

Becoming a Valuable Part of the Community

A successful business offers more than just the right mix of products and services. It also establishes roots in the community by getting involved with charitable efforts, fund-raising programs and support of other local organizations.

Granted, a business can't say "yes" to every request for help that comes its way. But by being selective with your efforts and finding ways to educate those organizations about your store at the same time, a hobby business can reap long-term benefits from its community involvement.

Here are some ways you can become a more valuable part of your local community.

- **Make your presence known** – We're not just talking about advertising here. You need to make sure your community knows that you are part of the local business scene. Become active, or at least knowledgeable, in what's going on with your local chamber of commerce, business development groups and other organizations that are focused on businesses in your area. Get to know "who's who" for small business or economic development issues related to your community.
- **Get involved with kids, schools** – There's any number of worthwhile organizations your store can support, but without question, a hobby store should make sure to lend support in one form or another to programs or organizations that involve local youth. Whether it's a donation of free cards, the sponsorship of youth sports programs or other monetary support, supporting youth-based initiatives will help boost the number of young customers in your store. Your efforts will also be noticed by parents of youngsters and give them another reason to introduce their kids to your store.
- **Promote your efforts** – Make sure customers who visit your store are aware of the local programs you support. Have photos on display of any youth sports teams you sponsor, as well as any in-store events that benefit local causes. For instance, if your store takes part in the MLBPA's Cub Scout program, show photos of the Scouts learning about cards in your shop.
- **Use donations as a form of advertising** – Donating sports collectible items as prizes or items in fund-raising auctions is a great way to promote your store. Go beyond the reciprocal mention of your business the event organizer will offer in exchange for your donation. Make sure to attach a business card to the item or include a letter detailing the item if you donate an autographed piece. In other words, make sure the prize winner and anyone else who sees the item understands the piece came from your store. If it's a quality item, you're certain to get calls from customers looking for similar pieces.
- **Tout your expertise** – Anyone can sell sports collectibles, but what makes your business successful is the trust your customers have in your knowledge and expertise related to the hobby. Promote that expertise beyond your traditional customer base. There are probably thousands of sports fans in your town or market who are not active collectors but would be interested in learning more about sports memorabilia. Create a display for your local library, offer to give speeches to local organizations or even conduct occasional seminars in your store for youth groups. Also, making yourself available for appraisals can not only generate additional revenue on an hourly basis, but also give you the opportunity to acquire high-dollar items for your store.
- **Bring customers together for a cause** – It's great when a group of people can come together to help others in need. Hosting special store events as fund raisers is not only a lot of fun, but can create tremendous community support for your business. For instance, let's say a natural disaster hits your area and several families are left homeless. You could offer to donate a certain percentage of sales from a given day to those families, and use your store as a drop-off point for other donations. Letting the general public know about your efforts will not only bring in more buyers, but other first-time visitors to your store. It not only introduces them to your shop, but also lets them know you care about your community.

A successful business that lends support to various organizations is a valuable part of any local community. It also helps that business maintain a profile that traditional advertising can't accomplish on its own. Investing your store's resources into community programs will benefit your business in a variety of ways.