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Getting Into the Spirit of Doing Good While at Work

An increasing number of local businesses are getting charitable at meetings, including Habitat for Humanity and bike-building

By Evelyn Lee

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Wyndham Hotel Group always tries "to look for teambuilding activities where there's a local community tie-in," says Greg Land, second from left, along with Wyndham employees and a participating youth. [Courtesy of Wyndham Hotel Group]

Whether it's trainings or discussing budgets and sales targets, company meetings are centered on taking care of business. But for a growing number of New Jersey businesses, meetings are also a means of getting employees more in touch with their altruistic side.

Incorporating a corporate social responsibility component — where a company engages in a charitable activity — into a meeting is becoming increasingly popular with companies, says **Jeff Backal**, chief executive officer of Cherry Hill-based **Team Builders Plus**.

"A couple of years ago, there weren't as many community-type activities" that were part of meetings, Backal says, but more recently, many companies have been making a big push toward adding a charitable component, he says.

"It's a domino effect," says Backal, who plans to develop three more charitable teambuilding programs in the next year. "The more people hear about these types of activities and get involved with charitable organizations, the more they want to do."

The firm offers a number of teambuilding programs that help to support local charities, such as Wheels for the World, a half-day program where employees are divided into groups to build bicycles that are donated to local youth; Kindness Wins, another half-day activity where teams are given a list of deeds to carry out in the local community; and Tools for Teens, a full-day program where employees work with Habitat for Humanity to help build a home for the less fortunate. Such activities can be used to kick off or close a meeting or as a diversion during the middle of a five- or six-day session, Backal says.

Demand has gone up at conference centers for more socially responsible activities to be offered as part of business meetings. "More and more, we see corporations and associations that have meetings in our hotels asking for teambuilding events with this type of charitable tie-in," says **Greg Land**, senior vice president of sales and distribution at Parsippany-based **Wyndham Hotel Group**.

This month, the hospitality company is officially launching this month a new program called Wyndham Inventive Meetings and Events. One of the options under the program is Recipe for Success, where employees are split into teams and cook with the chefs at the Wyndham property. Afterward, the hotel donates the food that is cooked during the activity to a local homeless shelter, according to Wyndham.

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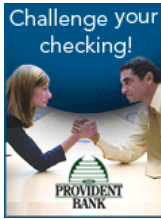
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Corporate social responsibility has also become a feature of Wyndham's own internal meetings, Land says. "We always try to look for teambuilding activities where there's a local community tie-in," he says. As part of the company's biannual global sales meeting in January at the Wyndham Princeton Forrestal Hotel and Conference Center in Plainsboro, 120 employees participated in a charitable teambuilding activity where the group built bicycles for more than 20 local youth from Big Brothers Big Sisters of Mercer County.

The employees were split into 20 teams, which were given a frame and an instruction sheet on how to build the bicycle, according to Land. The teams then had to compete to earn bicycle parts by answering trivia questions, negotiate for remaining bike parts and present marketing campaigns to promote the bicycles, he says. After the bikes were assembled, two staffers from Team Builders Plus — which facilitated the program — checked to make sure the bicycles were built properly before they were decorated and given to the children, Land says.

The bike-building activity helped make the meeting more memorable and boosted morale among participating employees, he adds. "It was definitely one of the highlights of the meeting," he says. "It made them feel good about the company they were working for, and personally made them feel good about coming into the area where we were having this meeting."

The "feel good" factor is one of the major benefits of having a charitable team building activity at a meeting, concurs Gary Long, chief operating officer of Virtua Health in Marlton. During a meeting of 40 department heads and managers in April, the hospital conducted a bike-building activity on behalf of children from the Boys and Girls Club of Camden County.

Donating the bikes served as inspiration and motivation for the participating employees, he says. "Health care is so complex, in terms of its structures and systems, one can lose focus on our core, which is to take care of people," Long says. Building volunteerism into the meeting "reinvigorated people as to why they went into the vocation of health care to begin with."

Millville-based **Wheaton Industries** has made it a point to include socially responsible activities in their meetings at least once a year, says **Michael Eyler**, director of organizational development. In September, the glass-products manufacturer held a week-long national sales conference at its headquarters with 40 of its sales representatives, focusing on product and sales training, but incorporating a bike-building activity — sales employees built 10 bicycles that were later donated to Big Brothers Big Sisters in Cumberland County.

A charitable activity on the agenda breaks up the monotony of focusing on business the entire time, Eyler says. "Too many meetings are one-dimensional, in that the meeting organizer dumps a lot of information on the participants," he says. "These meetings we design to be interactive and participative and socially conscious ... it heightens people's awareness of folks less fortunate than themselves."

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