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Charity sponsorship links business to community

Fundraising for good causes is a valuable activity for developing good corporate citizenship, writes Claire Shoesmith

Does the word "sponsorship" send a shiver of dread down your spine?

While to most of you that may seem a little over-dramatic, for the few with either particularly small families or a lot of siblings of a similar age, it may well be the effect the word has on you. Yet again you have to get in touch with those relatives you only ever seem to contact when you want something, and for the neighbours it's even worse: if you're not quick then all your classmates will have cornered them already.

We all know that the amount raised doesn't really matter and that it's taking part that counts, but it can still be a rather daunting task.

Still, the benefits of traditional fundraising methods such as sponsorship to charities is huge, according to Sinéad Devlin, fundraising event manager for Dublin-based charity Fighting Blindness.

While her own charity expects to have raised about €10,000 through sponsorship from the recent Dublin marathon, she says there is potential to raise much more.

"So many people make so much effort doing the marathon. For them raising sponsorship money is the easy bit," she says.

Overall about €10 million is expected to have been raised for charity by the 10,000 participants, matching the amount raised at the mini marathon earlier in the year.

According to a spokeswoman for the events, support for charities has grown over the years, as has the number of charities people raise money for. "Where once you only heard about traditional, well-known charities, people are now running for their own causes," she says.

Research released earlier this year showed that just 12 per cent of Irish adults make fixed monthly donations to charity. The study, carried out by Amárach Consulting, found that nine out of 10 people donated to one or more charities during the year, and that the average donated was €15 a month.

Street collections are the most effective way to raise money, according to the study. Overall, Irish people are expected to give €450 million to charity this year. This is 0.34 per cent of Irish Gross National Product (GNP), and compares with 2.1 per cent of GNP in the US and 0.77 per cent of GNP in the UK, according to Amárach.

So while for most people donating to charity is something they do through sponsoring a friend or a family member, or by putting loose change into a collector's box on the street, for some it comes through a different medium.

In September, the 4,000 people in the Republic who work for US technology group Dell raised more than €25,000 for charity.

Every September the company, which has sites in Limerick and Cherrywood, Co Dublin, holds what it calls "Global Community Involvement Month". During this time, Dell employees around the world dedicate time to volunteering and fundraising, taking part in events ranging from a fashion show and soccer tournament, right through to a sponsored shave and wax, and even to senior management serving staff in the canteen.

This year employees spent more than 300 hours volunteering in the local community, including cooking, gardening and helping out in local community centres.

"We see it as hugely important in terms of involvement in the local community and in terms of being a good corporate citizen," says Annette Condon, spokeswoman for Dell. "It also helps the work-life balance of our employees and helps them understand the influence the business community can have on the local community."

According to Ms Condon, getting involved in these activities helps to create a strong sense of teamwork among the company's employees and reinforces the idea that there is more to life than just work.

The company also reconditions old computers for use by non-profit groups, and has several ongoing schemes providing computers and technology to local schools.

While this may seem a bit too good to be true, Dell isn't the only company to be involved in such activities. Musgrave SuperValu-Centra (MSVC), the retail franchise division of Musgrave Group, invests more than €2.3 million a year in local community sponsorships, initiatives and charitable causes.

As well as sponsoring particular events, MSVC also donates resources, premises, equipment, and even provides nutritional advice to local schools and sports groups.

The idea of giving back to the local community is being adopted by more and more companies.

Indeed, Bank of Ireland played a large part in the Special Olympics last year and Diageo has put an enormous amount of money and employee time into the area around the St James's Gate Guinness brewery.

Children's charity Unicef has launched its own fundraising initiative for Irish companies, entitled Corporate Champions for Children.

The programme, which can be tailored to suit the needs of an individual company and its own corporate responsibility issues, enables employers to give something back to the global community, says Maura Quinn, executive director of Unicef Ireland.

Since it was set up in 2003, eight companies, including Aer Lingus, ESB, Davy Stockbrokers and Deep RiverRock, have become involved in the scheme.

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