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## *Pro Bono Work Helps Firms Fight Economic Slump*

*Employees Volunteer Services to Charities and Nonprofits, Fostering Potential New Customer Relationships*

BY RAYMUND FLANDEZ

Some small businesses are following the recession playbook of the unemployed.

Just as many laid-off workers are volunteering more to fill up their free time and enhance their résumés, small-business owners and their employees are doing more pro bono services or volunteer work as a marketing and customer-relations strategy.

The recession hit Studio G Architects Inc. of Boston particularly hard last fall, causing 2008 revenue to drop 30% from the prior year, says Gail Sullivan, the principal. Clients of the 16-year-old architectural firm killed or put on hold 10 projects last October. With work slowing down, the company began providing 15 to 20 hours a week in pro bono services to keep employees occupied and potentially attract future contracts. It worked.

This spring the firm prepared preliminary design projects, such as a playground for severely handicapped children, for various charities. The projects later received full funding and Studio G obtained several contracts, which ranged in value from \$16,000 to \$100,000. "Offering the pro bono services has given us a chance to maintain our design vigor [and] resulted in people hiring us," Ms. Sullivan says.

For a small business that has lost clients or seen revenue-generating projects dry up, performing free work is a way to keep employees engaged while cultivating new relationships. Donating services to charity groups, churches, schools and other nonprofits can "increase local visibility, deepen local business ties and create opportunity for new business," says Christine Banning, vice president of marketing and communications at SCORE, a Washington-based group that provides free counseling to small businesses.

While it is a strategy that can bear fruit in a tough economy, she warns that small-business owners should set parameters in terms of how much they give away. With charitable giving falling in 2008 for the first time since 1987, dropping about 2% from a year earlier, according to a Giving USA study released last month, more nonprofits could be seeking donations from local businesses.

That is why Robert Politzer, president and chief executive of GreenStreet of New York Inc., made sure his pro bono work can benefit his company in the future.

At a networking event four months ago, Mr. Politzer met the director of the Hudson River Clearwater Sloop Inc., a nonprofit that aims to preserve and protect the Hudson River. Now, the green-building and consulting firm is serving as the volunteer construction manager of the group's new headquarters in Beacon, N.Y. As a public-relations move, GreenStreet is uploading videos on YouTube as it documents the pro bono work.

"This is only going to help expand our network, which should lead to more business for us," Mr. Politzer says.

Indeed, relationships matter now more than ever, says Audrey Murrell, professor of business administration at the Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh. Those customers who get a first-hand look at a company's expertise during a pro bono project will likely turn to that company later, Ms. Murrell says.

"When there are fewer opportunities, there are more choices of whom people are going to do business with," she says, adding that people are going to "be more influenced by the relationship that you've cultivated."

One of the beneficiaries of eMazanti Technologies' largesse this year was a local church, which had trouble

setting up an outdoor wireless digital sign board. The Hoboken, N.J., technology company worked on the four-month project free of charge, saving the Our Lady of Grace church some \$7,000 to \$12,000.

In exchange, the company received an endorsement unlike any other. At a Mass, the pastor thanked the company in front of the congregation.

"My wife says, 'It's almost like a referral from God,'" says Carl Mazanti, the 33-year-old chief executive.

With business ebbing, George Amorim, the co-owner of Divine Catering LLC of Madison, N.J., is offering free food and catering services this summer to local charities, in preparation for more business in the fall, when holiday parties are typically in full swing.

So far this year, he and his five employees have put on a Fourth of July barbecue party at a local children's hospital and donated a cheese tray for a bowling fund-raiser. In September, the company plans to cater a 10K running event. "We're trying to get the word out," says Mr. Amorim, whose business started in 2004 as a caterer for private-jet passengers. "All these things that we're doing now are for the future."

Steve DiFillippo, owner of Davio's, a 24-year-old Northern Italian steakhouse in Boston, shifted 30%, or some \$20,000, of the company's advertising budget to pro bono work. This year, he says, not a week goes by that the company doesn't offer its services for charity events, or give away gift cards. Last year, the frequency was every other week.

"It's worth more to do charity work than to advertise in a local magazine," he says. "It's more like guerrilla marketing. People see that we're involved in the community."

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