

Competitive philanthropy: 'Good is getting really sexy'

TRALEE PEARCE

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Ben Goldhirsh, 26-year-old heir to his father Bernie Goldhirsh's magazine publishing fortune, wouldn't have raised any eyebrows by starting up his own vanity glossy about skateboarding or indie culture. So why did he launch a magazine about doing good?

Goldhirsh makes the analogy to Wired magazine, which documented technology's shift from nerdy to "sexy as all hell."

"Just the way the transformation of technology in the cultural landscape affects how much money, interest and human capital goes into it, the same thing with good," he says from his West Hollywood office. "Good is getting really sexy."

No kidding. His timing is red hot, right on the heels of a spate of almost competitive acts of philanthropy by the likes of Richard Branson, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, with big donations being earmarked for African aid, global warming, global health and AIDS. Celebrity charity à la Angelina Jolie and Bono has never been hotter. Being good is the new citizenship, particularly in the corporate world: A group of Toronto CEOs led a 600-person brigade last week in building a new playground in the needy Lawrence Heights neighbourhood, for instance.

Backed by Goldhirsh's millions, Good magazine is itself a philanthropic agent: The full \$20 subscription fee goes to one of a group of causes the subscriber can choose from, including stalwarts such as Unicef and newer initiatives such as Creative Commons, which collects and distributes free on-line licences of arts content for file sharing and remixing. In just two weeks, he has secured about 6,500 subscriptions.

Goldhirsh says that for too long, good has been mired in a soft, sacrifice-based mentality, where "do-gooder" is a pejorative. "That's a problem for us. We see people doing good as the most impressive, sexy, interesting people around," he says, adding that those who meld idealism with pragmatism will get the most glowing coverage in his mag.

"How are we going to be as tough as the bad guys? Let's give good some teeth." Part of that means unapologetically aggressive branding, cool-kid graphic design, and hipster New York and L.A. launch parties.

"We're just trying to frame valuable content with an aesthetic that makes it engaging and exciting and entertaining. I don't care about what fashion to wear or how to get six-pack abs. We think there's a giant audience out there with this sensibility that really wants content that matters but wants it framed in a way that caters to their life.

"It has to. This isn't a chore."

The contents include a photo essay from both sides of the Mexico/U.S. border, an "experiment in extreme urban environmentalism," and a profile of Majora Carter, the executive director of a

grassroots group called Sustainable South Bronx.

For the serious, there's a column by poverty activist Jeffrey Sachs and for fun, there's a page of non-donkey-or-elephant animal-shaped American campaign stickers. Like the trend itself, the magazine's appeal is cross-generational, aimed at everyone from twentysomethings weaned on Jon Stewart to baby boomers who want to recalibrate their priorities.

Toronto executive coach Julia Moulden says an increasing part of her business is helping successful midlifers figure out how to serve the world better. She is writing a book about the group she has dubbed the New Radicals.

"At first, I was sheepish about the trend, which might be seen as a sixties redux. People are cynical, saying that people who came of age in that era, they never did anything more than invent Prada and non-fat decaf lattes.

"But I feel there's an unfinished revolution welling up inside of us. Our ideals had been covered over by our busy lives -- careers and raising families. Now that we've got more time and are at midlife, many of us believe our greatest contribution is ahead of us and we want to make the second half of our lives about doing good in our communities and the world."

Anil Patel is the executive director of the Toronto-based Framework Foundation, which since 2001 has matched young volunteers with charities at chic cocktail parties in Toronto and Calgary. He characterizes our emerging fascination with philanthropy in the form of a challenge: "How big can you make your civic footprint?" At Framework's "Timeraiser" art auction events, 1,100 volunteers have donated 25,000 hours for 120 charities in exchange for \$110,000 worth of Canadian art. "It's about both disposable time and income -- you don't have to be Bill Gates to have a big civic footprint."

Thanks to the Internet, it's also easier than ever. You can contribute to a friend's Terry Fox run in another city, log on to a local activist group website in your neighbourhood to find out about an upcoming meeting, or learn more about global charities tackling the environment or the developing world.

Patel says the recent Toronto AIDS conference is a great example of the efficiency of modern philanthropy. "You just had to look at the kiosks sitting beside each other -- faith-based organizations, gay and lesbian groups, youth groups. These are untraditional pairings."

Goldhirsh is particularly interested in what he sees as a new business model for doing good that bucks the non-profit, granola, tree-hugging stereotypes -- the idea of "doing well by doing good." He also loves to repeat a quote by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar about corporate giants "giving back." "He asks, 'What were they doing the whole time -- taking?' I think there's a way to do both. The market starts to account a value for good -- especially at a time when maybe there's a lack of confidence in the pen of government setting things in a certain direction. You've got to hope the market can do it."

Philanthropy is now a commodity, of sorts. Just as you would shop for the right house, you shop for the right outlet for all that good you have ready to bust out.

Moulden says the first step is figuring out the nature of your commitment -- do you want to work full-time as an activist in an existing organization, start up a new enterprise, or influence your workplace from within?

Next is figuring out what skills you have to offer, what moves you and how you're going to manage the change.

In this climate, charities have to be savvy about attracting the right people too.

William Pace has been matching up charities and potential board members as chief development officer of a Canadian charity called Boardmatch Fundamentals, which introduces people with much-needed skills such as law, marketing or accounting, with 800 non-profit groups who need them -- much like an on-line dating service.

"It's an expanding and growing program -- there's almost a social shift that's happened," he says. "There's an increase in younger people, in their 30s, who want to be on boards."

Soon, it will be deeply uncool to not be engaged beyond writing a cheque. And it also isn't taboo to admit that there's more in it for you than a warm and fuzzy feeling.

Pace says one reason for the uptick is the changing corporate environment. Just as Angelina Jolie may have been told by her managers that throwing herself into African and Asian development issues might boost her public persona, so too are management types being told that being on boards may put them in better stead back in the workplace.

Pace is excited about harnessing that ambition, and hopes to expand Boardwatch across Canada. "The charity sector accounts for 100 billion dollars a year [in revenue]," he says. "If through good governance we could improve that by 1 per cent, we could add a billion dollars."

Goldhirsh says that although he's having a lot of fun, he knows the stakes are high. "There's both an ominous and an exciting feeling. One is a potential so fantastic that moves us towards whatever perfection our species is supposed to attain eventually. The other is a potential we don't like to speak of."