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Working for a good cause

More companies tap nonprofit groups for their workforce needs

BY GREGORY POTTS

Nonprofit organizations of all types are constantly searching for funds, while operations of all types are constantly searching for labor. So the two can be a perfect match.

Take Frontier City. The Oklahoma City amusement park makes special efforts to attract and retain workers, including frequent staff parties and prize contests. Nonetheless, employment can be a challenge, especially since the park experiences huge crowd fluctuations based on the season and the day of the week.

In 1995, the park was approached by a local church group that offered to send out a group of volunteers that would work at the park. In return, a check would be made out not to the individuals, but to their church. Frontier City's management tested out the idea, found it to be a success, and dramatically expanded its use.

"This is an excellent fund-raiser because, you know, you see a lot of organizations out there washing cars and they can only make so much, but this is guaranteed," pointed out Pete Fingerhut, director of marketing for both Frontier City and its sister park, White Water. Both are owned by Premier Parks, the Oklahoma City operator of the Six Flags theme parks.

Just as an example, one fraternity group brought a team of 34 workers to the park to work a seven-hour shift of simple jobs like food service, catering or running the games a few weeks ago, and received a check for \$1,400, noted Monika Mullins, the human resource manager for the parks, who heads up the "Fun"raiser booster program.

Frontier City uses between 40 to 50 groups in a year, with each group working three days in the year. A typical group has between 10 and 30 volunteers. On a busy day, up to 20 percent of workers at the park may be volunteers.

The park pays volunteers \$6 an hour with no income tax withholdings, which is a little higher than the hourly wage for regular employees. But then again, these volunteer workers don't get paid benefits and aren't entitled to workers compensation.

Fingerhut noted the volunteers make top-notch workers. He says most are raising funds for churches, athletic groups or charities, and are typically "good quality" individuals with an all-American image.

"They don't mind working," he observed. "A lot of times when you've got someone working for 30 days, it becomes very monotonous. You know, it's the same thing every day. But to a volunteer who will only be here three days, they're fresh."

The only thing the volunteers do not do is run the rides, explained Fingerhut. To ensure safety, ride operators must receive special training. The company has not used the volunteers very much yet at White Water since that park's staffing needs are much lower.

With very little promotion of the program, Mullins said she gets calls from interested groups about three times a week. Fingerhut noted similar programs are also used at several other parks in the Premier family, and he expects the number to rise.

Tony Collette, a local author researching the phenomenon, also believes the practice is on the rise. However, he said it is impossible to determine how often this practice is used since there is no central clearinghouse of information on "volunteer workforces," as he has labeled it. He has found virtually nothing written on the topic and has found that even leaders in volunteerism are unaware of it.

Collette has, however, turned up several other Oklahoma City-area businesses which have used the practice. BlueCross/BlueShield, for example, has "employed" the services of Edmond Memorial High School Band Boosters. When the company needed to hand-assemble a huge mailing to its insureds, the materials were taken to the school's gym and teen and adult volunteers worked on the mailing from morning to evening.

Albertson's has used volunteers for the high traffic experienced at the grand opening of its gas stations. In addition, the Southwestern Bell Bricktown Ballpark and certain Sonic Drive-In locations have used volunteers, according to Collette.

But perhaps no program locally has been more long-standing than the one at Lloyd Noble Arena. Henry Loyd, who manages the facility, said the University of Oklahoma facility has used volunteers to clean up after events since some time in the '80s, although he was not exactly sure when it first began.

According to Loyd, one church group actually paid off its mortgage with its volunteer earnings at the arena. The groups can sell concessions and receive a cut of the sales. Or they can pick up trash and sweep in the seating area and then haul the trash out of the building. After the volunteers are done, the Lloyd Noble staff mops. Following a typical basketball game, this cleanup will generally take three hours, said Loyd.

These groups are paid based on three factors – the size of the crowd, the amount of concession sales and the quality of the work.

In an average year, the arena hosts between 25 to 30 events a year, including 16 men's basketball games and five women's games, a three-day high school wrestling tournament and three to six concerts. Last season, Lloyd Noble used eight different volunteer groups. But unfortunately, Loyd receives many calls from more groups than he needs.

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