

Guerilla Marketing in Isla Vista

Marketing with a small budget and a large imagination

BY MELISSA COHEN

In his 1984 book, Jay Conrad Levinson introduced the general public to *Guerilla Marketing*, coining a term that would become synonymous in the business realm with promotions derived from “time, energy, and imagination, rather than a big marketing budget” (source: Wikipedia). He suggested the employment of new PR elements such as street giveaways and stunts, with achieved goals offering new ways to measure “redemption rates” and “target markets”—psychological interceptions that could be measured face-to-face, leading to person-specific tailored marketing techniques. And more people buying your stuff.

But before there was a book, there was a co-op. And in the co-op world, it’s pretty clear that things are done differently. Imagine a group of thoughtful, committed citizens who feel they could change the world. They decide that their activism will encompass food: purchasing and distributing outside the confines of the corporate system, organizing food orders in an apartment and pickups at a park, then opening a store so more people could become part of their experiment in food sovereignty. Decades are spent working to become a mainstay in a community known more for transients than long-term residents.

Rooted in a community with no roots

That is where we will begin: with the conundrum of what to do when a business has become rooted in a community, but the community has virtually no roots. Welcome to Isla Vista, Calif., the seaside town adjacent to the University of California at Santa Barbara, where, in 1970, a bank burned down and a community rose up, and, in 2002, a co-op almost burned down, closed its doors for three months, and had to rise up all over again.

When my position of marketing and outreach manager was created in September 2006, there wasn’t much to work with. Much of the small budget had been spent on traditional methods of advertising such as print ads, sponsoring local political groups, and basic member services (including the now-banned keg at the annual owners’ meeting). While this method had proven itself in earlier years, the destructive nature of the fire, which closed our doors long enough to allow long-term loyal customers



Melissa Cohen takes a spin on Isla Vista Co-op’s yellow trike.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ISLA VISTA FOOD CO-OP

The co-op looks at incoming freshmen as the gold at the beginning of the rainbow.

to form other shopping habits, ultimately forced this new marketing manager to look at other ways of engaging everyone who was still walking, skating, and biking by our doors—and putting on the back burner those shoppers who had found new loyalties in other places. Enter, “Hi, have you been to the co-op before?”—a tactic aimed directly at the short-term student population of alternate transporters.

Of course, our co-op still benefits from the support of longtime shoppers, but it just happens that we are located in the middle of a bustling college town, which generates a lot of foot traffic connected to small basket purchasing (and the bulk of our customer count). It is the students who are the focus of our marketing

efforts at this time. A point should be made that our co-op has seen consistent double-digit-percentage growth each quarter since our new marketing program rolled out, with \$20,000 budgeted for all marketing expenses each year.

The co-op looks at incoming freshmen as the gold at the beginning of the rainbow. They are our best bet for long-term shoppers (three to four years), and we focus on engaging them. The co-op’s services are offered to Resident Advisors (RAs) for active programs and tastings in the residential halls. After we opened up the co-op to regular communication with RAs, we no longer footed the bill for these events. Now, we offer short presentations on a variety of requested topics, and they pay us to advertise our goods and our store!

Once we found success with this format, the same concept was replicated around Santa Barbara County, from co-op preschool parents’ nights to local Parent-Teacher Association meetings. It may not be completely groundbreaking,

but any accrued dollars are put right back into our marketing budget and some of our more harebrained schemes. We see a good return rate from people who meet us in the community and then come to the store.

This brings us to the basic tenet of our co-op's guerilla marketing mandate: what we could pay for a print ad will buy a significant amount of fresh local organic produce and top-selling snacks. This focus has allowed us to capitalize on a much-noticed area of advertising: we feed people high-quality food for free, and for that, we become even more of a trusted resource. People love free food.

Free food is found at every information table where the co-op wriggles itself in, around 50 per year—strategically staffed to reflect the demographic where we are stationed that day. There is no better advertisement than a smiling cooperator pumping up potential customers and handing out healthful snacks.

We also partner with the university and well-funded campus organizations. The co-op sponsors like-minded groups (at 5–10 percent off their monthly invoices), and in return they spend thousands of dollars over the course of the year to offer snacks (beyond the ubiquitous pizza) at their meetings. The co-op gets mentioned at every meeting, and several organizations also use us as a pre-event meeting area—bringing students straight to our door to buy trail mix and granola before a hike, or food for days of camping. This concept has been replicated to nonstudent community organizations as well, with much success.

Other schools and groups also work with us to plan large-scale camping trips and festival booths—not necessarily groundbreaking in some towns, but we need to give people from the neighboring cities a reason to brave the Isla Vista pedestrian traffic and check us out. This tactic fares significantly better than any print ad: the personal service of custom camping trip planning for 50 of your students and parents is a breath of fresh mountain air right here in our seaside town.

Use your imagination

Imagine you're back in college. You're on your way to class, balancing on your skateboard. You approach the thoroughfare of campus and see something up ahead, something causing people to stop on their rush to class. You get closer and a smiling college-aged young woman starts running toward you with a tote bag in her outstretched hand. She says, "Free food from the Isla Vista Food Co-op! Even local tangerines!" She shoves it into your hand and is off to the next unsuspecting passerby. You are still moving toward campus, but now you have coconut ■>

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The thousand tote bag giveaway was a plan hatched by our general manager a few years ago, and it has become a staple of our guerilla program. The first year, we footed the bill for branded tote bags and snacks, costing around 4,000 well-spent dollars. Last year, I switched to purple co-op tote bags, made cold calls to Co-op Advantage Program suppliers touting our precious college-student demographic, and reduced the entire event's cost to \$1,000. Pair that with a core of volunteer-owners who spend roughly three days assembling the bags, plus those who think that giving out free tote bags is more fun than receiving one, and you have the makings of a word-of-mouth advertising explosion. Each bag contains coupons for free items that can be redeemed at the co-op, so we can track the return rate easily.

We have more people than can be counted walking in looking for free bags after seeing the sea of purple on campus, and all we say is, "We're there, then we're gone. If you're lucky, you'll catch us. If not, try again next year." A thousand bags handed out over the course of three days. Total handout time: less than 45 minutes. The benefit of word-of-mouth advertising that continues until the next year's handout? Priceless.

But how do we keep the masses intrigued until the next thousand tote bags? Enter the Yellow Trike. We partnered with our local bike kitchen, Bici Centro, and traded a future event sponsorship for wholesale pricing (and free labor) to put together our dream tricycle. The Yellow Trike program is still in its infancy, but

the general idea has been implemented experimentally this past school year. It's a multi-purpose concept.

Part One: driving onto campus is a nightmare. And we're a county-certified green business. So, I decided that the only way to travel onto campus was by bike, and if I'm spending time riding to and from campus, I might as well be advertising the co-op. My old bike trailer wasn't going to cut it, but perhaps an adult woman riding a tall yellow trike would draw the attention that I was seeking. Part Two: change the purpose of the tricycle from a form of transportation to a traveling co-op show on wheels.

We are currently using the yellow trike for the skeleton of the program: a team goes onto campus with the trike and free snacks with maps to the co-op stapled to them. We infiltrate different pockets of campus, again with the hook, "Hi, have you been to the co-op?" followed by, "Have a free snack on us." This method of roving advertising generates a ton of buzz (the snack-and-map program has been used for the past few years, the trike is new and adds extra mobility and efficiency). The goal for summer is to build a custom trike cart to haul more, and to make it as identifiable as our store is. Find the trike, get a free snack. As summer rolls in, the roaming trike will move beyond the confines of campus and out into town, where we'll set up a moveable produce, lemonade, or ice cream stand, ready to make the day of another unsuspecting passerby.

We've tackled the short-term giveaway, but what about the "we're here, we're hanging out, then we're gone" event that is meant to draw in a large crowd for an extended period of time and then disappear as quickly as it appeared?

Perhaps the best example I can give is the Co-op Country Fair, an event that was first planned as a way of getting owners to actually attend a keg-less annual meeting. It wasn't meant as a guerilla tactic, but after all was said, done, and gone over the course of six hours, the tune changed. Turning the street in front of the co-op into a full-blown pie-eating, bake-off, goat-poop-bingo, and washboard-playing Country Fair brought us more attention than even the best advertising run could expect. Over a thousand people came to our party, shopped in our store, and left shaking their heads in confusion about why there were turkeys mingling with people teaching a bike-tuneup workshop. It was a resounding success! And then it was gone, with no evidence that it had ever been there. A lone college-aged student walked up, asking, "Wasn't there just a fair happening here a half-hour ago? I just went home to tell my friends, but now it's gone. And I really wanted to pet that goat, I can't believe there were goats in Isla Vista."

Well, that's why guerilla marketing is so amazing: it always leaves you scratching your head, wondering if what you saw was really there, or if what you know was there is going to come back soon. And it will come back, just in a different form, at a different time, in a different place. But rest assured that people will wander into the co-op just to verify this, with friends in tow. They'll leave with a free recipe card or sample in one hand and a bag of purchases in the other, laughing at the silly sandwich names, puzzling over the character ringing them up. And they'll come back for more, until they graduate and move away, and the four-year cycle continues. ■

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