

You Can Bank On It

Use bank envelopes to deliver your message. It's the newest idea from a nonprofit entrepreneur.

BY BRIDGET MCCREA

As Debbin Smith drove away from the drive-through teller, she realized that her cash was *not* neatly tucked in a bank envelope. Curious, she returned to the bank to find out why. She discovered that the bank had cut back on using envelopes because they were so expensive.

It was the dawning of a great idea.

Because bank envelopes contain money, people pay attention to them, she reasoned. It was a shame not to take advantage of such an opportunity. Why not use the wasted space on the envelope backs to advertise products and draw attention to nonprofit causes? In turn, banks could use the fronts to call attention to their programs and promotions.

Smith spent a year gathering information and conducting surveys on this idea. Then, after completing a feasibility study for a large Florida bank, she took her idea a step further. In January of 1995, Smith founded You Can Bank On It (YCBI), a Clearwater, Florida-based company that gives nonprofits a new way to generate funds and awareness without having to pay fees to any outside company.

"The idea is to add to the banks' bottom line, while giving great exposure to nonprofits and advertisers," explains Smith, who is no stranger to nonprofit organizations. She has been donating time and resources to over 20 charities since 1984. At 33 years old, she has had many careers, including ownership of Happy Harmonies' Singing Telegram Service and We Buy Notes (a company that bought and sold promissory notes in the secondary marketplace). She has also hosted a children's show on

cable TV and performed as Harmonie the Clown. "I've always been an entrepreneur," says Smith, who has known, ever since she can remember, that she was going to "be something."

Even though YCBI is a for-profit company, 100 percent of all money raised goes to the charity involved in each project. "In the programs that involve advertisers, we provide premiere advertising space at a competitive price," Smith explains. And the banks gain unprecedented exposure by letting the community know that they really do care and are willing to go the extra mile to help those in need.

Realizing that people are wary about contributing to organizations (due to bad press on a few), Smith relies on her certification as a licensed private investigator to uncover pertinent information about all parties with whom YCBI works, to ensure their legitimacy.

YCBI hopes to help raise \$1 billion for nonprofits this year through the envelope program. "To most, this goal may seem to be quite high and out of reach," says Smith, "but we believe anything can be accomplished if it is undertaken with a full heart."

Nonprofit World • Volume 18, Number 3 May/June 2000 • Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations • 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, WI 53719 • (608) 274-9777 • www.danenet.org/snpo

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CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Use a Digital Collection Plate

Set up a contribution form on the Internet, using First Virtual's payment system. First Virtual (www.fv.com) provides a simple, secure way for donors to make transactions over the Internet. Contributions are paid directly into your bank account. For more information, see *The Fundraising Planner* (608-274-9777).

Give Out Awards

Hold an awards event at which you honor people who have performed service for organizations such as yours. Such an event is a good way to reach a wide range of prospective contributors, including employees, vendors, corporations, and major donors. The honored guest could be the president of a bank, a philanthropist, a board member, or a celebrity who believes in causes such as yours.

Tell a Story

Tell donors real-life stories to show what giving to your organization can accomplish. For example, Covenant House mails to its donor base 17 times a year, and each mailing includes a specific story that illustrates a problem Covenant House faces and shows how it addresses that problem.

So how does Smith bring it all together to satisfy everyone involved? Most of her programs work like this: She teams a bank, an advertiser, and a nonprofit organization. The bank and advertiser share the cost of printing the envelopes. The nonprofit generally pays nothing. All three use the bank envelopes to get their messages out.

Whether the nonprofit needs help raising funds, finding volunteers, or publicizing an upcoming event, Smith's goal is to meet their needs through YCBI. With local food groups, for example, she uses messages on the bank envelopes to let people know what items are needed and where to drop them off.

Likewise, a Toys for Tots program, which helps over 90,000

children in west-central Florida each year, received the benefit of a massive name recognition campaign conducted by YCBI in concert with a local bank and well-known fast-food chain. YCBI's commitment and the ease of coordinating the effort were remarkable, says M.D. Bargy, coordinator of the West Central Florida Toys for Tots.

The envelope program is designed on a county by county basis and was developed for a national audience. "My goal is to help nonprofits create a better community," says Smith. "It's been reported that 64 percent of the public will buy a product or service from a business that supports an organization. We take that concept and create ways

for everyone to benefit. We're helping the community support the community."

From giving free clown shows to developing mascots for charitable organizations, Smith is used to jumping in to help. Her new envelope program combines her entrepreneurial spirit with her desire to contribute something to the nonprofit sector. "I could just volunteer my time to the organizations, but by looking at the bigger picture, I realized I could help them even more," she says. "I guess I'm just hooked on that feeling that I get when I give." ■

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