

The Red Campaign: Are we really feeling the pain?

by Ian Fowler

“Do They Know It’s Christmas” was the top tune two decades ago as Bob Geldof mounted an in-your-face campaign to get the world to care about the devastating famine in Ethiopia. Now, it’s Saint Bono urging us to help fight HIV/AIDS and shop-‘til-we-drop, but the campaign’s tune could almost be “Do they even know the charity?”

The sight of Bono and Oprah launching a \$200 “RED” i-Pod as part of the eponymous campaign is a long way from the haunting image of a vulture near a bloated, starving child – images we saw back in the Ethiopian crisis and, most recently, in the campaign to bring attention to the suffering Darfur region in Somalia. Both the RED and The Gap campaigns are big productions inviting consumers to join celebrities in consuming and caring, but what the caring is actually for is in pretty small print. Recent sales figures indicate (including a dismal holiday performance) The Gap has failed to connect with a new generation of consumers. As the *New York Times* stated in a recent article on The Gap “consumers appeared more confused than intrigued by the incessant changes...” By attaching itself to the fickle world of fashion, the RED campaign could be in danger of becoming last year’s trend.

The quick retort of course is “does it matter?” It’s all about the money and impact and there’s little doubt that Africa has never been an easy sell-in. (Full disclosure, I served on the board of the Smithsonian Museum of African Art) St. Bob has now completed a six part television series traveling across Africa to be shown on the BBC, and his ongoing commitment to focusing on the continent and its people is clearly evident – and applauded.

Bono has been a striking figure in forcing change in the politics of debt relief for the world’s poorest countries and his ability to bring attention to the needy is huge. Cause-related marketing can be great work by any standards of advertising, but

the RED brand launch here in the U.S. comes across almost as if the brand, and identification with it, is greater than the cause. And a ten dollar donation from the purchase of a \$199 i-Pod?. Feel the pain.

So Awakening Consumers need to be especially awake when it comes to these new cause-related marketing campaigns. Ultimately, the proof will be in just how much product sells. Right now the jury is out.

Editor’s Note: as this issue went to press, an article in Advertising Age claimed the Global Fund (the organization on the receiving end of the RED campaign) had received a “meager” \$18 million in contributions on an initial media spend of approximately \$100 million. Read the article here: http://adage.com/article?article_id=115287

Read Bobby Shriver’s (CEO,RED) response to the Ad Age article: http://www.joinred.com/ad_age.asp