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Small businesses' creative efforts to help charities pay off

Area companies find innovative ways to give, while gaining goodwill and recognition.

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Small-business owners might not think they have the resources to help charitable causes, but several area owners say they do -- and it can pay off for the nonprofit and the business.

Because small firms often struggle just to handle basic administrative and production duties, owners can feel like the small amount generated from payroll deductions plus the expense and time needed to set up the program is more than they can bear, said Becky Byrne, executive director of Annie's Hope, a nonprofit that helps grieving children.

Instead, companies should become more creative in their giving, she said. "They can make a huge difference in the life of kids," she said. It can make a difference for the company as well.

An example is the annual remnant sale that Hallmark Stone Co. of Fenton has held for the last two years to benefit Annie's Hope. Hallmark Stone, a manufacturer, wholesaler and installer of granite and stone countertops, sells its excess inventory to the public over one weekend and donates the proceeds to Annie's Hope and other charities that its employees select.

Because the company doesn't sell directly to the public, co-owners Fred and Tina Christen asked their retail customers to approve of the fundraising sale. All their customers agreed, and two -- RSI Kitchens and Baths and Signature Kitchen and Bath -- helped pay to advertise it. Others referred customers to the sale, forgoing revenue themselves.

"One of the benefits -- and it's huge -- is the employees feel good about being part of something," Fred Christen said.

Last year, Hallmark Stone raised \$22,000 from the sale; \$8,500 went to Annie's Hope and the rest to charities or nonprofits that the 90 employees designated.

This year, the sale brought in \$77,000; almost \$36,000 was donated to Annie's Hope, and the remainder to employees' selections.

Innoventor Inc. of Maryland Heights also has a creative way of donating to President **Kent Schien**'s favorite charity, Easter Seals. The 65 employees, plus customers, vendors and friends, participate in the Easter Seals' annual fundraising walk, including the one coming up July 23.

Last year the company raised \$37,000 and had more than 220 walkers, said company spokeswoman Dana Klassen. **Innoventor** has been involved with Easter Seals since the company's inception 10 years ago, because Schien's son, Alan, is disabled.

Besides building team spirit among employees and helping a good cause, raising money for charity has helped **Innoventor**'s business, Klassen said.

"It's branding. It really does get recognized," she said. "At Easter Seals last year we were all there in our blue shirts, and we went to another event. Some guy said, 'I saw you guys. You do really great stuff.'"

The company gets media attention for its nonprofit activities, which also include work for Habitat for Humanity and a gift drive for an orphanage.

"When we go out and talk to our new customers, it's part of our presentation," Klassen said. "It shows that we are more than just capitalists; it shows that we have a heart."

When a company is a microbusiness with just a handful of employees, there are other inventive ways to give to nonprofits, said Lisa Richter of the United Way. An example is Annie Gray, who employs three people at her executive search firm Annie Gray Associates Inc. and Executaries By Gray in Clayton.

Gray is a team captain for the United Way Women's Leadership Giving Initiative, which seeks donations of \$1,000 from women business owners. The initiative collected \$148,675 this year from 58 entrepreneurs, Gray said.

Besides encouraging fellow women business owners to donate, Gray also gives generously herself, especially when a United Way agency uses her professional services.

"Because of my executive search work, I am very often brought in to professionally conduct the search at one of the United Way agencies," she said. "The credibility of the United Way agencies helps me when I

go out (on sales calls). It's kind of like the Good Housekeeping Seal of approval."

For some small firms, the most effective way of giving is in-kind donations. That's particularly been the case for Orlando Banquets Inc., owner of Orlando Gardens banquet centers.

Founder Sam Orlando Sr. created the Orlando Family Foundation for Charities annual gala. Business and charities buy tables of eight for the gala's gourmet dinner. At the end of the evening, two charities are drawn by lottery to split the proceeds of the night.

This year, the gala served 450 guests and raised \$53,000 that was split between the Oxalosis and Hyperoxaluria Foundation and Ursuline Academy. Over the last five years, the foundation has raised \$167,000 for area nonprofits.

Subsidiary Catering by Orlando also sponsors meals on Thanksgiving and Christmas for more than 250 homeless people at the St. Patrick's Center in downtown St. Louis. The company raises about \$170,000 a year for Food Outreach through its Tasteful Affair event.

"Quite honestly, we don't do a lot of cash donations. We try to use our position in our industry to help when we can," said Sam Orlando Jr. "If you are selling ball bearings, then an in-kind donation is difficult; but everybody needs food."

Orlando said he hopes the firm receives referrals or business from guests at its fundraising events, but the company doesn't attempt to track it.

"It's good public relations, but it certainly is not done for that purpose," he said. "I know it sounds hokey, but we've always felt very blessed to have a prospering business, and when less-fortunate people come to us and ask, it's hard for us to say no."

And when a company develops a reputation for donating to charitable causes, more nonprofits and individuals will come with a hand out, he noted. Orlando Banquets gets about 20 requests for assistance a week, he said.

"Because of the economy, we can't give as much as we used to," Orlando said. Instead, the company tries to work with nonprofits and provide food at cost.

"If (other small businesses) can do things for cost, where they are not actually going to lose dollars, it's a lot easier to do," he said. "People want to do business with people who they feel care about them."