

Helping hands

By Tony Pearson

A couple of weeks ago, I was writing up an article on the Alzheimer's fundraising walk, when I took a second look at the pledge form.

On the back page was a list of sponsors ? local businesses who donated to the event. There were more than a score of them ? not counting the Bancroft Association of Realtors, who co-organized the event.

This was one event. Throughout the year, these businesses are asked to contribute to local causes.

Estimates are that local firms get at least one request a month to help out, from major tourism development events such as Wheels/Water/Wings, the Gemboree, and the Rally of the Tall Pines, to fundraisers such as the Rally for Life or the Alzheimer's walk. Sometimes the request is for money, sometimes it is for merchandise (for example, the Lions' annual Christmas auction), sometimes it is for supplies, sometimes it is for people to help.

And the local businesses come through. Obviously, no business can support everything. But almost all businesses support at least one thing, and many support more than one.

Why do it? You could dismiss it as ?PR? ? building a good ?image,? but in a small town, ?image? doesn't bring in customers ? goods and service do, since residents and tourists alike can quickly determine their preferences.

Local businesses make their money ?the hard way? ? they earn it by their knowledge of what people in the region want, and their efforts to supply it. It's not easy.

(By the way, it's been said that everyone should have a go at opening their own business, so they can learn how it's possible to work double the hours for half the pay.)

I believe that in a small town, where business owners and their customers are neighbours, there is a greater sense of a shared community, including a shared awareness of what's needed and what it takes to achieve it.

Businesses donate because they want the events and the activities to succeed, and they want to help with the presenting problems. Certainly the rate of engagement of local enterprises is greater in a small town than in a large urban area, where it's much easier to say ?not my problem? or ?not my neighbourhood.?

And when you're working on limited sales and small profit margins in a small market, then a sponsorship, no matter how minor by comparison, is a greater contribution than the huge amounts given by national and multi-national corporations.

A document prepared some years ago for Imagine Canada, which helps the charitable sector, found that three per cent of national-level businesses collectively contributed a billion dollars in charitable donations.

This seems like a huge amount. Yet it represented less than one per cent of their pre-tax profits, and was only 15 per cent of the amount donated by individual Canadians.

Moreover, these large companies donated to large organizations ? mostly agencies with over a million dollars in revenue themselves. In percentage terms, 84 per cent of the money went to only seven per cent of non-profit agencies. These are groups with offices, and paid fundraisers and organizers.

That's a different world. For local causes, you have to fundraise locally. You need people to volunteer to do the organization and the canvassing. You need local businesses to throw in their support.

And they do. In fact, often they do both ? help organize and contribute.

So when I wrote up the article, I put in the sponsors' names ? not because they're advertisers (not all are), but because they deserve recognition for making a contribution, even though it may have little or nothing to do with their business. They, and the people who contributed their time and energy rounding up pledges and setting up the event, are ?hometown heroes.?

In small towns, you can't do without them.