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The good you do can also help you grow your business; seedership the small business platform to tell your community giving story



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CEOCFO: Ms. Smithberger, what is the idea behind seedership?

Ms. Smithberger: Our goal is to elevate the visibility of the good that small businesses do every day in their communities. We know they give back their time, energy and resources, supporting the community is a part of who they are. That good that they do can also help them to deepen customer connections, attract new ones, increase brand awareness and strengthen their reputation. We help them to easily and quickly turn their giving into a shareable, digital community story, so customers who want their purchasing dollars to benefit their community can support them and help them grow. It's a win-win. As a small business grows, so will their giving.

CEOCFO: Do most local businesses have involvement with the local community and give back? Has that changed over time and in particular, during the COVID pandemic?

Ms. Smithberger: I have come to see what small businesses do through my family. There are more than a dozen small businesses between my husband's family and mine and we started to take notice of how much they do for their communities. That is what piqued my curiosity and made me start asking the owners of all the local businesses I frequented on a regular basis about their giving. From a grocery store or restaurant, to my dentist or accountant, they all supported multiple organizations and causes.

I started doing research that validated that they were deeply involved in their communities, and then, earlier this year, we partnered with a market research firm to conduct our first 'Spring Into Kindness' national study of small businesses' giving. We discovered that 99% of them give back. They give financially, they give their time, they give their resources, and in-kind services and products. What happens is that many times giving is an extension of the owner, so it is their desire to pay it forward to the community that has supported them, helped nurture their business and enabled them to achieve their dream.

CEOCFO: Do small business owners welcome the idea of including this as part of a marketing strategy?

Ms. Smithberger: Large businesses, in my experience, *shout* it out. They share stories of their corporate social responsibility, as it is called out in their employee town hall meetings, earnings calls, annual reports, their external website and internal intranet – and it is something they are very proud of. However, for small businesses, we found in

speaking with them, that many see it as “self-promotional” and they hesitate pro-actively marketing their do-good activities.

From our study, we learned that small businesses’ primary driver in giving back is to help their communities. Certainly, they hope that it will benefit their businesses, but the dominant reason they do it is to make their communities better places. They are not the most comfortable in marketing it. We ask them how they get the word out about what they are doing and the primary ways are Facebook, word of mouth or tucked somewhere in their website.

CEO CFO: *How are you able to help businesses understand they should want people to know about their generosity?*

Ms. Smithberger: Particularly due to circumstances this year, the biggest change I have seen is that more and more are realizing the importance of being more open and transparent about what they are doing. I believe there are two reasons for this. Many of them are truly surviving directly because of some of their give-back initiatives. We have seen restaurants, for instance, delivering donated meals to feed the frontline and essential workers, but many other businesses also want to jump in and help, and they want their communities to know that they are there doing their part to serve, and that people are not alone. I have seen businesses that I typically would not expect to be outspoken about it, all stepping forward. I guess it is their desire for human connections, and to let their communities know that together they are going to make it through this.

“Especially now, small businesses are seeking ways to stay connected with customers online and they are looking for content to create every week. They are already doing the heavy lifting of doing good, so why not help maximize that by sharing the good they do on a platform where their community-giving stories can have a longer shelf life and become part of their overall business story.” Jennifer Smithberger

When I speak to small businesses, I say that it is more of how you frame your story, but more are seeing the attraction of engaging their communities. How do we maintain that relationship and connectivity beyond the products and services that we sell? Your customers are the reason you can do good. They are the ones that are giving you the opportunity and affording you the ability to do good in your communities – so celebrate it with them. It is also an opportunity to use your voice to shine a light on causes and organizations in your community that matter to you as a business. The most wonderful thing for me as a business owner is when I see my clients embrace this approach and realize their small business is a platform for change in their community.

CEO CFO: *How are you reaching out and with so much potential, how do you decide where and how to focus your efforts?*

Ms. Smithberger: We started to market and roll out in the Spring. That is why we did a national study. We were going to leapfrog from that, but then things changed this year. We were doing a lot of online ads and inbound content, and we have had to shift gears and pivot a little. We are available nationwide and small businesses can immediately access the platform via our website. We are now focusing our marketing efforts in two areas – Ohio and Connecticut – and we are reaching out to these specific targets with direct email campaigns and outbound sales.

CEO CFO: *What have you found works in engaging people?*

Ms. Smithberger: It is a new concept that usually takes a bit for people to understand. This is not something that currently exists in the market for small businesses, so our impetus has been how to expand one’s online visibility quickly. The seedership platform and the entire design is based upon the idea of simplicity. It’s easy to use, intuitive, automated as much as possible, and generates a lot more value than what the client puts into it. I wanted our offering to be a fast and easy way to ramp up one’s presence online. I also wanted it to complement everything they are already doing. We are not a replacement for anything a business is pursuing online; rather we help enhance and feed content to what they are currently doing.

The other piece that resonates well is how each small business has a story to tell. Consumers more and more want to support businesses that contribute to social good. They want their purchasing dollars to mean more than just a product or service. They are seeking businesses that help them make a difference, and are willing to drive a little further, they are

willing to switch brands, and even pay a little more. The idea of you having a story to tell that people want to hear is also appealing to businesses. If they need help telling their story – we are happy to help them with that as well.

CEOFCO: *Would you tell us about the free digital management dashboard you recently launched?*

Ms. Smithberger: Like many other businesses, with COVID's onset, we took a pause and had to reassess how to sell to and approach people. At that time, we also said that we truly believe in what we are doing and we know that small businesses give back so much to their communities and that giving is an asset for them. We want to help them leverage that, and make what they do more transparent. This is why we created this free package that we just rolled out. One of the things we found is that many small businesses underestimate the value of how much they give. They easily track the financial aspect of it, the money that they give or help fundraise, but where the picture starts getting hazier is evaluating the time their employees volunteer, the products or services they may give, or resources they loan such as venue space.

Part of the reason tracking is challenging is that small businesses get asked so frequently to give back. It could be clients, employees, partners and local nonprofits, and generally they want to say yes. Our 2020 Spring into Kindness survey found that 87% get asked at least once a month to give back. It may not always be big things they are giving, it could be a gift certificate, products for a silent auction, a gift basket or buying charity raffle tickets. While they are not keeping track of all of those things, when looking at the whole scope of everything that they do, it all adds up and does represent a big investment and creates significant impact. That is why we wanted to give this measure tier. Our hope is that when they clearly see all they do, they will realize that they should try to realize a greater return on investment (ROI) from their contributions to their communities. By ROI, I mean benefits for their businesses. If their contributions to local causes are more visible, more people can, and will, support them and thus can also potentially enhance the good they are doing for the communities.

CEOFCO: *Are you surprised more people are not keeping track just from an accounting and tax benefit point of view?*

Ms. Smithberger: That is what we found that they, in fact, *do* track. They use accounting and financial systems to track their finances, but the numbers dramatically fall when they consider their time and in-kind donations. Some of them use point-of-sales systems. For example, we spoke with a bakery that just entered into their inventory management system how many pro bono pieces they give, but time is something that they do not track. When we look at everything they give, we believe it is their energy, their resources and their time, together, that represent a significant investment for their small business and shows how they are consistently showing their community that they care.

CEOFCO: *Would you walk us through a typical scenario with one or two different types of businesses?*

Ms. Smithberger: We are a platform and provide a tool for them to use. The first component of that is we have a patent-pending act tracking and sharing system that allows a small business to enter what they have done. We call it a good deed. We will enter whatever donation that they make and then there is a really fast measurement component that asks them if it was time, things or money, to get an inventory of what they gave and its value. Once they enter all of that one time, it goes into a dashboard that aggregates. At any point, they can look at their profile and see what they have done in real time.

The second part is the community storytelling platform. All their impact stories are in one location. Many of them already do this on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. They are already entering commentary in posts and pictures. We instruct them to also enter it on our platform so it is not lost, and is archived, searchable and stored, with the added benefit of measurement. Those are the two components, the tracking and sharing.

An example of how we help them, through their use of the tool we provide, is a coffee shop owner in New Britain, Connecticut, who started with us recently. She did it because she relies on foot traffic and when COVID happened, she had to close her business and rapidly pivot to become an online retailer. She started a program that entailed buying two 12 oz. ground coffee packages and an additional one would be donated to essential workers in the community. That program has grown rapidly for her. In fact, she has expanded beyond her core market and now has customers nationwide. She has also expanded her network because she is dropping off the donated coffee to different locations throughout the community, enabling her to form new partnerships. She recently told me that when things return to a sense of normalcy, she will continue her buy two, donate one program. The program has helped her grow her business, drive sales and strengthen customer loyalty. She feels that they have a connection because they are doing good together

and it is also personally more fulfilling for her. I believe she recently kicked off a program which is giving back to teachers, through shifting the focus of who she is giving the donations to. She is using our platform to track every donation drop-off she does. For her, it is important to let her customers who purchased know that she delivered their donated coffee. She wants them to see the final conclusion of their good deed. She also wants to be very transparent in sharing with her customers how much she has given away to date. She does not want to just say she has a donation program; she wants to show people where she is going. I love seeing her page because she has all these good deeds already on display there. It is already a rich site that she can now share and build on.

We have another client who recently enlisted us to help them get started, and we are working with them to enter the first couple of acts that their business had done. They are a market research business services company, and they have a give-back program. For every project they do, a percentage of the profit goes back to the community. That is what they track. Every quarter, they write a check to the nonprofit that they are supporting. What they were not tracking is all the time that they give back through volunteerism or pro-bono projects. They were surprised when they saw how much they gave back and its value to the community when they put the donated time from their employees into our measurement system.

CEO/CFO: *Businesses are so cost conscious today. How do you help them understand it makes sense to tell their story?*

Ms. Smithberger: Sharing their community story generates many of the desired objectives of marketing their business. It helps them increase the visibility of their brand, strengthen their reputation, expand their network, and deepen relationships with existing customers. It can help them attract new customers who may not be shopping for what their business is selling but may have a shared purpose or organization they care about. It also can help generate trust in their business and employees. seedership is also an affordable way to expand your online presence in a polished, professional format. No coding or graphics skills are required to create their profile.

They are already making the investments in their community when they give their time, dollars and products or services. The seedership platform is about helping them maximize the impact of their giving – to create more awareness and exposure for the causes they support and to build visibility for their business.

I also priced it very cost affordably. The base share package is \$300 a year, which comes to \$25 per month. The average marketing spent for a small business is \$400. When we first started, we did research and designed the platform to be simple and self-service to allow for affordability. Especially now, small businesses are seeking ways to stay connected with customers online and they are looking for content to create every week. They are already doing the heavy lifting of doing good, so why not help maximize that by sharing the good they do on a platform where their community-giving stories can have a longer shelf life and become part of their overall business story.

