

News



Like dating, companies seek that perfect match

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By Wendy Culverwell, Business Journal Staff Writer

Painting day cares, delivering meals to homebound seniors and hammering up drywall are all worthy activities and account for much of the way businesses organize their employees to help their communities.

But increasingly, local business leaders are more likely to lend their professional expertise to help their favorite nonprofits with mission statements. Web sites and other administrative tasks that help them expand in ways that go beyond the odd can of paint.

“My feeling is corporate giving has become more strategic and aligned with business goals,” said Andy Nelson, executive director for Hands On Portland, a nonprofit that helps businesses connect with nonprofits who need volunteers.

About a dozen times a year, Hands On Portland helps organize employee giving days, sending workers out to help with a specific task. For nonprofits, the benefits go beyond a freshly painted wall or rejuvenated landscape.

They see it as an opportunity to school more people in what they do and perhaps recruit permanent volunteers, donors and even board members.

“Every nonprofit will tell you, ‘We’re not well-known enough,’” Nelson said.

So it is for Steve Rosenbaum, president and chief executive officer of Pop Art Inc. Rosenbaum became an investor and volunteer with Social Venture Partners Portland, which brings a business bent to its philanthropy. Investors such as Rosenbaum put not only money but time in nonprofits.

“What I really like about it is it allows me to donate my time in what I would say is the highest possible leverage,” he said.

Through Social Venture Partners Portland, Rosenbaum and his company have contributed time and professional expertise to a free clinic, social agencies and the popular Shadow Project, which rewards students with special education needs with “shadow bucks” that can be spend on gifts, educational toys and other kid-friendly items donated to the program.

Rosenbaum said the benefits work both ways. Its partners get the benefit of professional counsel and Pop Art builds its experience by serving more clients.

“I’m able to donate my time and my company’s time to helping these organizations with their planning and their vendor selection and things like that,” he said.

Megan Leftwich is both president of the Social Venture Partnership board and leads its work with the Shadow Project.

She said the Social Venture group elected to invest in Shadow Project because its mission of helping children at risk matches with the organization’s goals. Too, the business-minded participants appreciate that the Shadow Project model produces measureable results.

The Shadow Project began 11 years ago with two classrooms and 40 children. Today, it serves 1,200 children in 20 schools, chiefly in Portland Public Schools. To grow that much it needed help expanding its capacity to serve children and their teachers.

To get to that point, Leftwich points out that Shadow Project relied on supporters to help it with everything from business planning to marketing and publicity.

Cash Oregon is another Social Ventures investee that has benefitted from the contribution of business acumen. The effort works with lower income families to ensure they receive the federal Earned Income Tax Credit.

It teams with the AARP’s Tax Aide volunteers to help mostly low-income taxpayers complete their federal tax returns. Three years ago, it helped with 9,951 returns. Last year, it helped with 16,172.

Collectively, its efforts helped Oregonians collectively claim \$12.4 million in tax credits, money that had gone unclaimed in previous years.

The Internal Revenue Service estimates that up to one-fourth of all filers who are eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit don’t apply for it, in part because they don’t know about it or don’t know how to claim it.

It costs an average of about \$20 per return, or about \$150,000 to process last year’s 16,000 returns. In others words, for every \$1 spent helping a filer with a return, more than \$82 comes back to the community to the residents who need it the most.

Its clients in Multnomah , Clackamas and Washington received refunds of \$800 to \$1,000. Supporters say it is a truly inspiring experience to help families master their tax returns.

“They say, ‘This is free? And I get this much back?’ And we say yes, yes, yes. It’s very gratifying,” said Bruce Murray, a retired banker and Social Venture Partners’ lead on the Cash Oregon project.

Murray became a Social Venture investor after moving to Portland with his wife in 2002 to be closer to their son and grandchildren. Murray said he liked the organization's approach to pooling the skills and abilities of like minded people.

As Cash Oregon grows, he wants to add financial education to its lists of program to help low income clients work out meaningful budgets.

But Murray said he and his wife are beneficiaries too.

"It keeps us off the streets and golf course," he joked.

One of the most innovative new charities in Portland is Donor Resource, an online effort launched in April by Sisters of the Community founder Della Rosenthal. Through its Web site, DonorResource.org, the charity links donors with nonprofits and leaves it to them to arrange pick ups and drop offs.

Sisters had operated a warehouse to help needy families, but found that being in the storage and inventory business was too overwhelming and turned to the Internet.

In just a few short months, donorresource.org has been profiled in the national media and grown to serve 165 nonprofits. In May, it had to stop registering new clients. Rosenthal said Donor Resource needed to slow down to ensure it is properly serving the charities it already has. She expects to reopen the registry by January.

"I can't even tell you how crazy this has been," she said.

In essence, the Web site lets its member charities identify their needs. Visitors with items to donate can find an organization they want to support.

The possibilities, she said, are endless.

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