was one that marketers thought could no longer go untapped.

In the late 1990s, the movement progressed past the disease focus and was searching for social issues that needed a champion. Issues that were seized upon were domestic violence and general crime. Ryka, a major female sports shoe brand in the USA, launched a campaign to target violence against women. Their advertisements featured a woman with “a bead of perspiration rolling down her back when exercising which contrasts with the picture alongside of it of a woman with a tear rolling down her face” (Miller 1993). Digital, Sony, IBM and Polaroid all came together to support the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. They produced a passport identification of a child in case that child was abducted. It importantly it was within minutes of the missing child for the Polaroid was the passport for its ever.

The 1990s also saw the concept of CRM expand to include credit cards that were credit cards that the US and 1 in 5 users of such card types of cards were Visa or Mastercard. They were good; the merchant increased 10-20% US$20 million on average and from the merchant this was a good money flowing to outlay US$21 million, but expected a much higher sales revenue.

American Express card by giving US: accounts opened n 1997 money raised, but the money distributed to RSPCA and by 1997 (Murphy 1997). The grand total of £10 million. It was a different way of thinking about CRM from the marketing mix.
marketing by the AIDS issue was much more campaigning meant to finding a disease major consumer group: group to suffer and Craig targeted this metropolitan (UK). Esteban a synergy for the crowded companies could target. Avon breast cancer market treated extremely well breast cancer research of only US$500,000 97) claims that case that women with their advertising, in male and female on makers re family about health issues that linger go untapped. ease focus and was that were seized upon be sports shoe brand against women. Their rolling down her head of a woman, IBM and Polaroid being and Exploited in case that child was abducted. It included all sorts of information about the child, but more importantly it contained a personal photograph. If the concern did eventuate, then within minutes of the reporting of the abduction, posters were made of the missing child for distribution by law enforcement agencies (Caudron 1994). Polaroid were the only one of these companies that got any recognition on the passport for its efforts. The others it would appear chose to remain anonymous.

The 1990s also saw financial institutions and credit card providers embrace the concept of CRM. In America and the UK, affinity cards sprung up. Affinity cards are credit cards that are linked to a cause. These cards accounted for 1 in 5 cards in the US and 1 in 20 cards in the UK (Murphy 1997). It would appear that the users of such cards made more frequent purchases and the profitability for these types of cards were on average higher than the traditional cards (Cheary 1997).

Visa positioned itself to support children’s and senior citizens’ issues with their cards. They saw it as a win for everyone but in this order: “cardholder feels good; the merchant is a good corporate citizen; Visa sees a shift in the use of the Visa card, and of course, the cause wins too.” (Griffin 1997, p.84). Visa’s volume increased 10-20% when using such programs (Griffin 1997). The company spent US$20 million on the advertising of the reading literacy programme for children and from the generated proceeds donated US$1 million (Leighton 1997, p.4). Whilst this was a most generous donation, the question remains as to the amount of money flowing to Visa from such a promotion. If the company was willing to outlay US$21 million on this venture then one can be assured that the company expected a much greater return on this investment than just its outlay.

American Express supported Multiple Sclerosis in the USA through its Optima card by giving US$1 for each account opened (Griffin 1997). This was based on accounts opened not billings accrued. Once again one cannot quantify the actual money raised, but only speculate that it will definitely exceed, by many times, the money distributed to the not-for-profit cause.

The Bank of Scotland, in August 1993, launched its affinity card to support the RSPCA and by 1998 it was expected to have donated over £1 million pounds (Murphy 1997). The card had 80,000 holders. The donations worked out at a grand total of £12.5 pounds each over 4 years or £3 pounds per year for the
RSPCA from the purchases of cardholders. The question remained with these cards as to how much the financial institution was making from these joint endeavours.

In respect to the UK situation, this idea was examined in research conducted by Abram Hawkes. A one-off payment was usually given for each card issued to the supporters of the cause. The research showed that the organisation, representing the good cause, "typically receives between 0.2% to 0.25% of the amount spent on the card." (Murphy 1997, p.32). Whilst large amounts of money were going to the worthy cause one can be assured that much larger amounts of money were going to the partner of the cause.

The Attraction of CRM for Non-profits and Companies

Non-profit organisations always face the need to raise revenue. The individual in a society is constantly asked for donations to support a plethora of causes, thus 'donor fatigue' (Murphy 1997) tends to set in, which can in turn lead to potential donors reducing their commitment to charitable causes. People feel that they have given enough, or are just basically tired of the constant stream of requests to support a vast range of causes. We have all been interrupted during an evening meal for a range of needy causes which, whilst succeeding in catching us at home and getting our attention at meal time, often disenfranchise themselves from our dollar by the interruption to our special time with our families.

An individual can only make, in most cases, a small contribution to a cause. Yet, by harnessing the forces of business; selling on the back of a product that customers see as one that they would buy, and the power of advertising, then each person's small contribution, when consolidated, can have a major impact on the money that a charity can raise. Charities therefore can benefit from these liaisons with commercial interests. The customers can purchase at their discretion and they may use their continued use of a product, 'donate' on more than one occasion. Charities can get more 'hits' per person for a limited going work input from the charity and limited intrusion into the lives of the consumers/donors.

A survey of ten non-profit organisations involved in CRM found that they saw the benefits of being involved as: the consumer getting something in return for the donation; a way to get funds in tough economic times; it involves selling people in corporations; increases public awareness of the cause and increases income of the CRM as they income; to be customers to Thompson.

It would a Ramada group as a result of the communities be supportive of the organisation. A study by Chynoweth (1997) deemed that it not only increased pride in donating to the programme but the intrinsic motivation for organisations.

Developing

During this firm seeking out of the core end, agency arrangements, the benefit of all. It was not just oneself with or a better relate product focus, (1997) support between women and children's causes not only must must also iden
income of the cause. Ten corporate executives were also asked for the benefits of CRM as they perceived them. The corporations' reasons centred on generating income; to benefit a cause and to be philanthropic; maximise goodwill; to get customers to feel good and to improve community relations (Wagner and Thompson 1994).

It would appear that corporations also benefited in one other major way. The Ramada group, which sponsored Childreach, found that employees were most supportive of the programmes where they saw themselves making a difference in their communities by their personal donations and that of their company (Mihaly 1997). A study by Chivas Regal found that 53% of employees felt more loyal to the company as a result of being involved in corporate giving programmes (Mullen 1997). Avon deemed that CRM had created a 'halo' effect that had helped relationships with not only its customers, but also its sales force. Their sales representatives had an increased pride in representing the company to women because of Avon's focus on donating to breast cancer research (Davidson 1997). Employees tended to embrace the programmes and felt an increased pride in representing their companies. This intrinsic motivation should then have increased their performance for their organisations that is again another win to the corporations.

**Developing a Partnership**

During this first twenty years, developing a partnership had gone from charities seeking out companies to companies seeking out charities (Murphy 1997). To this end, agencies sprung up to assist in these partnership searches and subsequent arrangements. These agencies tried to match causes and companies to the mutual benefit of all parties.

It was not just as simple as picking from a smorgasbord of causes and aligning oneself with one. It was suggested that the cause that was picked should have had a better relationship with your company if there was some linkage in terms of product focus, the cause and the company's values (Abrahams 1996). Davidson (1997) supported the need for a product link. That link could be for example between women's issues and a women's product or a product that has a link to children's causes that mothers may wish to support. Cone (1996) believed that not only must there be relevance to your organisation, but that the target audience must also identify with the cause.
Once the cause and the company had got together, the relationship needed constant attention and ongoing management of the situation (Murphy 1997). The company needed to find a champion for the relationship to ensure the continued success of the venture (Cone 1996). This sector of the company’s business needed to be managed just like any of its other commercial ventures, for that is what it was: a commercial venture designed to derive the maximum income for the company from a niche marketing strategy.

**Consumer Acceptance of the Concept**

Cone Communications and Roper Starch Worldwide conducted a survey in 1993 of 1,981 men and women aged 18 and over and found that consumers believed that businesses should be contributing to causes that helped reduce crime, homelessness, child abuse, poverty and hunger (Cone 1996). They also found that 84 percent of those surveyed believed that by being involved in CRM that it created a positive company image, whilst 66 percent would switch brands and 62 percent would switch retailers to support a cause that was of concern to them (Weisend 1993).

Research carried out in the UK in 1996 by Research International on behalf of a charity called Business in the Community found similar opinions. It surveyed 1,053 consumers concerning CRM. It found that, “61 percent of consumers would switch from one retail outlet to another if it was associated with a ‘cause’,” while 86 percent have a more positive view of a company if they see that it is doing something to make the world a better place, regardless of the cause or issue concerned.” (Murphy 1997, p.30).

The Pearlman group in the United States commissioned a study in 1996 by Roper that found that, “92 percent said it is important for corporations to find ways to be good citizens, and 68 percent rated it as very important. One-third of the public frequently bases its purchase decisions on the causes a company supports.” (Davidson 1997, p.38). Public scepticism of this type of marketing appeared to be minimal. Consumers were happy to support worthwhile causes and buy the products of those corporations that it would appear were trying to make a difference to the society.
AN INTRODUCTION

...got together, the relationship needed for the relationship to ensure this was done. This sector of the company had a number of other commercial ventures, formulated to derive the maximum income.

Research International commissioned a study in 1996 by Worldwide, a survey company, to find similar opinions. It surveyed found that consumers believed to be effective at being involved in CRM was that 61 percent would switch brands and 9 percent would switch brands if a company if they see that it is in their interest, regardless of the cause or issue.

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**Issues of Concern**

While the concept appeared to be based on a major win-win rationale, further thought on the issue raises some concerns that need to be considered. The first of which is the equitable distribution of the money raised in the joint partnership. Although no one could lambast organisations for treating the partnership as a commercial venture, the question of the fair distribution of the spoils needs to be addressed. For the American Express/Statue of Liberty venture, which was the catalyst for the creation of CRM as a marketing tool, is worth considering. The donation by American Express, based on a dollar for each new card and a cent for each use of a card (Morgan 1995). Table 1 contains some supposition, but is based upon conservative assumptions. It highlights some interesting disparities between the money generated and the money donated.

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The above figures were based on a conservative US$20 per purchase.

Causes and customers, it would appear, have been enamoured with the outputs and the outputs are to the causes. To donate US$1 million to a cause was an extremely benevolent gesture and Amex is to be highly commended. Customers would have been pleased to see a donation of this magnitude, because they would feel extremely warm and happy about their involvement. Might it not be of interest to them to know that the company had generated, speculatively, between US$53 million and US$66 million for itself at the same time. Also, the ongoing purchases in subsequent years by the new cardholders and the purchases of others already cardholders but enroled by the concept were not factored into these figures.
Consumers and non-profits tended, it would appear in these situations, to place a sad reflection on the large ‘outputs’ in terms of the donation, rather than focus on the ‘inputs’ in terms of sales and company profits that have led to the output. Companies need to be wary of a potential consumer backlash when the customer realises the volume of money being generated for the company as compared to their donation to the cause.

Secondly, charities needed to think carefully about the distribution of the spoils of the partnership before committing themselves to it. To this end, Wagner and Thompson (1994, p.13) believed that:

“Non-profits should enter into contractual arrangements by clearly defining the terms.... They should require that the amount of money coming to the non-profit be clearly stated in the advertising.”

Contracts are a normal part of any commercial venture and obviously should be incorporated into this form of marketing. It is an extremely positive move if the amount being donated to the non-profit is featured in the advertising for the joint venture. However, it should be monitored by the cause so that the use of ‘creative’ advertising to highlight that the donation, is seen in its true light and not one that appears to be grander than it actually is.

The third issue was the means by which some organisations were selecting a partner non-profit with whom they decided to establish a relationship. A British multinational is one company that had a definite selection process in place. The CEO, in respect to CRM, “views it as a specific brand building tool.” (Abraham 1996, p.23). This idea gave some indication to the company’s approach to the issue. The process used by this company is worthy of comment. According to Murphy (1997, p.32), the company contacted five charities and asked them “pitch for the right” to be involved in a CRM joint venture. The winner was the children’s cause that was able to convince the company that “it had the credentials to develop an active partnership.” (Murphy 1997, p.32). It is an interesting concept to get non-profits to bid for business. How does one distinguish between four other causes and helpless children? One assumes that one should not need to distinguish, but for building a brand, obviously one must. If Murphy (1997) was correct, then getting them to ‘pitch’ for the company’s business...
would appear in these situations, a non-profit, rather than focus on the profits that have led to the output and consumer backlash when the customer looks for the company as compared to

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Murphy 1997, p.32). It is an interesting business. How does one distinguish between two?

en? One assumes that one should do it, obviously one must. If Murphy’s words for the company’s business was

a sad reflection on the lengths that marketers will go to make a dollar. Surely one evaluates the values that are integral to one’s company and then one searches out the charity that can best benefit from the support of the company. Companies seemed at this time to be losing the essence of the value of social responsibility or even more sadly, they had just switched on to it. To commercialise the worth of others’ misfortune and tragedy, even though apparently large donations are being made to the cause, was ethically questionable.

The fourth issue centred on the longevity of the relationship and the way that non-profits may have geared themselves in respect to the money from the for-profit company. If companies were looking at CRM as a way of increasing sales and thus assessing CRM as an income producing part of the business, then what happened if the return on the investment was not up to company expectations? Or even worse, what happened if another cause came along that could demonstrate that it could generate more income for our marketing for-profit organisation? The relationship may not be renewed or at worst, if the contracts were not legally secure and binding, it may have meant that the non-profit was suddenly faced with exclusion from the game. The well being of those who depended on the services of the non-profit may have been placed in jeopardy if the non-profit had relied heavily on the relationship with the for-profit in order to generate revenue. As Wagner and Thompson (1994, p.12) said, it is, “never advisable for a non-profit to depend exclusively on cause related marketing income.” Hence, the money from CRM should be seen as only one part of the revenue raised for the non-profit organisation. It should also be seen as a windfall and used as a base for future revenue generation, in case the cause is suddenly out of fashion and loses its perceived marketing potential. The longevity of the relationship and resuming the arrangement may well be a downside for the company that breaks off the arrangement. The company may lose consumer goodwill; endure negative publicity; suffer a reduction in community perception of the organisation and impact on the morale of their own employees. Hence, each side of the agreement needed to be wary of the consequences of a disruption to the relationship.

Conclusion

Cause related marketing is an intriguing concept in which one finds a cause and intertwines one’s marketing push to sell both the cause and one’s products. Was this
just a cynical money making venture or was it justified based on the fact that the worthy cause needed the funding? How were the ‘profits’ shared in terms of percentages of the take? Should we have lambasted the view that ‘social responsibility is a good marketing hook’? (Robbins et al., 1997). It does seem once again to quantify in monetary terms the perceived worth of intangible social values. Whatever happened to the anonymous donation to good causes without a return on investment angle factored in? What about the public’s gullibility to accept this blatant marketing for profit as socially responsible, rather than recognising that in many cases it was just another corporate money making venture?

The reality was that some companies did focus solely on the profit returns from socially responsible ventures and others did not. At least causes that were worthy of support were getting the support that they rightly deserved, but at what cost? These issues are still complex and perplexing today. A marketing tool like this is too good not to be utilised. Marketers from the scrupulous through to the less than scrupulous will see its obvious commercial benefits, however, all of the parties who look to become involved need to examine each other’s motives.

All those interested in utilising the concept need to be wary. Whilst increased in company sales are the cornerstone of any marketing venture, one needs to guarantee that a fair distribution of the money generated is also considered. Consumers may well be switched on to the concept initially, but over time cynicism may take hold and the marketing organisations and the non-profit may well run the risk of a considerable consumer backlash. This realisation by consumers may alienate, especially, the charity from its natural fund raising base. Cause related marketing should be just that: marketing to help a cause to which one feels related. It should not be driven by pure profit motives, because it will be derided if it is seen as commercial righteousness manipulation of the consumer, primarily designed and implemented to increase the profits of large corporations. In the first twenty years of CRM, one could not be sure that the motives for engagement from companies were as honourable as one would have hoped and that causes benefited as much as they could have and should have.

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