

Section: Features

[Editor's Note: This is the second article in a special series on our past Corporate Citizenship Awards winners and finalists. The Minnesota Chamber and its Minnesota Business Gives program won the 2004 U.S. Community Service Award.]



Minnesota Business Gives: Strong businesses, strong communities

Together, communities and businesses can partner to solve community problems and address community issues. Minnesota Business Gives has proven an excellent avenue to help enhance this mutual goal.

Minnesota Business Gives takes advantage of the fact that businesses contribute to their local communities in countless ways. This statewide program, managed by the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce in concert with local chambers of commerce, is designed to motivate, educate, and recognize local businesses for their important and significant contributions through their giving and community involvement.

The Minnesota Chamber was one of 14 founding partners of Building Business Investment in Community, which started in 2001. The name was changed to Minnesota Business Gives in 2005 when the program went statewide as a program of the Minnesota Chamber. Major funding for Minnesota Business Gives in its first three years has been Marquette Financial Companies.

"The theme of 'Strong Businesses, Strong Communities' is the foundation of the program," said David Olson, Minnesota Chamber president. "Everyone benefits from healthy and thriving communities."

And it's working, as evidenced by the growing statewide network. The Minnesota Chamber has established relationships with 31 local chambers since assuming full responsibility for the program 2 ½ years ago.

Best of all, the program is a great fit for companies of all sizes and types. Businesses are recognized for cash and/or in-kind contributions to charitable organizations amounting to 2% or more of their pretax earnings. In other words, a small business that gives \$1,000 each year can receive the same recognition as a larger company that contributes \$10,000.

The program is easy to administer, too. The prime components are an educational workshop and a formal recognition program.

With assistance from the Minnesota Chamber, each local partner agrees to sponsor a seminar, "Strategies for Smart Giving." The workshop helps business owners develop a process for deciding when to say "yes" and when to say "no." Businesses will better understand why and how they give – how they can be more strategic about what they give and to whom. To date, more than 350 businesses, primarily small and mid-sized, have participated in these workshops in 30 communities. Another 10 workshops are scheduled in the coming months.

To be eligible for recognition, businesses simply have to complete an enrollment form and submit it to their local chamber. Owners certify that during their most recently completed fiscal year, they gave at least 2% of their pretax earnings in cash and/or in-kind contributions to charitable organizations. A worksheet is available to assist with the calculation. The only information about participants that is publicly released is the name, type of business and location.

Close to 80 businesses have been recognized in 8 communities across the state. One community has conducted an event annually for three years, and two others have done it for two years. Recognition programs will occur in additional communities this fall. In addition to the local recognition, each business receives a letter from the governor acknowledging its participation.

The program is winning rave reviews from participating chambers and businesses alike.

"As a chamber president for over 20 years working in three different communities, the one common factor I found in each is how willing businesses are to give back in their communities but how very modest they are about their giving," said Ken Warner, president of the Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce. "We jumped on the opportunity to create Willmar Lakes Area Business Gives as we thought it would be a great way to recognize our local businesses and thank them for all they do, and then encourage others to do the same. It's a win-win for everyone."

And from Chris Nelson, owner of Nelson's County Market in Faribault: "Our business has gained valuable tools and strategies. The feedback our chamber received was very positive. Local businesses appreciated learning how to be savvy philanthropists while both promoting their businesses and contributions to their community's needs."

For more information on the program, contact Jackie Reis at jreis@mnchamber.com, (651) 292-4679.

www.mnchamber.com/foundation/businessgives.cfm

For the full text of BCLC's July 2007 edition of The Corporate Citizen®, visit www.uschamber.com/bclc/resources/newsletter. Email the editor at BCLCeditor@uschamber.com.