



Small firms, big hearts

Have you ever given away \$10,000? Paul Matthews, managing director of Parramatta-based law firm Matthews Folbigg, decided to do just that as he accepted the Parramatta Business of the Year Award at the Suncorp Parramatta Regional Awards for Business Excellence.

When the firm entered the awards, Paul had no idea winning attracted any monetary recognition. It was only as the awards evening unfolded that this became clear. As Paul walked to the podium to accept the award he felt elated about winning and embarrassed about the prizemoney. He made a swift decision – he would give the \$10,000 cash prize to Parramatta Mission and the Salvation Army, charities that his firm is passionate about and has supported for many years.

When Paul told the crowd what the firm would do with the prizemoney the audience went berserk: the crowd leapt to their feet, clapping and cheering. Paul was astounded by the crowd's reaction. Afterwards he was approached by hordes of people congratulating him, effusive in their praise of his firm's achievement and its generosity.

The following week the firm received congratulatory emails, letters and even magnificent flower arrangements from local businesses and clients who were so impressed by what Matthews Folbigg had done.

GENEROUS GESTURES

No one was more surprised than Paul. He just did what he thought was right. Paul is like so many partners in smaller firms – acting with generosity, giving away time and money to help individuals, causes and charities.

Firms like Paul's have understood and acted generously long before the big end of town embraced corporate social responsibility (CSR) and turned it into a key component of their employee brand and marketing strategies.

Big law firms now have sophisticated CSR programs – they embrace all manner of activities and do a lot of good for the community and for their firm's reputations and recruitment success.

Many large, influential organisations and governments, such as Westpac and the Victorian Government, insist that their law firm suppliers adhere to the principles of CSR. In the Victorian Government's case they make it a condition that their panel law firms provide pro bono services of at least 5 per cent of the value of the legal fees they derive under the panel arrangements.

This type of buyer power has influenced many bigger law firms to embrace CSR with a passion not previously evident, as this extract from one leading law firm's website reveals: "We recognised that if we failed to address issues such as social disadvantage and environmental management we would place at risk our ability to attract and retain the best people. We also recognised that our clients were placing increasing emphasis on the CSR credentials of their supply chain, including professional services firms. So, for us, our commitment to CSR is good for the community and good for business."

ALL-SIZES GIVING

Smaller law firms are often less strategic – they act on gut instinct and without much thought to business benefits. Smaller firms can feel out-gunned by their bigger rivals when it comes to meeting the requirements many clients have about reporting on their community and pro bono activities.

Smaller firms are a lot like that old Nike slogan – they 'just do it'; they don't record time against codes or calculate the cost. Instead, they work tirelessly for organisations such as Rotary and volunteer emergency services; they bail out wayward relatives of staff; they give staff time off to do good works such as volunteering for Meals on Wheels, donating blood, helping out at schools, coaching the kids' soccer teams; and they take pity on clients who are in dire straights and need legal services but can't afford to pay for them. This is the coalface of CSR.

Against this background it was a breath of fresh air to hear a spokesman



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for the Victorian Government at a law firm briefing, held for firms interested in putting themselves forward for consideration in the upcoming tender for appointment to the Victorian Government's Legal Services Panel, respond to a question from the floor about how a small firm could meet the requirement that 5 per cent of the value of legal fees derived under the Panel arrangements be committed to providing pro bono services by saying: 'Smaller firms do more than they know they do, they just don't record it or capture it in a way that can be easily measured.'

The smaller firms in the crowd must have felt so wonderful to know someone realised that they would meet the criteria if they just got better at recording and reporting what they already do.

GET IT DOWN

CSR is about how companies manage the business processes to produce an overall positive impact on society. If smaller firms use this definition as a guide and start recording the many activities (or business processes) they engage in that have a positive impact on society they will exceed the Victorian Government's requirement. They will make tangible an important business asset and will meet the requirement of a growing number of companies (big and small) which are demanding that their law firms meet minimum requirements and have the records to prove it.

You can argue that recording your community and pro bono activities is yet another administrative burden. And it is. But if it's a burden that could mean the difference between winning or keeping a client then it seems like a burden that you should embrace with the same grace that you display in doing good in your communities. ■

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