

Businesses find benefits in volunteering: Events like the WEG can bring free growth opportunities

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Guest Columnist

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LEXINGTON, KY - Many businesses want to know how to benefit from and how to prepare for the impact of the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, the largest international sporting event to take place in the U.S. since the 2002 Olympics Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

The University of Kentucky Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin), in collaboration with our Innovative Employer Roundtable Partners, brings you the first of a series of articles that will focus on how businesses can prepare for the advantages and opportunities the Games offer our workforce and our region.

Jennifer Fritsch, owner of Sutra Salon in Georgetown, is already thinking about how to capitalize on the tens of thousands of visitors descending on the area for the WEG this fall, September 25 through October 10. She's decided on a unique approach: volunteering.

"Advertising can be expensive," Fritsch said, but "volunteering for the Games will provide us with exposure through their advertising outlets and networking opportunities with other volunteers. It is a good, low-cost opportunity and we will hopefully increase our business from it." Fritsch and her employees already volunteer for several local initiatives.

"Our community appreciates our support, it helps drive business and the employees really seem to enjoy the experience. They benefit because they are given the opportunity to go out and build their clientele," she said.

Fritsch may not have a formal name for it, but this is a perfect example of an employee volunteer program. Not only do these programs help employers increase their community partnerships, but they've become such a sound business strategy that many organizations incorporate them into their overall business plan. Research supports that community outreach programs lead to increased revenues and customer loyalty. In addition, they provide employees the opportunity to help others, meet new people and be a part of a special experience.

The WEG presents an opportunity for Kentucky organizations to profit from these benefits during a unique and momentous event. The Games will require thousands of volunteers to run smoothly and provide the chance for employers to begin or enhance an employee volunteer program. Through the Games' Corporate Challenge Volunteer Program, participating employers will be recognized on the Games' website and event signage, translating into free advertising. Volunteers need not have equine experience to participate as opportunities range from event services to venue management and operations.

Erin Faherty, director of the Games' Volunteer Services, sees this as an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"Volunteers will gain exposure to a worldwide event and experience different cultures. Of course, the community benefits are huge. Lexington, and Kentucky in general, has the opportunity to showcase this area on a world stage."

Locally owned W. Rogers Company, specializing in the construction of waste water treatment plants and pre-treatment facilities, is a strong supporter of community volunteering and is the presenting sponsor of the United Way 10,000 Hours Show. This program is a year-long effort to promote volunteerism in the Bluegrass by celebrating volunteers who offer 10 or more service hours to any non-profit organization in Lexington or the surrounding areas. W. Rogers Company encourages its own employees to take up to 10 work-hours to volunteer

at a non-profit of their choice.

Warren Rogers, president and CEO of the company, touts the benefits of employee volunteering, "encouraging employees to volunteer in the community creates a deeper connection between our employees and the community. It also helps build employee morale, increase retention and is an opportunity for team building and for leadership development. Some of our employees have truly developed into better leaders by serving on various non-profit boards and committees, which has also anchored these employees to Lexington."

Multiple research studies support Rogers's practical experiences of employee volunteer programs. According to the study, *Good Companies, Better Employees*, employees who participated in volunteer programs were more likely to pursue promotion and development activities. In addition, volunteer programs can help attract and retain young talent and improve older workers' health. A 2007 Deloitte study found that 70 percent of 18 to 26 year-olds thought companies should use volunteering as a professional development tool and 76 percent said volunteering enhanced leadership skills. The same study found greater tenure for employees whose employers supported their community involvement, reducing recruitment and training costs. As for older workers, a 2007 Corporation for National & Community Service study found that volunteering provides adults over 60 with even greater benefits, including improved physical and mental health and greater life satisfaction.

Whether it's free advertising, team building, improved profits, community support or improved health, employee volunteer programs offer organizations and employees tremendous benefits. The World Equestrian Games is a perfect opportunity to begin such a program.

"What better way to impact the legacy, both economic and with our people," Faherty said, "than by volunteering for the World Equestrian Games. This really is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that has the potential to change lives."

As for Fritsch, the salon owner, "I'm just not sure if businesses are aware of the impact the Games could have. This is a great opportunity to help spread the word about the salon and help increase business."

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