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# GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

## CHARITY OFFERS TANGIBLE RETURNS

The term “bookstore” can only be loosely applied to Sherman’s Books. From a three-story building in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, Sherman’s sells popover pans and blueberry tea alongside best sellers, cookbooks, refrigerator magnets and jars of lobster salsa. If it weren’t for Sherman’s, the people who live there year-round would have to drive miles to buy their toys, housewares and stationery.

But residents of Boothbay Harbor can thank Sherman’s owner, Jeff Curtis, for more than sundry items. Over four years, Curtis helped raise \$6 million to rebuild the local hospital, St. Andrew’s, which needed new wiring and laboratory facilities.

In helping to refurbish the hospital Curtis hoped to benefit the community. He also hoped that residents would feel the same sense of community by continuing to patronize local businesses such as his. “By being concerned about the community you hope your customer will have the same attitude and support the community by shopping in it,” he says.

Welcome to the world of strategic philanthropy. Few small business owners run charitable foundations or have millions of dollars to donate. But as Curtis’s example demonstrates, there are many ways to give back to the community.

A 2002 national survey by the Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance shows that 91% of small businesses support charitable organizations on some level, such as cash gifts, raising money for the local symphony, or sponsoring a Little League Team. Done right, these efforts can produce a tangible return for the charity and the donor.

The question is how. Most small businesses are inundated with requests for donations of money and products. Figuring out where to direct their giving is a real challenge. “You have to know when to say no,” says Curtis. “And that’s especially hard when the person who’s asking is someone you know well.”

### Choosing a Charity

Giving can be in line with your business goals. If, for example, you run a consumer-products company, a charity event might provide you with the opportunity to offer samples of your products. If you’re an industrial supplier, you might gain access to local politicians and business leaders who are on a nonprofit’s board.

You might aim for local television coverage as public relations expert Nancy Sims did when she arranged for two business clients to provide laptop computers and training to local foster children in Houston. The donation was covered by local TV stations and was fea-

tured in a newspaper read by more than one million households. Says Sims, “That donation put them on the map and it cost them about \$15,000 combined.”

If tying civic donations to business objectives sounds mercenary, consider this: 86% of consumers would switch to a brand associated with a good cause if the price and quality were roughly equal to their current one, according to a recent survey by Cone, a marketing firm in Boston. The study showed that public perceptions about a company are influenced by its charitable involvement.

Of course it’s not always possible to draw a direct line between philanthropy and increased sales. But a deliberate giving strategy can be more effective than providing random contributions. To gain measurable results, donations don’t have to be made in dollars either, they can be made in time and energy.

David Becker, co-owner of Philippe Becker Design, a package design and branding firm in San Francisco, donated his time and skills, for example, and made a huge difference in creating public awareness about the plight of the city’s homeless.

Each morning on his way to work Becker would pass at least 15 people living on the streets. Through the local Chamber of Commerce, Becker learned about a program called Project Homeless Connect, which helps the homeless find housing and employment. The program had substantial support from corporations and city hall, but it didn’t have brand awareness. So Becker volunteered his professional expertise in this area to make the program instantly recognizable, inspire area residents to pitch in and let the homeless know that help was available.

Over a 6-week period in 2005, he and his 20-person firm spent 200 hours devising a logo and tag line. The logo they ultimately chose—a red rectangle with two clasped hands reaching from opposite corners—was versatile enough to appear on a billboard or a T-shirt, yet not so corporate-looking that it would scare away homeless people, who are often suspicious of authority. The tag line read, “Never look down on someone, unless you are helping them up.”

Becker’s donation of time and talent paid off. Having a logo appear on billboards throughout the city proved his company could create art for larger media. The company’s reputation also received a boost. He says 35% of the requests he has received for proposals or meetings to discuss new business this year have come from CEOs or top management, compared with 25% a year ago.

“It was exciting to see billboards up there with our work on it, and to know that we made a difference,” says Becker. **V**