



Doing Well By Doing Good

By Michael F. Carmichael
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You've probably gone to an event where there was a small gift at your place. Or, you and your team have made your goal for the quarter and your boss gives you all a reward. Those gifts and rewards are part of the incentive business and they often have brand names attached. If you worked for, or sold to, or were a corporate buyer of clothes by Eileen Fisher, those gifts or rewards might not have had name brands. They might have been something as simple as a basket of soaps and shower gels and other spa goodies made by lower income women working toward self-sufficiency in the Enterprising Kitchen in Chicago. The basket might have been made of hundreds of iron washers, reclaimed from repair shop floors and welded by local women artisans in India.

These items and many more are the result of an idea that came to one man, Michael Arkes, a second-generation veteran of the incentive business. He was having coffee with a friend, the head of Enterprising Kitchen, and explained, "how they could expand into sales channels they weren't pursuing."

Before he got involved, the Kitchen was barely making it, with sales of \$150,000 and helping 28 women get on their feet financially. "I decided that since they couldn't afford the marketing they needed to make their socially-conscious organization grow, I would do that, and sell the products through my existing incentive company [Hinda Incentives, his day job]," Arkes says. Now sales are \$680,000 and 60 percent of that comes through incentive and reward products they make.



Mary Fisher and artisans in Zambia.

"Then, since I was doing it for Enterprising Kitchen, I thought I might as well do it for other social enterprises that I could find that have products that will work in the incentive market and that I could count on because they were well run, so I created Helping Hand Rewards," Arkes continues.

[SYSTEM-AD-LEFT]"Finding those other social enterprises wasn't as easy as I thought," Arkes says. "Another friend suggested I go to a meeting of an organization called Social Venture Network. I thought there would be tons of social enterprises and I could sign them up and everything would be great. That wasn't the case. I did meet Julius Walsh, who at that time was president of Greyston Bakery. So then I had two!" he laughs. Greyston makes brownies. Not just any brownies, but the brownies for Ben and Jerry's Fudge Brownie ice cream. They had decided to broaden their product offerings by individually packaging their gourmet brownies. "So, they had a new line and I had a new client," says Arkes.

"I read an article in Newsweek about a woman who had an organization called Mercado Global. Her products are made in

Guatemala by artisan groups. Guatemala is poorer than poor,” Arkes says parenthetically. “So that was my number three. Her people make jewelry and they’re adding mugs and scarves.

“We now work directly with artisan groups throughout the world. We have a total of eight.”

Arkes says that he’s learned the way to ensure a reliable supply of products from the artists and craftspeople Helping Hand works with. “The key to success,” he says, “is having an understanding and commitment from the person who runs the organization. They understand what needs to be done to support the business and are willing to do it.”

One of those people at the top of her organization and who understands is Mary Fisher. Fisher, the daughter of Max Fisher, a legendary Detroit-area investor and philanthropist, was diagnosed as HIV-positive many years ago after being infected by her former husband. Her speech to the Republican convention in 1992, in which she said, “The AIDS virus does not care whether you are Democrat or Republican. It does not ask whether you are black or white, male or female, gay or straight, young or old... HIV asks only one thing of those it attacks: Are you human?”, was named by a group of leading political scientists as one of the most important in 20th century America.



Michael Arkes, founder of Helping Hand Rewards.

Fisher, an artist, author and activist, created ABATAKA – a pan-African term meaning community. Her Zambian HIV-positive women artisans create beaded bracelets to support themselves and their families. The designs Fisher created are learned by all of the participants who execute them. In the process they also learn how to budget their income with the result that many have sent their children to school or even started their own businesses.

Most of the organizations Helping Hand works with are nonprofits, so additionally “a significant amount of their money comes from donations, which in turns funds the programs for the people they’re trying to support,” explains Arkes.

More and more companies are recognizing that they have a need to support a broader community than their shareholders. Eileen Fisher, the higher-end women’s clothier, Arkes explains, “has Amy Hall, who’s Director of Social Consciousness. If her company runs a promotion, for instance: ‘get a gift with a purchase of X dollars,’ then she’s going to try to source those gifts from a company that’s a social enterprise. Her mindset is ‘why wouldn’t I?’”



The Aventurine Protection bracelet is made by the Zambian artisans who work for Mary Fisher Designs.

Another example, explains Arkes, is Marriott. “They’re a socially committed organization. A portion of what they do supports social enterprises. As an example, they did a direct mail promotion to travel agents and they wanted to send a socially responsible gift to promote their Mexico and Caribbean properties. They sent them two travel candles in a little sack. The gift was made by a social enterprise

called Bright Endeavors – which was started by the same woman who started Enterprising Kitchen.”

Corporate social consciousness is, in some ways, going viral. Arkes tells of a woman who supplies business gifts to Marriott who came by his booth at the recent national tradeshow and symposium of the motivation industry called the Motivation Show. “She fell in love,” he says. “She took three of the washer baskets, filled them with samples of other Helping Hand products, and sent them to three Marriott executives. One of the executives was having a meeting for 30 other executives so he ordered one each for the attendees. From that meeting, then, we’ve gotten several other orders for 75-100 pieces each.”

As the great philosopher Tom Lehrer once said, in an entirely different context, Arkes and Helping Hand Rewards, even as a nonprofit, is doing well by doing good.