

Too busy to help a local charity? Consider this:

Volunteerism is Good for Your Career, Good for Business, And Good for the Community

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As donations shrink from individuals, as well as from many struggling corporations, national organizations and a growing number of community-based non-profit charities are putting out urgent calls for dollars *and for volunteers*.

For small business owners this presents two major opportunities. First, to help the efforts of charities that are vital to the health of our communities, and second for visibility in a tight marketplace.

Volunteering for a cause in which you believe provides the important satisfaction of giving something back to society, helping your community, and helping disadvantaged citizens. If that doesn't warm your heart, consider this—*volunteerism is also good for your business, and good for your career!*

Simply put, in order to gain community or professional visibility, or to sell a product or service, people have to know who you are, and they have to feel good about you. AND you have to feel good about yourself.

Just like the corporate giants, small business owners, entrepreneurs, job seekers and future community leaders should take note that *it does not diminish your good deeds by sending out press releases and getting more than just a little publicity about your efforts*. One does not preclude the other—**Think about it**. When Bill Gates started his global charity foundation, he made sure to get the most visibility for Microsoft and for “Bill Gates.” When Warren Buffett joined the Bill and Melinda Gates bandwagon, he did not exactly keep it a secret.

While many job seekers, small business owners and other self-employed individuals cannot afford the large or even moderate cash donations provided by “big” businesses—volunteerism provides a great opportunity to

increase your professional visibility and to be a good citizen at the same time, without the need for deep pockets.

Women business owners certainly caught on. Research published in May 1996 by The National Foundation for Women Business Owners (NFWBO) showed that nearly six million women business owners made “significant contributions to the fabric of their communities” by volunteering.

Dollar donations were not the standard. *Nearly eight in ten women business owners spent time volunteering and encouraged a majority of their employees to do so as well*. Half volunteered for more than one charity.

Overall, nearly two-thirds or 65 percent of women business owners spent time helping a community-related charity; other charities cited included education-related (35 percent), religious (28 percent), health or disease-related (21 percent) and the arts (19 percent).

In November 2000, NFWBO further reported that entrepreneurs (women and men) were actively volunteering in large numbers for charitable organizations. Seven out of ten of the business owners surveyed by NFWBO (68% of women, 72% of men) reported volunteering at least once in a typical month, compared to 62% of all women and 50% of all men in the U.S.

Building a career or a new business does take time and energy, and it is easy to feel there is little left to donate.

This is a mistake for two reasons. First, there is nothing so satisfying as helping others in need and really being part of your community, and second, it will help you and your company!

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There are many opportunities out there, but there are also some important guidelines to consider! Key to this effort is to carefully consider where you will have the most impact helping others, and gain the most public and professional exposure.

Remember, there is nothing wrong with doing good deeds and getting the public and professional recognition that go with it.

Keep in mind that volunteerism, if not done carefully, can be an unfocused activity that is nothing more than recreational at best. But carefully thought-out, it can be a powerful professional opportunity as well as a worthwhile community service.

Not only will you get publicity and recognition, but you will be giving publicity to the charity as well. This is a part of building your professional image, and it is an important part of doing business in your community.

Your choice of a charity is also a very personal one. After all, we are talking about your time *and* heart. Think about charities that may need your particular help and skills, and causes that will fill your heart with a special sense of joy that comes only from such an endeavor. Finding time boils down to a simple fact: Just as you schedule your day of business activities, so should you commit a certain number of hours per week to volunteerism.

Below are guidelines for deciding which national or local organization to join, or which charity will be the recipient of your time and money.

- 1 Jot down how much time and money you are willing to spend on the organization and its activities.
- 2 Choose a committee that fits within that budget.
- 3 Look for the activities that will get recognition.
- 4 Don't bite off more than you can chew. This is a responsibility and a commitment that you must fulfill.

“Giving” as a corporate project has additional considerations. If you are considering having your corporation sponsor a charity event, or lending your company name to a charity or organization, take your thinking a bit further.

- 1 Does your company's philosophy mesh with the organization's mission?
- 2 Is the charity a group that is well respected in the community?
- 3 Does it have an IRS tax-exempt status?
- 4 Does a public accounting firm audit the group?
- 5 Is the organization politically motivated?
- 6 Is there a conflict of interest policy between executive staff members and vendors or other companies?
Is the policy disclosed?
- 7 Does the group have active directors?
Or are they in name only?
- 8 How does the group raise money? If they use outside solicitors, does the charity get its fair share?
- 9 Be sure to get an annual report, financial statement, budget, and copy of IRS not-for-profit filings.

If all this sounds very calculating, IT IS! After all, we are talking about your time and dollars— as well as making a difference in people's lives.

Just because you are providing your time and skills to a worthwhile cause by serving on a organization's board or committee, helping the disadvantaged directly, or providing in-kind services, doesn't mean you should not use the experience to further your business or career.

Will people think you're bragging? *They might.* Will you look foolish waving your own flag? *That depends on how skillfully you handle the situation.* With careful planning, you can create a public or professional image without losing credibility and self-respect. *Think about the image that you want to create, explore your own comfort level with public exposure, and assess the communications potential of your efforts.* This is part of “positioning,” and it is the basis for all good marketing efforts—whether you are marketing yourself or your company.