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What Works

Trash to Treasure: Converting corporate waste into classroom tools. By Roy Wood

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, www.ssireview.com



Trash to Treasure

Converting corporate waste into classroom tools *by Roy Wood*

First-grade teacher Bonita Lewis has never forgotten the dark-eyed little boy named Tyler who came to school without any supplies. “He was small for his age,” recalls Lewis, a teacher at Elmwood Place Elementary School, a few miles from downtown Cincinnati. “And he never had anything. I think the father was in jail. The mother was very ill and was on dialysis.”

Without Cincinnati’s Crayons to Computers, a free school supply store for teachers, Lewis says she would have had to buy Tyler’s school supplies. “I don’t know what I ever did without them,” Lewis says of the nonprofit organization, which is known locally as C2C.

C2C distributes free school supplies to teachers in the 320-plus public and private schools in the Cincinnati area, which includes 13 counties in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

Last year, 75,000 students benefited.

The program’s priority customers are the teachers from the 162 schools in which at least 60 percent of students qualify for the federal school lunch program for children from low-income families. Those teachers can shop once every three weeks without obligation. But teachers from any school may shop if they volunteer for three hours per shopping spree.

C2C was the brainchild of seven participants in the 1995-96 class of Leadership Cincinnati, a community leadership program. Over 10 months, participants took field trips to community agencies, schools, and neighborhoods.

One of the sites visited by some members of the class was a high school in a poor area of the city. “We went on a February morning, and all the students had coats and hats



A volunteer helps a teacher at Crayons to Computers, which turns surplus office products into free school supplies.



on,” recalls Shannon Carter, a participant. “And the teacher ... was selling pencils to her kids for a nickel apiece.” The teacher told Carter that she bought a gross of pencils every month because neither the students’ parents nor the school could afford them.

As part of the leadership program, the class had to propose an intervention to address a community problem. Carter’s group decided to find a way to get corporations’ surplus inventory into the hands of needy kids. She and six classmates chartered Crayons to Computers as a nonprofit organization in 1996. Carter has volunteered as president and chief executive officer ever since.

Launching a National Movement

Although Crayons to Computers was not the first free school supply center, it is viewed as “the Rolls-Royce” of the dozens now scattered around the country, says Penny Hawk, program manager at the SHOPA Kids in Need Foundation, which coordinates a national network for the centers.

The center took a year and a half to launch as its founders learned the ways of nonprofits and tapped people in their personal networks for advice – and donations. “I knew about the for-profit world, but I was unfamiliar with the nonprofit world,” admits Carter, who had owned a shoe store. To get ideas, Carter visited a free school supply center in Richmond, Va., as well as Cincinnati’s Freestore Foodbank, which distributes free groceries to the needy.

TURNING SURPLUS INTO SUPPLIES

- Focus on local businesses as donors
- Situate store near the people who use it most
- Inspire donor loyalty with thank-you notes from beneficiaries
- Recruit volunteers (such as inmates or students) who need to perform community service

The food bank provided 3,500 square feet of space and put Carter in touch with the Neediest Kids of All Foundation, which donated \$25,000 in seed money. Dick Bere, retired president of Cincinnati-based Kroger Co., helped C2C get free shelving from a closed Kroger store and soon came on board as the unpaid chief operating officer.

The leadership group’s alumni called upon their contacts at Cincinnati businesses, and donations started rolling in. In 1997, its first year of operation, C2C distributed \$201,000 worth of school supplies. By the 2004-05 school year, the value of its distributions was up to \$5.2 million. Over eight years, C2C has given away more than \$30 million worth of supplies. C2C has twice outgrown its space and now occupies its own 41,000-square-foot building just a few blocks from the high school whose students’ privatization spurred the founders into action.

Shopping With C2C

The store offers basic school supplies, incentive items, such as stuffed toys, and tools for teachers, such as flash cards, learning games, and overhead projectors. (C2C rarely provides computers anymore because it found that most donated computers were too old to be useful.)

One of the hallmarks of C2C is its emphasis on accountability. To ensure that only full-time, certificated classroom teachers shop at their store, C2C workers check IDs against lists of classroom teachers. “We just want to be accountable to our donors that the right people are coming to get the right stuff,” Carter explains.

When teachers come to shop, they receive a list of available supplies, plus their estimated retail cost. They may fill one shopping cart, and as they leave, a C2C worker records the value of the selections. This school year, the average “sale” is \$471. “At the end of the year, we know to the penny how much went out the door,” says Carter.



Teachers from more than 300 schools shop for classroom supplies, including books. Most of the C2C store’s contents are donated by businesses.



Inmates at a local prison transform Lucite bracelets donated by Estée Lauder into “magic circle” geometry games, for use in classrooms.

Recruiting volunteers, soliciting in-kind donations, and raising enough cash to cover operating costs, the bane of many nonprofit organizations, have not been problems for C2C, Carter says. Because some teachers have to volunteer, Carter always has ample labor to augment the six full-time employees.

Last year, more than 1,000 individuals and corporations contributed in-kind donations. “People find us,” Carter says. “They need to get rid of things in a positive way, as opposed to having it go to a landfill.” For example, Cincinnati-based Procter & Gamble, one of the city’s largest employers, came on board as a donor in 1999, initially providing funds for operating support and later donating surplus supplies. The company has even gone to the trouble of establishing an area-wide collection system for the stray paper clips, pens, and pencils often left behind when employees retire or change offices. Because of these and other donations, the only supplies that C2C has to buy are crayons, glue, pencils, notebook paper, and theme books, because of the huge demand.

C2C’s operating budget is \$550,000. Kroger, Federated Department Stores, and Hallmark are major underwriters, as are several local foundations. A significant portion of the

budget also comes from small donations from retired teachers, school-related organizations, and small businesses.

Inmates Add Value

One of the innovations that distinguishes Crayons to Computers from other teacher supply stores is its partnership with Ohio’s prison system in a program called Crafts with Conviction. The program won the 2002 Peter F. Drucker Award for Nonprofit Innovation, given by Claremont Graduate University’s school of management.

The prison program began in 1998 when the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections asked C2C to find a way to involve state prisoners. The resulting program, known as CwC, has since become the store’s largest single product donor, accounting for 20 percent of the value of distributed goods last year. The prisoners transform donated bulk materials into flash cards, journals, maps, book bags, and pocketed chair covers. Besides provid-

ing C2C with value-added products made from donations for which there often is no obvious use, CwC gives inmates in 14 Ohio prisons and six juvenile facilities opportunities for community service.

“It’s a program that utilizes the inmates voluntarily and makes them feel worthwhile,” Carter says. Since the program’s inception, inmates have volunteered almost 1.5 million hours to produce about \$7.2 million worth of supplies.

C2C requires teachers or students to write thank-you notes to donors and volunteers, which Carter says helps build loyalty. The thank-you notes from children to inmates are particularly touching:

“Dear Sirs: Thanks for the chair covers for my class. P.S. I hope the sun shines on your side,” one elementary student wrote.

“Dear Sirs: Thank you so much for the chair covers,” wrote another. *“You are great men to have in Ohio.”* □

—Roy Wood is a freelance writer in the Cincinnati area.