

Volunteering helps the bottom line National companies that compete with local businesses know this well

By Erica Waasdorp

It makes good business sense for you and your employees to volunteer. Not only is it a highly effective marketing strategy, but it builds teamwork, improves morale and increases productivity. A recent survey by the Points of Light Foundation surveyed 188 companies across the country and discovered the following:

- 74 percent reported that that volunteerism increased productivity of their employees;
- 93 percent said volunteerism builds employee teamwork skills; and
- 94 percent believed that volunteerism improved their public image.

These companies also reported that volunteer programs actually attracted better job candidates and helped them retain good employees. The businesses used terms such as skill building, company loyalty and job satisfaction in the same breath as volunteering.

Corporate community involvement is a conscious decision by businesses to be involved in specific social issues. It can mean a partnership with nonprofit organizations or a sole initiative by the business itself.

The Body Shop encourages staff in each store to volunteer at an organization of their choice. It then pays two employees to do two hours of community work together every two weeks.

Each Home Depot receives a special fund each year to use to benefit the community. Store managers use the money at their discretion, for fixing up one house or cleaning up an entire neighborhood. One manager said: "It's easy to give money, but you don't get that sense of giving back. Our associates can say they're actually out there helping in the neighborhoods where we do business."

Bank of America has an extensive network of volunteers, ranging from assisting after-school activities to teaching students money skills to promoting literacy. The company is involved in the United Way's Days of Caring, a year-round mobilization effort connecting company volunteers to United Way agency projects. All staff levels work together as one.

These are big companies, and many are coming over the bridge to compete with local Cape Cod businesses. So, the question arises: What can local business owners with far fewer resources learn from them?

The biggest lessons may come on the human resources side.

Companies that contribute their employees as volunteers, such as Procter and Gamble, Hewlett Packard, Johnson & Johnson, IBM and 3M, share three characteristics:

- They have a clear philosophy of how they want to conduct their business. They stand for something.
- Management emphasizes shaping and fine tuning these values to match them with its economic and business environment and to communicate them throughout the organization.
- These values are known and shared by all the people who work for the company across all levels.

The challenge for any organization of any size is to find the best business partners - and the best social partners, preferably a nonprofit that has some ties with the company's mission, product or service.

There are about 800,000 nonprofit organizations across the nation, a number that has doubled since 1990. On Cape Cod alone, there are between 1,200 and 1,400 nonprofits actively engaged in every aspect of the Cape's community, economy and environment.

Allowing your employees some time off to volunteer and supporting local nonprofits clearly contributes to a better image for the company, happier employees and better results for your business.

If your business is considering getting more involved in the community, there is an upcoming opportunity to literally shop among 70 nonprofit organizations at the April 26 Volunteer to Sustain Cape Cod EXPO at the Sheraton Four Points in Hyannis.

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