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“Companies Assist Charities: Some Businesses Use Holiday Gifts to Help Nonprofits”

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Michael Matson of Matson Financial Advisors in Danbury could have bought pocket calendars with his company name engraved on the cover for as little as \$2 each to give to clients as a holiday gift.

But Matson said he wanted to give a gift that was a worthwhile investment, and one that his clients would appreciate.

So, 11 years ago he began a tradition of making donations to charitable organizations during the holiday season in the name of his clients, most of whom live in Fairfield County.

“You’re doing it without the expectation of getting anything in return,” such as future business expected from something with a company logo, Matson said. “Our clients tend to favor the donation verses a trinket that may not be used.”

Area charitable organizations said they hope to see more businesses follow Matson’s lead and give donations instead of gifts.

“It’s a great idea, especially when not-for-profits are facing fund-raising challenges,” said Dianne Auger, executive director of the Southeastern Fairfield County Chapter of the American Red Cross. The chapter has had a few businesses make donations in the name of their clients or employees.

Merle Berke-Schlessel, president of the United Way of Eastern Fairfield County, said contributions as holiday gifts could be a good way to boost corporate donations, which have declined. The United Way has corporate donation programs, but she does not have any businesses making donations as a gift to clients or employees.

Maj. Michael C. Sharpe, the Salvation Army’s area coordinator, said he could easily work with companies who would like to make similar donations and could notify their clients of the donations.

“We could accommodation that type of donations,” Sharpe said. “It’s a wonderful option.”

That type of donation could do more for a company than just offer a tax deduction, Auger said. “I think it says something good about the company.”

Mike Tetreau, a real estate agent with William Raveis Real Estate in Fairfield, started making donations to the Red Cross in the name of clients four years ago. He said a donation is an ideal gift for his company, since giving back to the community is part of his company's mission statement.

He previously gave clients handmade birdhouses when he sold a home, but he does a lot of repeat business.

"It's hard to find a gift that meaningful to everyone," Tetreau said. He said he received positive responses from clients who also support the Red Cross.

Matson's company had made donations to a variety of charities, including Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Regional YMCA of Western Connecticut. Over the past decade, Matson Financial has contributed \$25,000. For the past three years, Matson's had donated money to Dallas-based Heifer International, a nonprofit charity giving livestock and agricultural training to communities in 47 countries, including the United States.

His average annual contribution of \$2,500 usually buys half of an "ark of animals," or one cow, one pig, two llamas, two goats, two sheep, five trios of rabbits, 100 chickens and 200 ducks or geese.

For years businesses have donated to Heifer International as a holiday gift to clients, said Wendy Peskin, Heifer International's northeastern region director.

The trend became so popular the company created a special catalog targeting businesses, she said. Matson said he likes that the value of the donation to Heifer increases for the community as the animals reproduce and crops grow.