

EVENTS/CAUSES

Mercedes-Benz supports green businesses to enhance entrepreneurial innovation

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By RACHEL LAMB

Mercedes-Benz is funding an initiative in collaboration with the Conservation Fund to provide loans to entrepreneurs working towards building green businesses.

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The program, dubbed ShadeFund, is meant to aid entrepreneurs who do not have the means to get traditional bank loans needed to kick-start their ventures. These loans can go towards working capital, as well as for the acquisition of materials, supplies, equipment and certification.

“Mercedes was founded on the same principles that we are trying to express in this initiative,” said Donna Boland, manager of corporate communications at Mercedes-Benz USA, Montvale, NJ. “If no one had believed in [the Mercedes-Benz founders] and helped their dreams come to fruition, the company couldn’t have been founded.

“[The brand] is trying to focus on how to enhance entrepreneurial innovation in a sustainable realm,” she said.

ShadeFund

The Conservation Fund is an organization focused on advancing sustainable and eco-friendly efforts in the United States.

The **ShadeFund** program will provide loans to 10-12 entrepreneurs who are trying to kick-start small business and do not qualify for a traditional bank loan.

Mercedes will fund the \$5,000-\$25,000 loans over the next two years.

The luxury carmaker is taking on this initiative because sustainability in companies is something that affects the entire world.

“We saw something that needed to be done, and we’re doing it,” she said. “This isn’t about increasing reputation, but rather an affinity program that increases awareness of building companies with sustainability.”

The project has already given loans to two companies, City Bench and Bluebird Hill Farm. They will receive their loans by the end of the year.

Green steps

The Conservation Fund is handling most of the marketing for the initiative.

“They are an exceptionally well-connected company and have contacts all over the U.S.,” Ms. Boland said.

Mercedes is helping spread the word through existing media channels such as its Facebook page, the brand’s Web site at <http://www.mbusa.com> and its Thinking Green site at http://www.mbusa.com/mercedes/innovation/thinking_green/overview.

All of the sites will have links back to The Conservation Fund’s Web site where there will be more information.

There is no disputing the green movement trend that automotive brands are currently moving towards. Whether it be the development of hybrids and other eco-friendly vehicles or green-related cause marketing, carmakers are very active in the fight to save the environment.

Cause marketing and luxury

For luxury brands, cause marketing is a good tactic, as 19 percent of consumers are willing to buy a more expensive brand if it is associated with a cause, according to a **Cone Inc.** study.

Eighty-three percent of Americans wish that more of the products, retailers and services they use would support causes.

The same study also found that during an economic recession, Americans have an even higher expectation of brands and companies to support charities and causes, with 31 percent saying that this time above any is when brands and companies should be stepping up.

Also, 85 percent of consumers have a more positive image of a product when it supports a

cause that they care about.

Forty-one percent of Americans have bought a product simply because it was associated with a cause or issue in the past year and 53 percent prefer to support a company that allows them to impact the donation by purchasing an item.

“The green movement confronts all of us, companies and consumers,” Mercedes’ Ms. Boland said. “No matter the motive, if there is any opportunity to help in whatever way anyone can, they should step up to the plate.”

Final take

Mercedes-Benz' drive for sustainability also includes hybrid vehicles as part of its Road to the Future campaign

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