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All-Star Sponsors Strive to Look Truly Charitable

By [KEN BELSON](#)

Making money by giving it away: that is part of the plan for the largest corporate sponsors at the All-Star Game in St. Louis this year.

State Farm, Bank of America, Pepsi and other sponsors have increased the money they plan to give to charities at this year's event. For each hit in the game, Bank of America will donate \$5,000 to Feeding America, which runs a national network of [food banks](#). State Farm expects to exceed the \$370,000 it gave to the Boys and Girls Clubs at the [Home Run Derby](#) it sponsored last year. Pepsi helped pay for a free concert by [Sheryl Crow](#) on Saturday that raised money for Stand Up to Cancer, a research group.

The strategy is in keeping with the times. Unemployment is up, incomes are down and conspicuous consumption is out. The last thing Major League Baseball or sponsors want is to appear insensitive to the economic challenges that many fans face.

The companies also want to deflect criticism of corporate spending on sports, which has become a symbol of the excess of the past decade. Increased scrutiny from politicians, shareholders and consumers has tempered spending on luxury suites, hospitality tents and event sponsorships.

This is particularly true at Bank of America, General Motors and other companies that have taken taxpayer money to stay afloat. For them, the task is even tougher: how to seem altruistic yet frugal while spending millions of dollars to increase sales.

"We've cut our promotions hugely, and we're trying in the few activities that we remain in to make sure we get a return on our investments," said Ed Peper, the vice president for Chevrolet at General Motors North America, which sponsors the Roberto Clemente Award, honoring the top humanitarian on each team.

"We sell cars and trucks, and we need to sell them to help repay the money we borrowed," Peper said.

Incorporating philanthropy into corporate marketing messages at sporting events is not new. Teams of all stripes have favorite charities that they promote and give to. The [N.F.L.](#) has had a long relationship with the [United Way](#). Baseball and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America have worked together for years. But few sporting events showcase corporate giving as well as the All-Star Game. Baseball is woven into the fabric of many communities and is perceived as a wholesome and less commercial sport.

The All-Star Game, in mid-July, is one of the few events competing for viewers' attention, so companies have a better chance of having their philanthropic efforts noticed.

"It is on a broadcast network, it's prime time, it draws a relatively large audience and it draws a lot of

attention leading up to it and has a bit of an afterlife," said Eric Wright, the vice president for research and development at Joyce Julius & Associates, a sports market-research firm.

In concert with baseball, companies are expanding their giving this year. MasterCard will give \$1 million to Stand Up to Cancer if a batter hits one of the Hit it Here signs in the outfield during the Home Run Derby or the All-Star Game. In the past, the money went to a fan chosen in a sweepstakes.

As it did last year, State Farm will donate \$17,000 to the Boys and Girls Clubs for each gold ball hit for a home run during the derby. It will also donate \$5,000 for each home run hit with regular white balls this year, which should help the company increase its total donation to \$500,000.

"Charities like the Boys and Girls Clubs are facing tighter times, so this is a great way to help their fund-raising," said Mark Gibson, the assistant vice president for advertising at State Farm.

Bank of America will match donations that fans make to Feeding America during the All-Star Game, up to \$100,000.

Sports marketing experts say that although charitable giving is a solid strategy, some messages can be lost on viewers if the philanthropy is seen as a one-time effort or a blatant attempt to drum up sales.

"There's a cacophony of ribbons out there," said Carol Cone, the chairwoman of Cone Inc., which advises companies about cause marketing. "If there's not enough below that ribbon, it becomes wallpaper."

The companies and baseball are careful to note that their giving during the All-Star Game is part of broader, year-round efforts not just to help charities, but also to improve their bottom lines.

For every dollar it spent on sponsoring baseball games, General Motors said, it generated about \$5 in sales. About 200,000 people have visited the league's Web site to take part in a program that gives fans tickets and merchandise based on how often they stay at Holiday Inn hotels. Bank of America said that for every dollar it spent at sporting events, it generated \$3 in net income.

"I can completely understand the cynicism and understand the questions about philanthropy and investments in sports," said Ray Bednar, who is in charge of global sponsorship marketing at Bank of America. "But we make money at this, and that's the most important message to get out."

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