

THE POWER OF STORY
Behind *Lawse* Coffees

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“I don’t really like coffee...”

And with these words, you are stopped short. All of your well-constructed arguments and delightfully thought out taste descriptions forced back in a choking cough. Nuanced aroma profiles are useless. They can’t help you now.

What are you left with? How do you connect with this person, who seems so much less than a potential customer now? The truth is, some people don’t drink coffee; and for good reasons or bad, they think they don’t enjoy it. What to do?

This is a pivotal moment and one you are quite likely to face head-on one day, if you haven’t already.

Coffee lovers and non alike are motivated by a variety of impulses. We hope that in our industry taste is a major force, but not all of our customers are moved by this; either because they have had bad experiences that have steered them into thinking they don’t like coffee, or because they truly don’t, and everything in-between. Also, your customer may not be buying for themselves. Crazy thought, right? This is something we remember around the holidays, but often forget the rest of the year.

How do we encourage them to care and/or purchase?
Tell them a story.

In particular, tell them a heartwarming story, involving white knights and good deeds...and make it true.

The coffee industry is taking a system that used to only think of cost reduction, with little thought for the future, and changing it to a system that attempts to make it, and the world around it, better. The coffee industry is maybe a bit unusual in that so many folks want to make the system better, applying themselves by helping others all along the entire coffee chain.

I can't think of many other industries that have come to understand their place in the weave of events like ours has. An understanding of how our actions relate to the bigger picture of the world and the results that they yield. While there may be an element of personal gain here (i.e., we like great coffee, and want to keep drinking it). Nonetheless we are willing to do something about making that sustainability a reality. The causes that currently exist in our industry are arguably a good start to realizing these goals of equity and sustainability.

Notice I didn't say complete and finished projects? That's because they aren't. Many of the organizations below have a way to go to create a better system, but they have made those first important steps into making it a reality; and for that we should endeavor to understand them, and support them when they are doing good work. Not blindly follow them, or spout off the name and consider the job done, mind you; but work with them in an effort to make the whole system better.

It is here that I want to emphasize that while I opened with a bid to capitalize on increased sales to catch your attention; this is definitely not the sole reason for joining in on these programs. The best of them are so good in and of themselves that they need no other reason for you to participate; and yet they CAN also help you reach a wider audience...even that person who doesn't drink coffee.

Causes (In and of Themselves):

The first type of cause deals with elements of good work at the coffee growing level—in-country, if you will. These are programs that work and support more directly the villages and towns of the countries that grow the coffee we love. Many of these efforts overlap in certain areas and fall into the category we have come to call Certifications. While there are many types of certifications, in the coffee industry they mostly all tend to be organized efforts to bring some equality to the interaction between farmer and consumer by working at the farm level in coffee growing countries, focusing on aspects such as labor, social/economic and environmental standards as well as coffee-specific production and processing practices.

You may have heard them commonly referred to, but maybe not always so well explained; Certified Organic, Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified and others. While the scope of this article could not possibly cover the details of these programs (see footnote for links to more info), the programs themselves can serve several purposes to the folks selling coffees with these certifications.

First, the sale of these certified coffees supports the good work the certifications aim to accomplish. Organizations like the Rainforest Alliance intend to better practices when it comes to methods such as integrating biodiversity conservation with community development, workers' rights and productive agricultural practices. Similarly, UTZ Certification has a mission to achieve a sustainable agricultural supply chain—a sort of bottom-up improvement of every facet of that chain so that the eventual goal is consumer demand for products that implement those practices, enabling better livelihoods and environments for growing communities. Both of these examples and other certifications are aiming for similar goals in sometimes different,

though often parallel ways. An argument can be made that some of these programs are incomplete and not yet achieving their goals, but they are ideals worth working toward, and can accomplish much, even if not currently reaching 100 percent effectiveness.

Second, these certifications can raise the awareness level for customers that this work is needed. This requires a fair amount of education and marketing outreach but ultimately this can help sell the coffee based on reasons potentially separate from the coffee itself.

That is the sticky point though. After all, most Certifications are systems that have as their scope very reasonable, proactive and enlightened goals, such as organic farming practices, sustainable practices that cover social, environmental and economic variables as well as productivity. As mentioned, all of these are worthy in and of themselves and, as mentioned, may put you in a position to sell to someone who is otherwise not swayed by flavor nuances...

Yep. That's it. We are missing a direct causality link between these certifications and the actual taste of the coffee...the quality. There is a fair amount of speculative and anecdotal information attempting to connect them but, as you can imagine, proving that can remain speculative and very indirect.

Keep in mind that these certifications cost the farmers money, both in up-front fees and in changes to their methods to achieve the standards. Yet, as we mentioned, certifications don't necessarily add intrinsic quality or value to the coffee, so the extra money the farmer might receive for the coffee is often entirely dependent on what the consumer is willing to pay for the social or environmental benefits of the product as defined by the Certification itself.

Another type of effort in the coffee industry has to do with indirect aid or programs that can help coffee growing communities, though not always directly through the growing of coffee.

Coffee Kids' one-sentence mission statement states; "To work with coffee-farming families to improve their lives and livelihoods." Simple and straight to the point. Obviously the details are a bit more complex than that, however.

Their method for fulfilling their mission is by supporting Latin American coffee-growing communities in a broader sustainable sense. Helping them form infrastructure that goes beyond growing coffee, but also encompasses microcredit for programs, training and investment in secondary crops and other businesses, education, health awareness and more. All this acts as a catalyst to reduce their dependence on the volatile coffee market, thus allowing them solid ground to stand on and grow coffee with an eye on quality and not subsistence need. Some funding for Coffee Kids comes from the coffee industry selling coffee; so that connection is still there, but the money that makes it back to these communities does more than just allow the farmer to grow the next coffee crop.

Other programs such as OPTCO's Café Femenino Coffee Project, a social program for women coffee growers in rural communities around the world, is similar in that selling coffee helps raise money. Like the Coffee Kids Program, that money goes back to women-organized and run co-ops to make them stronger in a more holistic sense, not just as it relates to coffee. To date, as an example, the effort in Peru has helped improve community economies, diets, sanitation, and infrastructure. This, with the emphasis on aiding women producers and involving the women themselves in finding ideas that would improve the conditions of their lives, helps them succeed in a male-dominated culture.

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Cause Coffees



By purchasing coffee with a company suited for these ventures you can theoretically empower farmers by giving them a fair price for their great product, if that is in truth happening, and also give charitable organizations, local, national and beyond, a chance to serve a cause with the proceeds from the coffee.

Another type of cause gives back to the people and places of coffee origin but can come from any area of the coffee industry, such as importers, roasters and even retailers.

Grounds for Health is one such program, created to bring women's health care to coffee growing communities. They are currently focused on cervical cancer prevention. It does so by facilitating partnerships between coffee companies, coffee cooperatives in coffee-producing countries and local health organizations. After securing a commitment from coffee growing co-operatives, with the financial support of the coffee industry, Grounds for Health makes a three-year commitment to bring technical assistance, training and medical equipment to the community. The financial support is gained through donations, as well as an online auction. The auction receives coffee donations from producers and importers that roasters and importers bid on (and retailers subsequently buy and sell), where all proceeds go to the cause. Retailers can also choose to continue the good work by setting up a coffee promotion and sending proceeds to the organization.

Roaster/buyer direct relationships can be a way to support coffee growing communities too, though this idea is not as clearly defined, company to company. Some companies have made an effort to be transparent in at least some if not all of their direct buying actions, and the level of support to the farmer varies from company to company. There is good reason to believe though that the honest efforts of a roaster or importer can be a boon to the farmers they choose to work with, giving them a margin of security in a volatile industry. It can also potentially be a conversation based on the quality of the coffee, something not directly linked in some of the other causes mentioned above.

The Cup of Excellence program may be, to my mind, one of the few that connects many of the goals mentioned in other certifications—some directly and some indirectly—to the quality of the coffee itself. This is a program that reviews a large number of coffee submissions a country has to offer and the best are chosen by a select group of national and international cuppers. These coffees are cupped at least five different times during the competition process and the final winners are awarded the prestigious Cup of Excellence, then sold to the highest bidder during an Internet auction. Approximately 85 percent of the proceeds for these unusually high-priced and valued coffees goes directly back to the growers as continual incentive to

grow for quality as opposed to strictly for volume. As stated by the organization, "The positive impact on the quality of life for a winning farmer and his family is permanent as the auction money will often be spent on farm improvements or family education, which can change their economic livelihood for the long term even if they do not win every year."

Buying and selling these coffees keeps the demand up for the highest quality coffee from a given country, and allows the program to continue to improve coffee farmers' lives and increase the amount of quality coffee that is grown.

A less specific and largely non-coffee related cause is Non-Profit Fundraising. Many companies will help non-profits and other organizations raise money by supplying coffee at a discount to sell and support a cause, others will donate to a cause with your purchase of the coffee and can even connect you to a cause if you don't have one in mind.

There are many associations, clubs and groups looking for a way to raise money for a worthwhile project. These groups may be looking for a way to travel to help the underprivileged, improve the environment, raise funds for the Parks system, fund their local club's chapter, or aid in the research of diseases.

By purchasing coffee with a company raising money for non-profits you can theoretically empower farmers by giving them a fair price for their great product, and also make a donation to a charitable organization, all through the purchase of a single cup of coffee.

So with all these options (and more...) available for you to involve yourself and your company with, why would you? For the sake of the cause of course. What's more, they can actually help you market and sell coffee to a larger population of customers, reaching people who aren't as "into" coffee as you are or some who just plain don't care for it. In return, you buy more of the coffee that is helping you sell more—thus keeping that big wheel turning.

Along the way if you can find a way to drum up some more money for the cause, say with a separate tip jar or an event, that too will help the cause and help farmers focus on growing coffee, hopefully great coffee, as opposed to having to worry about clean water, education and the future of their families.

Is it a win-win? Absolutely.

Resource List:

<http://www.groundsforhealth.org/>
www.cupofexcellence.org
<http://www.cafefemenino.com/>
<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=ORGANIC.CERTIFICATIO>
<http://www.utzcertified.org/index.php>
<http://www.coffeekids.org/>
<http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/>



Scott Conary co-founded the acclaimed Open Eye Cafe in 1999 and Caffe Driade in 2000, and has more than 16 years experience in the specialty coffee industry. His obsession with discovering and roasting phenomenal coffee transitioned into direct working relationships with farmers and producers as Carrboro Coffee Roasters. Along the way, Scott has worked as a barista, green coffee buyer, roaster, Cup of Excellence coffee taster and World Barista Championship head judge and trainer. Scott is the current Chair of the USBC Committee, and serves on the WCE/WBC Committee. He is an SCAA Certified Lead Instructor and BGA Level 1 Certifier.