

Small Business: Backing sports team can spur goodwill, cash

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By Joyce M. Rosenberg, The Associated Press

The signs posted on the fences at Little League and football fields advertising local mechanics and dry cleaners are some of the best marketing tools that a small business can use.

With millions of children playing baseball, softball, football and other sports year-round, small businesses have a great opportunity to boost their name recognition and perhaps bring in revenue. There also can be a side benefit to supporting a local team or league -- employee morale can get a lift when the boss does something that benefits the community.

Fred Dumas, who owns a Beef O'Brady's franchise restaurant in the Tampa, Fla., suburb of Riverview, has sponsored several teams, including boys' T-ball and girls softball. He also sponsors player of the week and player of the month awards at the local high school.

Mr. Dumas says sponsorships help him advertise his restaurant in the absence of a big marketing campaign. While Beef O'Brady's has 230 franchises in the Southeast and Midwest, it doesn't have the advertising budget of such bigger corporations as Applebee's, he said.

That's where an entrepreneur's innovation will serve him or her well.

"I was in the schools before we ever opened up the door" a year and a half ago, Mr. Dumas said. "I presented a trophy the first Monday I was in business."

He said his sponsorships had brought in business. When the local paper takes a picture of his players of the week and month, they're posted in the restaurant and, of course, the youths and their families and friends come in. The restaurant also draws a crowd after games, Mr. Dumas said.

He also works with elementary schools. At school fund-raisers, students get coupons they can bring in to Beef O'Brady's; when they do, Mr. Dumas will donate 20 percent of their restaurant checks back to the schools.

Sponsoring teams and awards isn't likely to break a small company's budget. Often, for just a few hundred dollars, a company can get its name on a sign on a ballfield fence or a mention in a program. And smaller companies have an advantage: As Mr. Dumas noted, "The big corporations don't believe in putting signs up in the Little League fields as much as we do."

Now, while he's competing against such chains as Applebee's, "The people who come in here, they know me and I know them," he said.

But if a small business wants to spend more, there are plenty of opportunities. If school or local recreation officials agree, it's possible to take cues from the businesses that give products and services away at minor league parks (fans love the T-shirt toss events between

innings). And you're not limited to children's events -- there are plenty of adult softball and basketball leagues and teams sponsored by local businesses.

The accounting firm Levine, Jacobs & Co., in Livingston, N.J., doesn't expect to bring in revenue from its sponsorships of two Little League teams, but there are other, intangible benefits to be had, according to co-managing partner Michael Karu.

Mr. Karu said the firm's sponsorships help its name recognition and create a sense of goodwill. They also help boost the morale of employees who can feel good about the contribution that their employer is making to the community.

"They know that whether we're sponsoring a Little League team or participating in a charitable event that something greater is happening" than just making money, he said.

"We've been in Livingston for over 50 years, and a large number of our clients live or work in the community," Mr. Karu said. "It is necessary for every small business to give back to the community, and one of the best ways is through the children."

As Mr. Karu noted, sponsoring teams is akin to helping sponsor charitable events or donating to charities. And small businesses often choose local charities.

"If I can benefit people in the community where my business is located and benefit my business at the same time, it's a perfect match," he said.

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