

FOCUS ON WOMEN IN BUSINESS

OPINION

Jump in! Volunteering helps you personally, professionally

By **MARILEE FALCO**

Special for Lehigh Valley Business

For professional women pursuing satisfying careers, the benefits of enriching their lives and work through philanthropic endeavors cannot be overstated.



Falco

Those who volunteer with charitable organizations inevitably experience the pride of giving back, the gratification of supporting those less fortunate than themselves and the connection to their larger community. In addition, volunteering with nonprofit organizations and community boards provides women with valuable leadership opportunities.

Working with charities enables women to hone valuable business skills, gaining expertise in written communication, collaboration, public speaking, event planning and organizational management. Community boards and nonprofit organizations offer great training for professional women, helping them gain confidence in their leadership capabilities while also exposing them to people working in local nonprofits and businesses that they might otherwise never encounter.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Volunteers do landscaping during the Day of Caring, an annual event organized by the United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley.

So, everyone wins – the organization receiving the volunteer support, the volunteer's business and the volunteer herself.

BENEFITS YOUR CAREER

The Urban Land Institute recently surveyed 1,200 women in the real estate and land use industries to gather data about what makes women successful in the field.

One interesting distinction between female CEOs and non-CEOs surveyed is that more than three-quarters of the CEOs viewed external networks (which include volunteer activity) as “very or extremely important to their career success.”

Non-CEO respondents viewed external networks as less important.

The study went on to report that the

external leadership experiences “often make [women] better prepared for leadership roles within their own organization.”

ALIGN SKILLS WITH VOLUNTEER WORK

Of course, it is imperative that women align their volunteer efforts with a cause that they are truly passionate about.

When a volunteer fully believes in the mission of a nonprofit organization, her efforts are more heartfelt, efficient and ultimately successful.

It is also advisable for women to recognize the skills that they can bring to a charity and apply them accordingly.

Certified Financial Planners, for example, can oversee the fiscal workings of a nonprofit, while women who work in public communications or marketing can help with the charity's promotional materials.

IF NECESSARY, EASE INTO IT

Juggling professional life, family life and philanthropic work can be challenging at times, particularly for women with younger families.

Often, women just starting out in the business world believe they must postpone giving back to their community. In fact, there are many ways they can pitch in.

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LEHIGH VALLEY **BUSINESS**

CHANDLER

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her mother, JoAnne Forman, and stepfather, Pat Forman.

"We're not just a flash-in-the-pan of sparkly ideas," Chandler said. "Products we invented soon after we started have stood the test of time — we still have new customers."

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Sealstrip started in the Conshohocken area in 1979, moved to Boyertown in 1992 and transitioned into its existing location in the Gilbertsville area between 2007 and 2009.

Chandler had a number of sales and management positions in the business before working her way to the presidency.

"Being in a family business was a challenge which amplified the challenges of being female and young," she said. "When I first started in the business, I was glad I had a different last name than my mom and stepdad."

She has always called her mom by her first name while at work.

"This was [almost] 25 years ago, but I when I started, I felt that there was a strong gender bias in family business," Chandler said. "Sons going into the family business were 'a chip off the old block,'



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Sealstrip Corp., which emphasizes community involvement, sponsored the creation of this bear, part of the 'Bear Fever' project in which life-sized fiberglass bear sculptures were made for display on the streets of Boyertown.

and daughters were 'given a job until they got married and had babies.' "

BUILDING CREDIBILITY

At the start, Chandler never mentioned her family relation unless she'd developed a strong relationship with a co-worker.

"I looked for ways to build my credibility both inside and outside the business," she said.

This translated to a master's degree in management from Penn State and a law degree from Temple University, through night classes.

"Not only did the degrees help my credibility, [but] they helped me to leapfrog ahead in my business knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving," she said.

"Working with large companies increased my professionalism, and the opportunities I've had to travel dramatically increased my maturity and understanding of people and other cultures."

FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT

Finding good workers and treating them well have been a big part of Chandler's and thus the company's success.

"It starts with putting people first, not profits," Chandler said. "I think the single most important factor for a business' success is employee engagement."

In the Best Places to Work in Pennsylvania survey, for six straight years Chandler's employees have scored their workplace at 100 percent in questions relating to owners and leaders caring about them and not treating them like just another number.

Chandler strives to listen to her employees and encourages them to be creative with internal projects; this keeps their work culture fun, rewarding and comfortable.

"This engagement and true caring about people turns into productivity,

innovation, customer service and then into profits," Chandler said.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Eileen Dautrich, president of the TriCounty Area Chamber of Commerce based in Pottstown, has worked with Chandler since 2009 when Sealstrip Corp. joined the chamber. Chandler was board chair for the chamber from 2014-16.

Dautrich noted Sealstrip was the first company to pilot the chamber's six-month worksite wellness initiative and that Chandler sends employees through its 10-month leadership and development program. The program is designed to help employees learn how to serve on boards of directors for community nonprofits.

"She is very supportive of women involved in business," Dautrich said about Chandler. "She, along with other women from Sealstrip Corp., regularly attends our women of the workforce luncheons."

Dautrich said the luncheons provide women with a chance to support each other and network, as well as hear a guest speaker.

"She sees attending these events as a reward for the women in her company, bringing them to the event — getting them out of the office so they have an opportunity to enjoy the event together," Dautrich said.

VOLUNTEERING

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Young professional mothers, for example, may not be able to attend every volunteer meeting, but they can write communications materials at night from their home computer or make phone calls on behalf of their charity.

And, of course, if women are unable to fit volunteer work into their busy lives, they can contribute financially to the charity of their choice, in the form of a cash gift, appreciated stock or through a donor-advised fund.

JUMP IN

For professional women working in the corporate world, it can be easy to live in a bit of a bubble. By volunteering with charitable organizations, working women gain insights into the life experiences of those receiving assistance, as well as a greater

understanding of their larger community.

The friendships formed and experiences shared with those being served and with other volunteers are uplifting and life-affirming.

So, jump into the volunteer pool. The charitable organization will benefit from your contributions — and so will you.

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ENGINEERING

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ensure they adhere to environmental regulations.

"Companies don't necessarily have specific expertise in office staff, so Mary is like their project manager," Jankoski said.

ANOTHER GENERATION

Rooney and her husband, Chris Hoffman, were able to reach a work-life bal-

ance during the demanding years of establishing a business and raising children.

"My husband and I kept abreast of each other's schedules and would cover for each other for that overnight trip or late meeting," she said. "Having my own established business did allow me some flexibility in my schedule to coach and be a Scout leader at various times in my children's lives."

Meanwhile, the couple's daughters are pursuing degrees in engineering.

It's just another example of the family continuing to defy the norm.

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