

social responsibility

corporate philanthropy

Good for business, good for the community

By Trisha Wilson, Founder and CEO, Wilson Associates

Many design industry individuals and firms have built strong traditions of giving back to the community—whether donating time, talents, or financial resources. They uphold the widely held view that corporate philanthropy is a vital part of business and society. Indeed, surveys consistently show that people like doing business with companies that give back to others. A clearly-defined corporate philanthropy program is not only good for business, but it helps build stronger relationships with customers, clients, and employees. And, while fitting into the strategic goals of an organization, a strong corporate philanthropy/community involvement program also meets specific needs in the community. It is a win-win strategy for all.

Philanthropy can take many forms: Some companies dedicate a portion of their annual budget to support civic/charitable causes, others select causes aligned with their businesses. Still others, like Wilson Associates, establish standalone organizations such as The Wilson Foundation, a nonprofit that also receives support from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Here are a few key steps to creating a successful philanthropic program:

- 1 Find your passion.** What charitable causes interest your company? Perhaps you can provide scholarships for design students or free architectural or design services for nonprofit organizations. I have always believed that education is the great leveler in our society, and a child who receives an education will have options that can change her life. For this reason, education is a primary focus of The Wilson Foundation's efforts.
- 2 Articulate the vision and build internal support.** Align the firm's interests with its culture and mission. Communicate the firm's charitable programs and create an environment that encourages and supports employee participation. Support for The Wilson Foundation is part of our corporate culture, and all employees are knowledgeable about its mission.
- 3 Be strategic.** Companies and individuals should think about what they want to do and seek ways to maximize their impact and build their brand. Some may have a broad focus and support a wide range of issues. Others may focus on areas that are more aligned with their industry. One exciting new organization, Dallas-based Dwell With Dignity (www.dwellwithdignity.org), partners with vendor companies and designers, taking excess inventory to create beautiful living spaces for women and children coming out of poverty and homelessness. The organization works to surround these families with good design so that they take pride in themselves and their surroundings.

3 Designate an internal coordinator. Having a central point person to manage philanthropic activities helps ensure better use of resources and overall consistency in efforts. Typically, the strongest champion for a cause is its founder. Clodagh, CEO of the New York-based design firm of the same name, established her nonprofit organization Clodagh Cares to help people help themselves. Focusing mostly on education, ClodaghCares partners with organizations in countries around the world, including Ecuador, Cameroon, and Kenya, to bring schools to disadvantaged children, which will in turn enhance the welfare and well-being of their communities.

4 Encourage individual efforts. Companies that articulate a commitment to corporate philanthropy should also endorse individual efforts. Employees may have their own interests and causes, and they should be encouraged to actively support them. For example, an employee in our Dallas office helps feed the homeless each week. Los Angeles office volunteers help out at a neighborhood elementary school. Singapore employees participated in a city-wide event promoting clean water. New York employees trained for and ran in the New York Marathon. Everyone who is inspired to make a difference can find a way to do so and their efforts should be applauded.

5 Seek opportunities to collaborate. There are more than 1.5 million U.S. nonprofit organizations today, and many individuals and corporations share a desire to make a difference. Designers and others in the industry can further their brand and deepen relationships with clients, referral sources, and vendors by finding ways to work together on behalf of these nonprofit organizations. There are myriad ways to give back to the community. For example, the NEWH (www.newh.org), the international hospitality industry network, has members in more than 20 chapters that together have given in excess of \$2 million in scholarships to students wishing to pursue careers in the hospitality industry. Supporters of DIFFA, the Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS (www.diffa.org), come from all areas of fine design and visual arts, and their efforts have resulted in over \$38 million in grants to AIDS education, prevention, and direct care.

Corporate philanthropy plays a vital role in business and the community. An organized corporate program that aligns with the company's strategic goals can result in a stronger brand; enhanced relationships with clients, vendors, and referral sources; and greater *esprit de corps* among employees. I have experienced first-hand the positive dividends that come from a shared commitment to make life better for those less fortunate. And I know without a doubt that it is possible to "do well by doing good." 

