

IN
GOOD
WE
TRUST

What do God and social good have in common with money? For some consumers, everything.

Fair trade. Buy local. Organic. Earth-friendly. Closed on Sunday. Manufactured in the U.S.A. What do these phrases have in common? They're all marketing appeals designed to get consumers to buy from the heart, not just based on price, quality or need.

But is it a good idea to use such tactics in your marketing? Photographer David Owens, whose ads and website include a quote from the Bible, says he's never had any negative response to highlighting his Christian background. Besides, he says, "It isn't a marketing ploy."

Owens believes he's commanded by his faith to give God the glory for his talents and to keep his Christianity, not his profession, first in his mind. "I'm not just a photographer; I'm a follower of Christ," he says.

Some business owners see their shops as small steps toward changing the world. Crystal Midkiff, executive director of The Mustard Seed, an independent fair-trade retail shop on Ninth Street, says that by buying fair-trade goods, consumers can help ensure that workers earn enough to send their children to school, get health care and perhaps avoid the violence and dangers of poverty such as sex trafficking or the use of illegal substances.

BY DIANNA BORSI O'BRIEN
PHOTO BY ANTHONY JINSON

For Owens and Midkiff and other business owners, the inclusion of their beliefs in their business models expresses their passions — and they're not alone. These days, most firms include some kind of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in their business practices, which is good because consumers want and expect companies to do more than make a profit. In fact, more than 80 percent of consumers consider CSR efforts when making decisions on what to buy and where to shop, according to a May 2013 study conducted by Cone Communications and Echo Research.

Consumers are listening

Rebecca Miller, 26, a University of Missouri graduate student, says she tries to buy ethically sourced items whenever she can, despite her limited financial means. Some products are easier, such as coffee and chocolate, which she buys fair trade when she can afford it. She also limits her clothing purchases to firms that take a strong stance against sweatshop production.

Miller's reasoning is simple: "White American guilt. It's not fair to inflict poverty if I can do something about it as a consumer."

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Miller also buys local and organic items when she can. She's concerned about the environment, which, she says, is why she's a vegetarian. "It is the easiest environmental decision someone can make because it minimizes the consumption of animal products," she says.

Yet, she acknowledges that she often falls short of her principles. "I'm not great about it by any means. I work long hours, and sometimes it's easier to buy prepackaged items. I just try to do what I can. And I've stopped beating myself up about it."

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This do-what-you-can approach is what Craig Bida, executive vice president of social impact at Cone Communications, sees from both sides of the equation from buyers and sellers. Only 6 percent of consumers believe companies exist only to make money; the rest want and expect companies to do something to improve society or the environment, according to a 2013 Cone Communications/Echo Global CSR Study.

CSR considerations loom large for consumers, and hence they should for corporations. About 90 percent of consumers, the study states, "are likely to switch brands to one associated with a good cause, given comparable price and quality," but as more companies climb on the CSR bandwagon, consumers are becoming savvier.

The right way to do it

A CSR message isn't just for large firms with splashy or international outreach projects. "Smaller businesses are at the cutting edge," says Bida, who outlined these three keys to doing it right: identify what issue is important to you and your consumers; determine what your firm can uniquely do to address the issue and mobilize your assets; communicate the results clearly because consumers increasingly want to know the impact that companies are having.

Stuart Insurance (from his own hunger)

Few firms have their CSR message emblazoned on their company's front windows, but Stuart Insurance Co. does. It's hard to miss the message on the windows at Walnut and 10th streets: "Buddy Up to The Buddy Pack! ADOPT A Buddy! Fight Student Hunger! Food Bank for Central and Northeast, Mo., 474-1020." Inside, there's also a collection jar for the Food Bank that the insurance company matches in donations.

But co-owner John Bell says the windows, advertising and jar aren't about marketing the company he owns with his wife, Ann. Instead, it's about making a difference for school children, and it stems from personal experience. Bell grew up very impoverished in Seattle and knows what it's like as a kid to have an empty stomach. Today, he says, "A child in a classroom should be able to focus on learning, not on being hungry."

The donation jar and his matching funds deliver about \$200 a month to the Food Bank, and Bell thinks it's his windows that offer the greatest benefits in increasing awareness. "Hopefully the window goes a lot further than the donations," he says.



Hobby Lobby (closed on Sundays)

Hobby Lobby's closed-on-Sunday policy is a visible sign the firm operates on Christian principles, and Vincent Parker, the firm's director of customer service and training, says every operating decision at the 557-store craft and home décor chain is based on the Christian principles of the founders.

The firm employs more than 26,600 workers and has increased the minimum pay for part-time and full-time employees for the past four and five years, respectively. The company's buyers also strive to purchase directly from the factories producing their goods. "We seek out and visit the factories where many of our items come from..." Parker says. "Our buyers do not do business with any factories that would conflict with our statement of purpose."

BOTT Radio **(Christian talk radio network)**

BOTT Radio Network is literally banking on that loyalty to a CSR message, in this case a message of Christianity. The 50-year-old firm offers Christian talk radio via 100 stations in 15 states, heard in Columbia at 89.9 FM KMCV.

But Regional Manager Sue Stoltz says BOTT doesn't sell ads and instead sells sponsorship or underwriting rights of six to eight minutes an hour for purchase. When Stoltz talks to firms considering buying time on BOTT, she tells them their listeners are loyal. "They do not channel surf," she says.



Mary Moss Furniture **(customers asked for it)**

Kay Wax wasn't planning to open an earth-friendly furniture store, but customers kept asking for it. She already sold some fair-trade and made-in-the-U.S.A. items in her lighting store, Bright City Lights, so she did some research and found there wasn't another furniture store in Columbia touting made-in-Missouri.

That was four years ago, and though the idea hasn't taken off, the store is holding its own. The upholstered furniture is from Missouri-sourced components and made by Justice Furniture in Lebanon. The wood furniture, tables and chairs are from local Amish crafters in the mid-Missouri area.

ServiceMaster **(gives away furniture)**

In 2007, the New York/London firm Clayton Dubilier purchased ServiceMaster and since then has softened its mission statement to "simplify and improve the quality of customers' lives." But when Adam Kinser bought his 14-county franchise, the mission statement was, "Honor God in all we do." For him, it still is.

Kinser says their job is to help people, and he works hard to make sure the company never says no to anyone in need. He makes sure all employees do their best, and he makes sure he can provide all 11 of his full-time employees with enough work to support their families. He also pays well above minimum wage and 80 percent of his workers' health care coverage — the same insurance coverage he has.

His firm also does plenty of pro bono work, with organizations such as the Ronald McDonald House and the American Red Cross.



Peace Nook **(fair trade before it was cool)**

Today there are plenty of places in CoMo to buy fair-trade items, but that wasn't the case when the Peace Nook opened in 1990. The store on the lower level of Broadway sells roughly \$300,000 in goods annually, with half of the store dedicated to items such as fair-trade imports, natural food, environmental products, baskets, jewelry, T-shirts, magazines and clothing. The other half of the store is dedicated to books, a division that makes sense because all of the Nook's proceeds after expenditures go to fund Mid-Missouri Peaceworks, a grassroots nonprofit dedicated to education about peace, economic justice and sustainability and the environment.

Why buy fair-trade items? "It's the right thing to do," says Tyler Kruger, the store's co-manager. It's important to respect less developed countries and use our social consciousness and privilege to make sure they earn a fair wage, Kruger adds.



The Mustard Seed **(beautiful items at good prices)**

Shopping at The Mustard Seed, Midkiff says, is like getting a passport because items, including clothing, food, coffee, toys and household goods, come from 36 different countries. And because fair-trade goods are purchased directly from the artisans or an artisan cooperative, prices are comparable next to larger retailers.

"A lot of people are shopping at Walmart not knowing that [The Mustard Seed] is affordable," Midkiff says. "This is an opportunity to change society from the inside out." **CBT**