

Forces for Good

Retailers and suppliers hope to increase brand equity by supporting causes near and dear to consumers' hearts — and their own.

By Bridget Goldschmidt

When Sunbury, Pa.-based Weis Markets considers which causes to throw its support behind, it looks no further than the issues that matter most to the residents of the areas it serves.

"We lean towards supporting causes that will benefit our local communities," affirms Gretchen Suydan, Weis' director of marketing. "We support pet shelters and locally based food banks and pantries through our cause marketing programs in May and September," the latter of which is Hunger Action Month. "We also support the fight against breast cancer through the sale of our Weis Quality Strawberry cheese cake ice cream, which we sell in October, as well as our pink reusable bags highlighting this cause. We are also proud to participate in the Wounded Warrior Project, which supports our veterans. In the past,

we've also done emergency checkoffs for Haiti and the victims of Hurricane Katrina."

When it comes to mounting successful cause marketing programs, Suydan believes that well-informed employees make a big difference. "It starts with training our associates at store level and communicating the importance of the programs," she notes. A key to our success ... is the commitment of our store associates — they, along with our customers' support, are [what] make our cause marketing programs successful. When we circle back with a store that has generated strong donation totals, we usually find that it was an associate or a group of associates who made the difference. Sometimes, they talk it up at the front end. Other times, it is a creative display or a contest."

Also key is providing shoppers with a choice of how they can help. "Giving our customers several ways to participate is important," asserts Suydan. "This includes allowing the customer to round up



FEEDING THE NEED
Food Lion Feeds, the grocer's recently introduced giving platform, enlists associates to help fulfill its commitment to provide 500 million meals by the end of 2020.

their order, allowing them to make a monetary donation at the checkout or online, or [letting them] drop off nonperishable items at our stores.”

When asked whether Weis’ corporate responsibility activities directly influence customers’ decision to shop there, Suydan responds carefully: “While it is difficult to quantify, customers notice when you are a good neighbor and when you are not. We see our customers nearly three times a week, and they are part of the community. When an area is hit by a natural disaster, our stores have been helpful to communities and local emergency organizations. Cause marketing helps reinforce our commitment to being a good neighbor.”

Manufacturing Connections

Like food retailers, grocery suppliers often have to make tough decisions about which efforts to get behind. “There are so many worthwhile causes that need support, and while we wish we could help them all, Café Valley Bakery supports causes that touch the lives of our teammates and customers, have a connection to our hearts, and whose mission is aligned with that of our organization,” says Amy Armstrong, VP marketing for the Phoenix-based provider of in-store bakery products.

Armstrong is a big believer in making sure such campaigns at retail are not only hard to miss, but also absolutely clear in their intentions. “Retailers that support the same causes as manufacturers are able to unite efforts to make an even bigger impact for a cause/charity,” she observes. “Consumers want to know which organization is benefiting from cause marketing programs, and by how much. That transparency builds consumer confidence in a brand and longevity in the cause marketing program as it continues to grow year over year and donation amounts increase. The best consumer-facing programs for cause marketing have strong visibility at the store level. POP signage, attention-getting displays and front-of-store or front-of-bakery placement ensure the program even greater success and participation by consumers.”

In Armstrong’s mind, there’s no question that the causes a company chooses to champion make a deep impression on shoppers. “Consumers connect with and rally behind manufacturers/brands that are successful and are willing to share that success by supporting causes important to both of them,” she asserts. “Consumers connect deeply and loyally to manufacturers and retailers that truly get behind a cause and give back to the community as a whole. For Café Valley Bakery, it’s not something that we have to do, it’s something that we *love* to do. The ability to be of service and to make a difference is everyone’s responsibility. Corporations are able to unite dedicated communities to make it a team effort.”

As Weis’ Suydan indicates, among the most popular causes backed by retailers and their supplier partners are hunger relief (only natural for those in the business of selling food) and battling breast cancer (also not surprising, given the fact that female supermarket shoppers are still the majority). Following is a closer look at what some grocery industry players are doing in those arenas.

Hungry Hearts

Weis launched its seventh annual Fight Hunger Program to run throughout Hunger Action Month in September. The program donates food and funds to local food banks and emergency food providers in the grocer's 163-store service area, which spans Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and West Virginia.

The program enables customers to donate shelf-stable items, as well as buy \$2, \$4 and \$6 vouchers at checkout, with all proceeds going to local food banks to help fill gaps in food supplies. Weis additionally offers convenient Fight Hunger donation boxes for under \$10, already filled with pasta, sauce, fruit, vegetables, tuna, cereal and soup.

"Since 2008, our Fight Hunger campaign has raised nearly \$1 million for local food banks and pantries at a time of soaring demand," notes Suydan. "During this time, we've also donated more than \$1 million to the food banks we work with."

Salisbury, N.C.-based Food Lion has recently ramped up its own hunger relief efforts through the formation last June of its new giving platform, Food Lion Feeds, which focuses on eliminating hunger in communities served by the chain's stores. "At Food Lion, we believe no one should have to choose between dinner and paying rent or gasoline and

buying groceries," says Courtney L. James, coordinator, external communications and community relations at Delhaize America, of which Food Lion is a banner.

To mark the launch of Food Lion Feeds, the grocer's associates traveled to five cities in five days across its footprint to donate 1 million meals during a Week of Giving. Then, from Sept. 15-19, the company held its first annual Week of Service, during which hundreds of employees from across Food Lion's 10-state operating market area volunteered to provide 400,000 meals to needy individuals and families struggling with hunger in their local communities.

In addition, over the course of the year, Food



PET PROJECT

Among Weis Markets' cause marketing efforts is Paws for Pets, which helps homeless domestic animals through customer donations.

Lion teams with its customers on three in-store campaigns in support of Food Lion Feeds. From June 9-30, the purchase of one Food Lion Feeds reusable bag provided five meals to local food banks in partnership with Chicago-based Feeding America, resulting in the donation of 1 million meals to area food banks. From Sept. 17-Oct. 7, customers could buy a bag of specially marked Gala apples for \$2.99, prompting the chain to donate five meals to local food banks, again in collaboration with Feeding America. And from Nov. 19-Dec. 23, Holidays Without Hunger boxes will be available for purchase in Food Lion stores, from which they'll be sent directly to local feeding agencies.

Further, each of the banner's 1,100-plus stores is paired with a local feeding agency through the grocer's food recycle program. Under the program, several times a week, local agencies pick up excess fresh and shelf-stable items and give them to local food-insecure individuals and families.

As a result of such efforts, only four months after it committed last June to provide 500 million meals by the end of 2020, "Food Lion has already provided more than 23 million meals to individuals and families in need, in partnership with its food bank and feeding agency partners," notes James.

Then there's Kroger's Pour It Forward initiative, which invites shoppers at more than 2,000 stores to purchase a \$1, \$3 or \$5 milk voucher donation while checking out during Hunger Action Month, with all donations collected benefiting local food banks affiliated with Feeding America, which will provide free milk coupons to their clients.

"Through our Pour It Forward campaign, we are adding a new way for our customers, associates and company to support local food banks by offering them access to an important food — fresh and wholesome milk," says Lynn Marmer, group VP of corporate affairs at Cincinnati-based Kroger.

Pour It Forward is part of the Great American Milk Drive, the first national program of its kind, which was launched by The Milk Processor Education Program (MilkPEP), National Dairy Council and Feeding America in April 2014.

"Our research shows retail is the key driver for program donations," notes Victor Zaborsky, marketing director at Washington, D.C.-based MilkPEP. "Early results [of the Great American Milk Drive] are positive, and, to date, more than 105,000 gallons of milk have been donated nationwide."



MILK MONEY

When shoppers give to Kroger's Pour It Forward program, they're ensuring that food banks have access to milk — one of the most requested items by their clients.

Help Give MUCH-NEEDED MILK TO LOCAL FOOD BANKS

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A gift from the heart for a healthy community.

When you donate \$1, \$3 or \$5 at checkout your donation will help deliver milk to local families in need. 100% of your donation will help provide fresh milk to Feeding America® food banks in your community. Give a gift of milk today!

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LET THEM EAT CAKE

The Café Valley Bakery Pink Cake Promotion provides eye-catching color-coordinated signage to retail partners to support the fight against breast cancer.

The reason for the program is straightforward, according to Zaborsky. "Milk is one of the most highly requested items by food bank clients, yet there's a nationwide shortage because it is rarely donated," he explains. "The Great American Milk Drive is a program that not only works to fill a major nutrient gap with a highly demanded item, but it also makes donating milk simple via a click of a mouse at www.milklife.com/give."

Further, the decision to enable shoppers to give at checkout was based on MilkPEP consumer research revealing that "it is the preferred touchpoint for donation collection," says Zaborsky. "We also work directly with retailers to develop custom programs and offer a robust toolbox of resources to help build awareness for the cause and make it easy for shoppers to purchase an extra gallon of milk for those in need."

In the Pink

Every October, countless grocers and suppliers across the United States festoon packaging, signage and displays with pink ribbons to mark National Breast Cancer Awareness Month — among them ongoing multi-retailer efforts such as Pink Ribbon Produce — with many companies' commitment going way beyond a single month of the year, but Café Valley Bakery's current cause marketing program adds a sweet incentive to the quest to eradicate this deadly disease.

The Café Valley Bakery Pink Cake Promotion "features an exclusive pink base created by



Pactiv for us for our three best-selling 16-ounce Bundt Cakes: Triple Chocolate Fudge, Lemon and Strawberry," says Armstrong. "The cakes also feature a new customized label with a pink

ribbon and 'Help us support Breast Cancer Research' on the label. For our retailers that run an ad feature, each store receives a custom-made pink stanchion and customized POP for their in-store bakery displays. The pink cakes stand out beautifully on the in-store bakery table, and with the stanchion and POP, [they're] a clear attention-getter."

It's not just about looks, though. "The bottom label on the cakes include a QR code that invites consumers to write a review on our website and visit our Facebook page to celebrate their loved one by writing a tribute to someone they love who was touched by breast cancer," explains Armstrong, adding that the entire Café Valley team was scheduled to take part in City of Hope's Walk for Hope to Cure Breast Cancer on Sunday, Oct. 5 in Phoenix.

As Armstrong, "a two-time breast cancer conqueror" herself, notes, "The best cause marketing programs are those that not only touch consumers and support customers, but also engage employees and their families, so that everyone's lives are enriched by the spirit of the program — to give back." **PG**

For more on cause marketing activities in the grocery industry, visit Progressivegrocer.com/causemarketing.



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The Humane Factor

Because of their unique relationship with consumers, grocers and food companies are obvious choices for organizations representing a range of causes. One such organization is the Washington, D.C.-based Humane Society of the United States, which, according to its food policy director, Matt Prescott, has teamed up "with dozens of major food retailers and producers," among them Safeway and Kroger, "on cause marketing efforts related to the treatment of animals in their supply chains."

As Prescott explains it, "When companies do the right thing for animals, like by switching to cage-free eggs or eliminating gestation crates from their pork supply chains, many rightfully want to let the public know about their good work."

In Prescott's view, supporting animal causes is a

logical fit for companies involved in the food industry. "The closer a company is linked to a predominant social issue — and the more top of mind that social issue is to consumers — the more likely the company is to address it," he notes. "Food production, for example, is so closely linked to animal well-being — and virtually everyone agrees animals deserve proper care — that animal welfare has become a major program for the industry."

Further, he believes there are myriad rewards in store for businesses that support such causes. "Addressing social issues like animal welfare can help a company in many ways," Prescott observes. "It can relate to customers a sense of shared values. It can convey to employees a positive feeling about their company. And it can generate positive earned and social media for the company, worth potentially millions of dollars."