

Box Tops Moms

BY DORI MOLITOR

WOMANWISE LLC

When my son was five and my daughter was nine, we would always tear the tops off General Mills cereal boxes and toss them in a plastic bag. I remember exactly which drawer we'd store them in, right under the microwave. When the bag was full I'd give it to the kids and they'd take the box tops to school, turn them in and help raise money for school supplies.

That was almost fourteen years ago, when General Mills first launched its Box Tops for Education program, but I still remember how excited the kids were to put those torn-off coupons in their backpack and take them to school. I found it emotionally rewarding because I wanted to teach my kids to give back. They loved it because they felt like they were making a difference.

Who knew that we were just at the beginning of a program that now involves more than 200 brands and more than a billion packages — not just General Mills brands — and last year alone contributed nearly \$50 million to help America's public schools make ends meet?

The program today engages more than 30 million households and some 100,000 schools and has raised more than \$300 million since its inception. Each Box Top is worth just ten cents, but boy, do those dimes add up!

Despite the program's obvious size and scope, I never thought of it as some big, national program. I thought of it as a local program for my kids' school, and that's a big reason why, fourteen years later, Box Tops for Education is still so dead-on relevant for parents, children — and their teachers. It may not generate the kind of trendy buzz that other cause-marketing programs receive but its low-key style is

actually a big part of its magic.

Box Tops for Education may, in fact, be the best example yet of “me, we, higher purpose,” or the idea that the most powerful brands not only touch consumers on a personal, emotional level (me), but also engage them in a sense of community (we) so that they can make a lasting contribution to society (higher purpose).

General Mills achieved all of that more than a decade before anyone had even heard the term “social networking.” This was 1996, before most people had an email address, let alone an iPad! Their original goal was not necessarily all that lofty, either: Box Tops for Education, originally called School Change, started out as a loyalty program.

Sure, there was an altruistic element, but it was really more of a marketing concept at the start. It has now evolved into a mission to nourish young lives by enhancing every child's learning environment and really embracing education for kids.

That evolution began in earnest eight years ago, when General Mills began to think of Box Tops as a brand in its own right, according to Mark Addicks, chief marketing officer.

“We stood back and said, let's just dream about what this could be and where the consumer wants to take this,” says Mark. “We began thinking about Box

General Mills creates a “we” brand, one box top at a time.

Tops in much the same way we think about our other brands and developed it with a cause in mind.”

However, Mark says this was more than just creating another cause-marketing program. “The most successful programs are those that are about social change,” he says. “We studied other programs, like Pedigree’s Adopt-a-Dog and Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, and we realized that Box Tops needed to be about creating community support for schools.”

The program has since expanded dramatically to create that kind of support. In addition to traditional box-top clipping, Mills is also now partnering with several retailers who donate a portion of purchases to local schools, and an online registry where teachers can create “wish lists” for their classroom. Donors can either buy those supplies for direct delivery or simply make a contribution (General Mills kicks in an additional donation equaling two percent of all purchases or contributions).

Most impressive, Mills has created Box Tops University, a traveling mini-seminar that provides tips and encouragement to some of the 70,000 Box Tops coordinators — the parents and teachers who promote the program at their schools — nationwide. The “university” visited more than ten cities this year, in addition to a national Box Tops University event in Minneapolis, at General Mills headquarters, which more than 300 volunteers, at their own expense, attended on June 18th.

General Mills did this because its Box Tops coordinators asked for it, and nearly 30 states were represented. It’s mostly women — Box-Tops Moms, as Mark calls them, along with a few men. “It’s hands-on and face-to-face,” says Mark. “We interact with our consumers in a way that a lot of marketers don’t.”

He adds: “This has really helped us as a teaching mechanism as marketers because this is how you should know your brand champions — the texture, the tone, the everything.”

This is all very smart and beyond admirable, and yet the striking thing is that Box Tops is so stubbornly unhip. Yes, they’re on Facebook (80,000 fans!) and Twitter. Without question, social media is enabling

Box Tops to connect with its supporters — and its supporters connect with each other — as never before. They can now co-create, share best practices and spread the word. Social media are a force-multiplier in terms of building the community aspect, and these connections will only grow and take the program to greater heights in the years ahead.

But you don’t see General Mills creating zany viral videos to promote the program, putting up billboards or making Super Bowl buys behind it. And yet, ask any mom walking down the street in any average community and odds are that she’s heard of the Box Tops program and almost as likely is an active participant in it. In fact, nationwide awareness is in the high 80-percent range and participation within that is almost as high.

For the past two or three years, Box Tops has come out on top of an annual survey of cause marketing by *PR Week*, in which consumers are asked, unaided, to name the top cause-marketing brand. But Box Tops for Education is a workhorse, not a showhorse. It’s not just about burnishing an image; it’s about brass tacks and getting things done.

A SNAPSHOT OF AMERICA

When you look at who is participating, the true spirit of the program comes shining through: Of the more than 30 million participating households, only about 24 million are households with kids. In other words, there are some seven million households — grandparents, neighbors — with no kids in them who are part of the Box Tops brigade. The sense of community — the sense of “we” that Box Tops creates — is truly remarkable.

“It’s fascinating to receive letters from grandparents telling us how much they love that they can let their grandchildren know they care simply by going on line and making a purchase or mailing them their box tops,” says Mark.

Sometimes it’s just seniors who become involved in the program as a way of starting conversations among neighbors with whom they might otherwise have no connection. Mark tells a moving story about

an elderly woman who lived alone and had no family of her own. She started by delivering Box Tops to her young neighbors, and over time became kind of a surrogate grandmother on her block.

Some schools get really creative with their participation. At the H&M Potter Elementary School in Bayville, New Jersey, students were given a choice between watching their principal and their gym teacher either race down a hallway on scooters or battle each other in sumo costumes.

Big surprise—the kids chose the sumo match. But to attend it, they each had to turn in 25 box tops, while their parents paid a \$2 admission fee. The school netted \$1,000 that night, including refreshment sales. All told, the school, which is located in a low-income neighborhood, earned \$7,800 from Box Tops for Education during the 2008-2009 school year, in part by involving senior centers and other community organizations in the effort.

Sometimes the Box Tops community gathers on its own, for reasons that don't directly involve collecting box tops or raising money. People have also used Box Tops to make their community more fit by developing family fitness nights.

"They showed us that it was not just about collecting labels and raising money, but also a way to get our parents really engaged with the school in all aspects," says Mark.

General Mills is now rolling out a family fitness curriculum nationwide but, true to form, the Box Tops volunteers run it, not General Mills. Another really special part of the Box Tops story is that there are absolutely no rules about how the money is spent—as long as it is legal, of course! Sometimes Box Tops are used to hire a foreign-language or music teacher they wouldn't otherwise have, or to take field trips that otherwise wouldn't happen.

THE EMOTIONAL VALUE

Box Tops for Education clearly appeals to consumers on an individual level—to "me"—in that it provides an easy way for parents, students, teachers, grandparents and neighbors to make a difference and to feel like they matter. It also joins them in a "higher purpose," which is to improve the educational experience in schools.

But it really is the inherent sense of "we" that makes Box Tops work. Kimmra Hingher, brand

manager for the Box Tops program at General Mills, articulated this beautifully: "It's just one little coupon until everyone joins together," she told me. "And then when they see they have joined with others in their school or community, it really adds up and is capable of having a real impact."

That's exactly what the power of "we" is all about. The best evidence of this is that the number-one beneficiary of the Box Tops program is a rural community in a low-income area of Kentucky. Last year, in a total community effort involving churches, hair salons, libraries—you name it—this small community raised somewhere around \$25,000 for its schools.

What this proves is that Box Tops is not just about helping your school raise money. It's much bigger than that.

And it's really smart. The beauty of it is that it doesn't require anyone to do anything extraordinary; people are buying these products anyway and it's easy enough for them just to tear off that Box Top coupon and help make a difference.

This creates a feeling of empowerment that's so much more meaningful than passively writing a check or attending a fundraiser. Beyond the dollars-and-cents value of participating in Box Tops, people also enjoy what Kimmra refers to as "emotional value."

"We're not fooling ourselves that we're totally changing the world," says Kimmra. "But if we can help people feel like they're making a difference, even in some small way, that's a pretty powerful connection."

That's not to say the program is now completely altruistic. As Kimmra explained: "Consumers understand that it's supporting our business but they don't mind that because they know that everyone comes out ahead." Box Tops certainly builds the brand image and sales volume for General Mills and its partners, but it also provides those much-needed dollars for schools.

There's a premium that consumers are willing to pay for a product that participates in the Box Tops program and it's more than the ten cents that each box top contributes to the schools.

General Mills also measures the return on its Box Tops investment by studying household panels and various third-party reports. This shows that once people join the Box Tops campaign they become loyal to the brand that brought them in, and then they start looking for other participating brands.

The question is whether this "loyalty program"

is now a movement, and Mark Addicks thinks it is, albeit in the beginning stages. He frames the program's evolution much like the development of any brand, as a process of "engage, convert and reward."

As Mark explains, "The engage is *why me?* The convert is *why now?* And the reward is *why us?*"

He continues: "The magic happens when you get the brand to *why us* because then you're in that small consideration set of brands. At the end of the day, consumers are sorting through about a half dozen brands that they will talk about and think about as being intrinsic to their lives, or important enough to advocate to others. What positive change is your brand part of and what does it advocate?"

When that happens, a marketer is no longer just thinking about a brand or a category and all the usual features, benefits and promises. The marketer is instead thinking about the brand and all the different things it can be in the lives of consumers. That's not only a point-of-difference, but also a point-of-relevance.

"Sometimes I think we forget what our brands can actually be, what role they can play in people's lives that go beyond the efficacy of the brand's utility and the importance of what it does everyday to include a broader role," says Mark.

If this sounds like a big shift, it's because it is. For General Mills, it's been an evolution of a corporate culture that's always had an active foundation and made a point of engaging in social initiatives. More than 80 percent of the Mills workforce volunteers, and that's just part of a culture of caring when you walk in the door.

Box Tops for Education isn't just another corporate cause-marketing overlay. When the folks who work on Box Tops at General Mills talk about the program, it is in the most human terms. They talk about the parents, the teachers and the coordinators and they know them by name.

The Box Tops groups have photos of the program's participants — standing in front of the computer or playground equipment they purchased using Box Tops — posted all over the building. This carries over to the other brands, bringing their brand champions into focus in a very real way.

It ignites the imaginations of the brands' marketers because it creates an understanding throughout the organization that a brand can bring about social change. We may think that we are just

marketers of toothpaste, detergent or breakfast cereal, but we can be so much more than that.

Creating social change opens up a whole new world of opportunity to complete the kind of enduring, *deep-soul connection* that makes a real difference for brands by making a real difference for the people who use them.

Box Tops for Education started as a loyalty program, but it wouldn't still be here today if it weren't bringing about social change. The truth is, it is still a loyalty program, but by making the goal something moms care about deeply — their child's education — it creates loyalty in a far more profound and lasting way. The goal isn't discounts or prizes; it's a better world that starts in the home and embraces the community. It truly has a life of its own.

Do you remember the movie, *City Slickers*? The scene where the Jack Palance character (Curly) asks the Billy Crystal character (Mitch) a profound, philosophical question?

Here's a refresher:

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is?

[Curly holds up one finger]

Curly: This.

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean shit.

Mitch: But, what is the "one thing?"

Curly: *[smiles]* That's what *you* have to find out.

This can take time, but it is not hard to do at all. In fact it's very simple. The secret of marketing — and life — is to find just one thing that can make a difference and taking a stand.

What is that *one thing* for your brand that touches your consumer, creates community and results in social change?

That's up to you — to us all — to find out. ■



DORI MOLITOR is founder and CEO of **WomanWise LLC** (womanwise.com) a WatersMolitor Company, a consulting firm specializing in marketing brands to women. Dori can be reached at dmolitor@womanwise.com or (952) 797-5000.