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Making an Impact When You Spend Money

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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A few weeks ago, I received a provocative e-mail from Mark Takefman, a colleague who is writing a handbook about the “elements of social responsibility” for community service and volunteer programs. He raised an interesting question about whether socially responsible organizations practice what they preach when they spend money:

As a member of the community service action team for Leatherstocking’s Promise here in Otsego County, NY, we organized a “Let’s Make A Difference Day” event. Seventeen groups did various services throughout the county on October 26, 2002 and then we all got together for a big party in the evening. To help identify and bond the participants, we gave each a t-shirt, a cotton shopping bag and a baseball-style hat, all with the event logo. All good promotional items, but wait... The cotton used in these items was grown using vast amounts of pesticides in foreign lands where sweatshop labor and even slavery is used. The fabric was bleached with chlorine, a dioxin-creating chemical. The articles were manufactured by those who maybe made one cent per piece. I asked our team before we ordered these promos, how are we making a difference by offering these items?

I told them that we have American-made, non-pesticide, organic cotton and non-chlorine bleached, American-made clothing available to us...Well they agreed, but somehow in the rush to do things, this was not important enough to get carried through. Personally, I felt ashamed at our effort and will certainly do more to rectify future such practices.

So I ask you, as we try in earnest to do good service, should we also try to consider the way and the materials we use to do this service? The above scenario reminds me of the medical quote: “The operation was a success, however, the patient died.”

Mark refers to American consumers, but clearly the issues he raises can be identified all over the developed world.

It is common for those in nonprofit settings to be critical of the social and environmental practices of business corporations. But do we ever assess our own degree of social responsibility? Do we purchase items only on the basis of the lowest price, without concern for the more global picture of production?

This has much relevance to volunteer programs. If we accept the premise that volunteers – by definition – care about improving our world, then they ought to support a move by the organization to purchase products that are environmentally safe and made by non-exploited labor. In fact, it would be a selling point to publicize an organization’s policy to seek out goods that meet the best social criteria.

Consider our choices when purchasing volunteer recognition gifts. Mark noted that some of the most common give-aways, such as t-shirts and tote bags, may actually perpetuate some of the problems volunteers care most about (child labor, pollution). Yet price becomes the paramount consideration (what volunteer program ever has lots of money to spend?).

Pay attention to product labels. Where was the item manufactured? Is there any symbol such as the recycled logo or low-energy tag? Vendors selling volunteer recognition items ought to proudly advertise their socially-responsible sources of products.

Even more creatively, make your purchase do double duty. Find small gifts that volunteers will enjoy in and of themselves, as well as have pleasure in knowing that the funds you spent went to a good cause. For example, shop at Ten Thousand Villages - <http://www.tenthousandvillages.ca/>, an organization that “provides vital, fair income to Third World artisans by marketing their handicrafts and telling their stories...” There is a growing number of such shopping options in North America and other places, including SERRV International <http://www.serrv.org/>, Equal Exchange <http://equalexchange.coop/>, or any of the companies listed on the Fair Trade Federation Web site.

Whenever possible purchase items that are made nearby. Many communities have elder craftspeople cooperatives or outlets for local artists to sell their wares. At major holidays, keep an eye out for craft and gift sales run by other nonprofit agencies, neighborhood associations, or faith communities. Often what you buy contributes to a fundraising drive supporting another good cause. You might even “commission” a gift especially for volunteers from a children’s art program or sheltered workshop (just make sure the products used to make your item are themselves fairly produced!).

If you try to shop with a conscience, make sure you attach a note to the volunteer recognition gift that explains where you bought the item and what the money spent will do. Not only will you be giving unusual items that can be enjoyed, but even volunteers who say “don’t give me anything” will be happy to know that your thank you to them also means a boost to someone else.

So thank you, Mark, for the alert and for allowing me to quote you here. I look forward to your handbook on social criteria factors (planned for publication later this year). If anyone wants to contact Mark directly, please e-mail him at: takefman@telenet.net

Please post a response to this topic:

- Do you believe that social responsibility should be an expectation of the profession of volunteer program management?
- Have you already found good sources of fair trade products or innovative gift ideas? Please share!

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Submitted on 17Feb03 by Juanita Fox, Media Coordinator, Ten Thousand Villages, Pennsylvania, USA

A special thank you to Susan Ellis for mentioning Ten Thousand Villages as a source for socially responsible giving. Ten Thousand Villages offers a wide variety of handcrafted items -- from home decor to jewelry, musical instruments, textiles and coffee and tea. All of our items are fairly traded, meaning that the artisans and the farmers received a fair price for their handicrafts, coffee and tea. Ten Thousand Villages products are available at a network of stores across the U.S. and Canada. Website: tenthousandvillages.com Ten Thousand Villages is a member of the International Federation for Alternative Trade and the Fair Trade Federation.

Submitted on 11Feb03 by Anne M Hislop, Scotland

What about the coffee/tea provided for volunteers and staff? Have you considered where they are coming from and if they too have been fairly traded?

Submitted on 7Feb03 by Doug Mackay, Volunteer Service & Resource Project, Pennsylvania, USA

When I purchased some holiday gifts for volunteers I used Supermarketcoop <<http://www.supermarketcoop.com/>>. When buying any gifts, at any time and for any purpose, consideration to those sites Susan listed and any other similar enterprises should be considered first. Circumstances, costs, time, and product choices may prevent full use of this purchase plan, but the intent is important and planning ahead can overcome most obstacles. I would recommend volunteer managers explore their region for local providers, scour thrift shops sponsored by or supporting nonprofit agencies, ask volunteers for their favorite sites and stores or vendors, and keep an eye open for new enterprises, especially at flea markets. Keep this motto in mind: "Always buy lemonade from a child." I have been collecting web addresses for places that offer a win-win purchase and a responsible consumer choice because we all should seek to support enterprises that offer a different return on earnings. Take a look at this listing for Responsible Consumerism: <http://www.geocities.com/givestore/wblnk10.html>

Submitted on 6Feb03 by Jim Edwards, Vol. Director-Hospice of Spokane Wa. USA

On a personal level I often shop for gifts at Global Folk Art, a fair trade store in our city. But to apply that same philosophy to volunteer gifts is a new idea. I have often ordered the items around a theme from a promotional magazine. Maybe the magazines themselves would offer socially responsible items if many of us requested them. Anyway, thanks for the expansion of consciousness or is that conscience.

Submitted on 2Feb03 by Vera Szoke, Contributing Editor: The ACTivist Magazine, Ontario, Canada -

Mark Takefman is absolutely right, and it's curious that more people haven't figured this out. He shouldn't have had to enlighten us. As much as we can, we should be consistent, make choices based on integrity, and practise what we preach. I would suggest that another important way to practise what you preach is to buy second-hand whenever possible. This may not work for promotional items, but it works for many personal and household needs, and sometimes even for gifts.

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