

Companies Promote Health and Brands, Making Playgrounds

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MARKETERS like [Kraft Foods](#), [MetLife](#), [CVS](#) and Dr Pepper/Snapple Group are steering millions in charitable dollars to a new and somewhat unlikely project — building neighborhood playgrounds for children.



Isela Velasquez delivered mulch as Kraft and Kaboom built a playground at Namaste Charter School in Chicago.

The companies are embracing the playground as an opportunity to make their names better known — and better liked — locally and to encourage employees to volunteer in their communities.

As the first lady, Michelle Obama, highlights child obesity and urges regular exercise, providing play spaces is a winning cause for the food and beverage companies, which are under fire for high calorie snacks and drinks.

Dr Pepper/Snapple Group pledged \$15 million this month to build or fix 2,000 playgrounds over the next three years.

“A fit and active lifestyle is one of our philanthropic goals,” said Tina Barry, senior vice president for corporate affairs at the company’s headquarters in Plano, Tex. “Playgrounds align with that.”

In October, Kraft Foods made playground-building a centerpiece of its annual company “Delicious Difference Week.” About 1,300 employees, including the chief executive Irene Rosenfeld, built 13 playgrounds, including one in Washington Park on the South Side of Chicago, at a total cost of more than \$1.4 million. Kraft, too, counts healthful lifestyles, along with ending hunger, as a top philanthropic priority.

“It’s huge — getting children excited about play,” said Nicole Robinson, the vice president of the company’s charitable arm, the Kraft Foods Foundation.

Kraft and other companies that provide money for playground construction say they have not studied whether their contributions increase public awareness of their brand. Corporate-financed playgrounds typically bear a plaque with the company’s name and receive a flurry of local news coverage.

Kraft’s playground projects are “a huge boost to the company’s reputation, and add to its credibility,” Ms. Robinson says.

Foresters, the life insurance provider, also has opted for playgrounds, recently pledging \$1.5 million to build 20 in the United States, where the company, which is based in Canada, has most of its clients.

“It’s a good fit for us,” said George Mohacsi, its president and chief executive. “And we get more bang for the buck when we build a playground, we put in something that people can use daily for a decade or more.”

A. Dennis White, president and chief executive of MetLife Foundation, said his company regularly finances playgrounds to promote physical fitness. The company has donated \$850,000 in the last three years for 400 play spaces in the United States and Mexico.

“It’s something that can be built in a day, and we like the visibility it gets in the local community,” Mr. White said.

Once upon a time, playgrounds were largely the province of schools or municipalities, but with plummeting local tax revenues, they are ripe for corporate support. This dovetails with a recent study that found companies are allocating their charitable giving — whether it is goods, services or cash — more toward community needs instead of grand goals such as alleviating world hunger.

Basic needs were the only categories in which corporate cash contributions increased last year, according to the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy’s annual corporate giving report, which used information from 171 major companies, including 61 of the Fortune 100.

Companies financing playgrounds often work in partnership with Kaboom, a nonprofit group based in Washington, which recently drew praise from Mrs. Obama. It has a comprehensive plan to include the community and company volunteers in designing, building and maintaining play spaces.

Kaboom has nearly 300 corporate partners, including [Home Depot](#) and Kimberly Clark. Darell Hammond, its chief executive, said companies need to spend \$75,000 to \$500,000 to create a public playground, depending on whether the floor is rubberized.

Companies are drawn to the idea because “playgrounds bring the community together,” Mr. Hammond said. “It’s almost a new town square.”

Other companies work with nonprofit organizations like Shane’s Inspiration or Boundless Playgrounds, to create play areas that are accessible to disabled children. This fall, CVS worked with the [Pepsi](#) Refresh Project to give \$70,000 to construct the playground proposal from the public that had won the most votes on the project’s Web site.

A Fort Wayne, Ind., playground proposal was selected and will be built in 2011, said Eileen Howard Dunn, senior vice president for community relations for CVS Caremark. CVS, based in Woonsocket, R.I., has spent \$3 million in recent years to finance 65 playgrounds around the country, and has pledged to build 10 more next year as part of its \$25 million “All Kids Can” initiative to help disabled children.

With charitable cash in shorter supply, companies are encouraging employees to volunteer. The corporate philanthropy committee report found that in the last three years, 20 percent more companies offer paid time during the workday for employees to volunteer.

Companies devoting resources to building playgrounds, which typically are in areas that are home to a concentration of their employees, say that worker engagement and satisfaction are important considerations in choosing the playground option.

“Employees who participate feel a sense of community whether they participate for the one day or for the six months of planning,” Ms. Robinson, of Kraft, said. “And any company really receives a halo.”