

Cause Marketing

How one marketer's passion has impacted a global team

By Mike Gospe

If you didn't know Michelle Barbour, you might miss her in a crowd. A well-respected marketing leader at Genesys Telecommunications Laboratories in Daly City, CA in charge of driving a number of customer-centric initiatives, she demonstrates leadership and drives change not through speeches and lectures, but through her actions. Nonetheless, this unassuming woman carries a shy reluctance to draw too much personal attention. And so I had to smile when I learned that Michelle developed her sense of self and leadership through experiences gained with the Peace Corps and the four years she spent as a community development volunteer in Cameroon, West Africa in the mid '80s. This same woman would meld these life experiences with a passion for marketing, eventually rising to the role of senior director of product management at Genesys. In 2007, she accepted the role to chair the "Make a Difference Community Relationship Program" at Genesys, a new program designed to support and encourage social responsibility among employees. In this new role, her life experiences have aligned to harness her passion for improving her community and the planet while nurturing that same passion within her colleagues. I sat down with Michelle to ask her about her life, the importance of "cause marketing", and how her skills as a marketer have driven the success of the Make a Difference program.

Q: Describe how the thread of "social responsibility" has woven itself into your life.

A. It's become a part of my muscle memory. I suppose you could say it's Zen-like in that I don't really think about it, but it's always there. Earlier this summer, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit Machu Picchu, the Inca citadel in Peru. I was so excited. This has been one of the things on my life's must-do list. We trekked for eight days to get to the top. The experience was amazing in both historical and spiritual ways. Even so, I couldn't help but notice the signs of humankind's presence along the way: namely the amount of trash strewn along the Santa Teresa trail. On the return trip, I took out a large plastic bag, hitched it to my belt and started to collect the trash. Almost immediately, Jairo, our Peruvian guide, noticed what I was doing. Without even a word or explanation, he got his own bag and started to collect trash as well. Others on the trek also began to pitch in, stopping to pick up a candy wrapper and deposit it in one of our bags. Each time we filled a bag, he and I would walk to the nearest village and ask



Michelle atop Machu Picchu.

their permission to drop off our garbage bag in their refuse area. Together, he and I collected 10 full bags of trash. A short time after I returned to the US, I received an email from Jairo. He said the trail was still clean, and that he had invited other hikers to help collect trash on his guided hikes up and down the mountain—with continued success and support. Although Jairo and I only shared basic communication skills with our Spanglish, we certainly shared our love for the environment which bridged the communication gap.

Q: That’s an inspiring story. Tell me about the Make A Difference Program.

A. My experience this past year as the chair of the Make A Difference Program is really quite similar in that I can summarize it with the observation that people don’t want to just give money: they want to act. They just needed a little help to get started. Our goal with the program is to encourage employees to act in a synchronized way so we can provide a large benefit to our local communities. The charter of the program is “to provide opportunities for all Genesys employees to come together to Make a Difference in the local community by offering our time, energy and goodwill to others.” The first step, then, was to ask the employees what programs and activities they would like to participate in. As there are an unlimited number of ways we could help the community, it was critically important to find out which ways were most important to the employees. If our programs met the interests of the Genesys employees, then we would be assured success helping us to achieve one of our goals of making Genesys a better place to work through enhanced teamwork and communication. We’ll also strengthen Genesys’ corporate involvement with the local community. Our slogan is “Being locally relevant, globally.”

Q: What sort of activities are included in the Make a Difference program?

A: We have four focus areas:

- 1) Local Community Support/Community Action Fund, such as:
 - Providing aid and support for local emergencies, such as the recent Santa Cruz wildfires
 - Matching donations and volunteer for local organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Animal Shelters, Food Banks, Toys for Tots
- 2) Health activities, such as:
 - Participating as a team in events and fund-raisers like bike/walk-a-thons for the American Cancer Society and American Lung Association
- 3) Youth/Education activities, such as:
 - Support for the Russian Children’s Theater where children of Russian emigrants have fun learning English
- 4) Environment clean up activities, such as:
 - Coast clean-up days, Parks and Recreational Areas volunteer support



“People don’t want to just give money: they want to act.”
- Michelle Barbour
Chair of Genesys’ Make a Difference Community Relationship Program

Q: That's an impressive list.

A: Our philosophy is to set up a series of activities that promote team building and break down company silos while encouraging heightened social awareness. We want all employees to participate in a way that is comfortable and meaningful for them.

Q: But this isn't just a nice thing to do, is it? Tell me about the business implications.

A: We think customers want more than just a great product; they want to know that the company that produced the product is a good corporate citizen. This is what has led to the rise of "cause marketing" -- involving the cooperative efforts of a "for profit" business and a non-profit organization for mutual benefit. (*For more on the topic of "cause marketing" check out [Wikipedia](#).*) In the end, we think this type of program provides a key differentiator for Genesys. And, it will become more and more important in the very near future. We see signs of it already in many local businesses.

Q: The Make a Difference program has been live for a year now. What are the results?

A.: Fabulous. Better than we could have hoped. We carefully set MBOs for our inaugural year for employee participation and for our donation to administration cost ratio. Although Genesys is a global company, we have determined that the Make A Difference program needs to be managed at a local level in order to reflect the customs, interests and culture of the local population. For 2008, we rolled out our programs at our Daly City, Campbell, and Walnut Creek campuses with a target of 15% employee participation. The success within the first year drove participation to 23%. And we achieved our 85 percent/15 percent ratio for donations versus administration/promotion costs. But maybe one of the biggest markers for our success is that Genesys employees are now coming to us with their ideas of organizations and events that they would like us to support and, in addition, volunteering to "captain" these events.

Q: Which of your own marketing skills helped you achieve these great results?

A: First off, our success is heavily driven by our ability to plan our program as you would any integrated marketing program. In this case, our audience is the internal employees, but the same rules of careful messaging, integrated communications, and tracking/reporting apply. And we've learned never to take for granted the importance of internal communications, which includes promoting our program and events with posters, "brownie breaks" and "ice cream socials", and very importantly, visible executive sponsorship. In the final analysis, our success can be attributed to the fact that we had great executive sponsorship from the CEO, CFO and HR and because we built the program from the bottom-up, driven by the interests of the employee base and administrated by a cross-functional leadership team.

Q: Where do you go from here?

A: We're already hard at work on expanding our program to include our offices in Canada and the UK. The momentum of this program has provided benefits to employees and the community, and we're looking forward to over-achieving our goals next year.

To learn more about Genesys' Make a Difference program, please contact Michelle Barbour at barbour@genesyslab.com.