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I chronicle the growth of New Belgium Brewing, a leading craft brewery

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When Giving Back Goes Awry In Business

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New Belgium Brewing has been known for its generosity ever since its inception in 1991. Right from the start founders Kim Jordan and Jeff Lebesch made it a point to undertake a variety of philanthropic efforts ranging from donating \$1 for every barrel of beer they produce to hosting epic bicycle-themed parades and film festivals. As a whole, the company gives away more than \$1 million each year to support causes it believes in.

New Belgium relies on a cross-departmental committee composed of one full-time co-worker along with a team of volunteers to review grant applications they receive throughout the year to help decide who the brewery will help support with its money. Historically, the money they have given has been split fairly equally between four different categories: healthy watersheds, smart transportation, sustainable agriculture, and environmental education.

“We give dollars to groups that do everything from plant trees to advocate for safer bike lanes,” says Bryan Simpson, who has worked at New Belgium since 1997 and now heads up PR for the brewery.

But Simpson says that the company has learned that there can be unexpected downsides to supporting a good cause. Case in point: There is currently a boycott of New Belgium beer underway in the town of Craig, CO., as a result of money the brewery gave to an environmental advocacy group.

The root of the trouble in this case actually began back in 2008, which was when New Belgium awarded an organization called WildEarth Guardians, which is based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with \$3,000 in their efforts to revitalize damaged waterways in Colorado.

New Belgium awarded WildEarth Guardians two subsequent grants, one for \$1,000 in 2011 and another for \$5,000 in 2014, specifically for the watershed advocacy work they were undertaking.

But WildEarth Guardians were also busy on other fronts as well – including filing a lawsuit to prevent an expansion of a coalmine in, you guessed it, Craig, CO.

The residents of Craig are supportive of their mine, and the 200 jobs it represents, so they were upset when they learned that a federal judge agreed with WildEarth Guardian's lawsuit requiring a public forum and a new Environmental Impact Statement for the mine operation. And when someone visited the organization's website, and saw that New Belgium was listed as one of their supporters, the situation quickly spiraled downhill to the point where people began writing angry e-mails to the brewery while restaurants and the local liquor store removed New Belgium beer from its shelves.

The experience was an eye-opening one for New Belgium, says Simpson, especially because they consider themselves to be pro-watershed – not anti-coal.

"We use energy that is created by natural gas and coal in our brewery," he says. "Yes, we're advocates for a balanced energy portfolio. We use our own solar and methane power as much as we can. But we can't do it alone."

When New Belgium learned of the boycott, Simpson, Katie Wallace, the brewery's assistant director of sustainability, and three regional sales reps drove out to Craig to talk directly with the business owners there as a way to try to help better understand what had happened. "We have a lot of respect for the people of Craig and we wanted to get feedback first hand," says Simpson. "Emotions were high when we visited. It's very powerful to hear people's stories in person. When you're fact-to-face with someone, you can really sense their concern."

The townspeople they spoke with were upset with New Belgium and it seemed clear that they weren't easily going to forget the brewery's association with WildEarth Guardians any time soon, says Simpson.

As one local, Lori Gillam, owner of Stockmen's Liquor, was quoted as saying: "Craig business owners said they don't care where the money went; New Belgium supported a group that could kill the livelihood of Craig. It's the company they supported. Regardless of how they supported them, they're supporting them."

As it turns out, a similar backlash occurred against the brewery several years earlier when it gave money to support an event that was perceived as a pro-fracking rally – which led to dozens of folks voicing their displeasure with

the brewery online. “One guy sent us a video of him teeing off with a nine iron on a can of Fat Tire,” says Simpson. “They were all having a pretty good laugh, but the message was clear.”

The reason he and Wallace made the time to visit Craig wasn’t just to let townspeople vent or to try and change their minds, says Simpson. It was also an opportunity to get data on how they could improve their philanthropy process.

What’s clear is that, despite the blowback in Craig, philanthropy will remain a critical component of New Belgium’s DNA.

“It’s disheartening to lose business over something we didn’t directly support,” says Simpson. “But we still stand behind the money we gave for water projects. We have to continue to support the things we believe in and not let events like this deter that. That’s important to us as an employee-owned company. We’d love to have that business back and we’re working toward that. But it makes our work more meaningful when we can use our podium to talk about things that we feel are important and that we believe in.”

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