

## **Giving or Taking?**

It is interesting that as charities are discovering the benefits of brands, brands seem to be discovering the benefits of charities.

There are, of course, a range of options should one want to go the charity route. Some companies prefer to galvanize their entire efforts behind one key independent charity. M&M Meat Shops has enthusiastically supported a charity very close to my heart, the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada, for the last 17 years, raising over \$10million in the process. What's the connection with meat? None that I know of. Obviously the linkage between the charity and the company is not as direct as it could be, but by having a single-minded company focus and being so consistent over time, I think they create a very clear impression that M&M Meats has strong values. It's no surprise to me that M&M's also happen to be one of Canada's most successful franchise companies, as good franchisees are attracted by things such as integrity and commitment in the ownership.

Others prefer to put the corporate effort into a charity of their own. Ronald McDonald House springs to mind, as does Tim Hortons Kids Camps. Approaches such as these have the benefits of company-wide focus, hence scale and impact, together with a much clearer linkage between the company and the charity, hence relevance. The longevity of the commitment and the single-minded focus definitely result in creating favourable impressions in the minds of their customers.

Both of the above approaches are sometimes combined to create such a strong impression that the corporate brand itself becomes at least partially defined by its charitable stances and efforts. The Body Shop is a good example, as is my alma mater,

Cadbury, who were proving a century ago that consumers do respond to a company's genuine desire to add something back to the community. In Cadbury's home city of Birmingham, England, there is little in the public infrastructure of hospitals, open spaces, schools, hospices etc that doesn't have a Cadbury donation in it somewhere. This, together with a widely publicised munificence towards its workers' health and welfare, created an overwhelmingly positive public feeling towards the company and its products.

My least favoured approach is the one currently in vogue, and that is for individual product brands to be setting up their own charities. I worry about this because it can easily be viewed as self-serving, and sometimes even hypocritical, if other brands in the portfolio are doing the complete opposite. Unilever's Dove Self Esteem Fund is, I quote "*a program aimed at changing the current, narrow definition of beauty.*" Can't argue with that. But perhaps they should start the bandwagon rolling by talking to their marketing colleagues in the next cubicle. "*Getting the girl has never been easier, thanks to the AXE effect*", we are told. Girls in the AXE ads, strangely enough, have few curves and can only be described as the waif-like young hotties being waged war on by the Campaign for Real Beauty. But then we all know what would happen to sales of AXE if the ads depicted it as only attracting the ample amazons from the Dove ads.

So I don't buy that a product brand should be developing its own charity as a part of the marketing mix. Damage can be done at the corporate level when there are the inevitable inconsistencies at the brand level. Charities are also a long-term play, and what chance is there of any longevity given a) the longevity of the average BM and b) their narrow and short-term objectives?