



Giving away and getting a return

By **MARILEE CROCKER**

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For any independent professional or small business owner, volunteering for a nonprofit group is always a good idea.

Donating your time, services or expertise to community, charitable or even professional organizations helps you become known and trusted and build a positive reputation for yourself and your business.

Along the way you'll naturally develop relationships that can lead to business alliances and referrals. In some cases you'll gain invaluable experience and skills.

Another reason to get involved is to create the personal ties that can serve as a powerful antidote to the isolation of working at home.

But there are challenges. For instance, what if the nonprofit world also constitutes your target market? If the organizations where you volunteer are potential customers, when do you give away your services and when do you charge?

That's an ongoing dilemma, said Erica Waasdorp, founder and president of A Direct Solution, which provides direct marketing and fundraising expertise to nonprofits.

Waasdorp, who lives in Marstons Mills, launched her home-based business in 2003, initially as a one-day-a-week venture. Employed at the time by a large direct marketing agency in Plymouth, Waasdorp had identified a need among Cape organizations too small to interest her employer.

To build her clientele, Waasdorp did what she'd always done. "As part of getting new business, you need to network, attend conferences, get involved. I was used to doing that, so to do the same thing on the Cape was a natural move."

Already connected to the Cape's nonprofit world, Waasdorp "really beefed that up." Within a few years, she was co-chairing Philanthropy Day, an annual event staged by the Planned Giving Council of Cape Cod.

She also was generous with her knowledge. "I was not afraid to help other people," she told me.

But if you're trying to earn a living, you've got to get paid at some point. "That is the hardest thing," Waasdorp said. "What do you give away for free, and what do you charge for?"

Waasdorp draws the line when an organization where she's volunteering needs help with a direct mail campaign. At that point she'll put together a business proposal.

In some organizations, her roles are mixed. For instance, Waasdorp donates her public relations expertise to the Cape and Islands chapter of the American Red Cross, but charges for her fundraising services.

Her other pro bono work includes serving as publicity chair for the local chapter of the American Business Women's Association and organizing meetings and helping with publicity for the Planned Giving Council.

Such volunteer commitments take time, and that's another challenge, said Waasdorp, who still works one day a week for her off-Cape employer. It helps, she said, to volunteer for specific tasks, such as writing press releases, and to avoid commitments that entail lots of meetings.

Still, it's important to stay out there, building existing relationships and establishing new ones. Waasdorp said that's especially true on Cape Cod, where relationships are "really really important."

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