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EMBRACING PHILANTHROPY MAKES GOOD BUSINESS SENSE



A business's philanthropic efforts may begin with an employee's personal desire to help others or an unfulfilled corporate commitment to charity. No matter which impulse inspires the act of giving back, charitable efforts in the workplace can become a gratifying component of one's professional identity. The stories of these three AmericasMart exhibitors demonstrate different ways to incorporate a philanthropic element into your business.

The Personal Touch

Although just 15 years old, entrepreneur Madison Nicole Robinson already understands the rewards of giving to others. At age eight, she began applying her sea-inspired sketches to outlines of flip-flops, calling them "fish-flops." Over the next four years, Robinson's father Dan helped her refine her designs, and they launched FishFlops® in 2010 with a line of flip-flops, T-shirts, hats and sneakers, each adorned with Madison's colorful characters such as Spinner the dolphin and Pinchie the crab.



Madison made charitable giving a part of FishFlops from its inception. "It means more to give when you really can't afford it," she says. "Time is one of the most precious gifts we can give to someone." She selects causes that have personal meaning, including military-related charities to honor her family members who served in the armed forces.

Not only does Madison give her time, but her company has donated more than 23,000 pairs of FishFlops to children's charities including Shoes for Orphan Souls to get FishFlops on the feet of children in need.

"Giving back makes me feel good about my business, so I continue to work hard," says the young Robinson. "I enjoy being able to help others, and that's what matters to me."



Building a Socially Conscious Business

Designer Paul Hickman founded Urban Ashes® to create environmentally conscious products and provide jobs and training for disabled and transitional workers. Hickman’s company makes wood furniture and picture frames, and he painstakingly researches every component of manufacturing to evaluate its source and environmental impact.



“When I started Urban Ashes, I did not know the term ‘social enterprise’ or ‘social business,’” says Hickman. “However, even not knowing these terms I knew that’s what I wanted to do.”



The wood used in Urban Ashes picture frames is hand-selected from felled, urban trees and finished with milk paint or petroleum-free linseed oil that will not adversely affect the health of the workers applying the product. He contracts with a local Michigan printer to create collateral with 100 percent recycled paper, which is in turn produced by a family-owned Michigan mill that generates its own green power via a hydroelectric plant.

Hickman partners with local agencies to find workers who might otherwise find it challenging to find employment. “The most rewarding element for me has been the human aspect. I like to think Urban Ashes is giving our workers something they can be proud of – in some cases maybe for the first time in their lives. That feeling to me is incredibly rewarding and powerful, much more than money can buy.” >





A Business Designed Around Charity

During a yearlong stay in Ethiopia, fashionABLE founder Barrett Ward discovered Women at Risk, an organization that helps women exploited by the sex industry get off the streets and into life-sustaining careers. “We understand that the solutions to poverty are in economic opportunity,” says Ward, “so it’s our mission to create economic opportunity in Africa, especially for women.”

A nonprofit enterprise, fashionABLE now employs 25 Ethiopian women to make scarves. Each style of scarf is named for the woman who creates it and is accompanied by a hand-written tag stating what the scarf has enabled her to do. For instance, Saba’s tags read: “Because of you I am ABLE to ‘feel pride in my work.’” fashionABLE successfully sold out many of its styles in 2012 and is now launching leather products, including a clutch, wallet and iPad case. Barrett says being a nonprofit “gives us the freedom to stay on



mission of employing vulnerable women, even through the hard times when production is poor or lacks capacity. These women, who have experienced challenges beyond my imagination, have such joy and courage and resilience. Working with them makes my life better.”

A Plan for Giving

There are many ways to incorporate philanthropy into your company. Donate time and/or product. Synthesize your ideals with your business model. Or form a business around a charitable goal. Whichever method you choose, charitable efforts will not only give you and your employees personal satisfaction, it also helps develop a deeper connection to your business that easily translates to loyalty in customers interested in purchasing products that “matter.” ■

For more information: fashionABLE, 615.301.1668 or livefashionable.com; FishFlops, 832.326.0593 or fishflops.com; and UrbanAshes, 734.657.5586 or urbanashes.com.

Images courtesy of Fish Flops, fashionABLE and Urban Ashes

