

Corporate gifts should be about giving back as well as handing out, writes Katy Chance

Branding that brings a new awareness

THE culture of gift giving is a universal one and, increasingly, a corporate one. But as mass-produced branded pens, key rings, flash sticks and card holders are all hopelessly 10 minutes ago, companies are having to think laterally about gifts that come bearing their name. And they're starting to think about the story behind the gift.

"We are experiencing a big demand for gifts that make a difference to a community," says Marion Pearce, deputy CEO of The Hope Factory. "Why buy AIDS ribbons from a factory in China when you could buy from a South African company that works within communities affected by AIDS?"

Started by Pearce and CEO Elizabeth Zambonini nine years ago in a garage with a couple of sewing machines in Cape Town, The Hope Factory trains 128 people a year at a single factory in Port Elizabeth. The two were already friends; Zambonini has a background in fashion, Pearce in corporate communications.

"We wanted to help transform SA in some way. With Liz's background in fashion, we looked at the clothing industry and decided we could help with skills and help people learn to support themselves."

They were assisted by the Department of Labour until 2008, but then the department changed the tendering process and the proposal had to be resubmitted. They're still waiting for an answer.

"In the meantime, we had to continue and position ourselves correctly for the private sector," says Pearce. The Hope Factory is now the enterprise development initiative of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants and is run from its offices.

Major corporate funders are DRA Mineral Projects, who came on board last year through a deal facilitated by Tshikululu Social Investments, Nedbank, and Actichem.

As companies cut budgets in the downturn, Pearce saw gifts orders that were less expensive "but had more meaning".

The Hope Factory has a three-phase model for enterprise development. Phase one offers two 15-week training pro-



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: The Hope Factory's Khosi Ngqinambi, CEO Liz Zambonini, Vuyo Mvinjelwa, board chairman Ernest Carelse, deputy CEO Marion Pearce and Ntomboxolo Miliho contribute to enterprise development in SA. Picture: SAM MAJELA

grammes in technical, life and business skills. The technical skills comprise aspects of craftsmanship such as sewing, beading, wirework, box and paper making.

As their development approach is holistic, the programme also looks at HIV education, early childhood development within the community they train and business skills.

"If they want to," says Pearce, "they can move into phase two, which most do, or they can move into the formal sector or the entrepreneurial side."

Even those who are involved in making corporate gifts — phase two — tend to "moonlight" in their communities using skills learnt from The Hope Factory.

"From the start we had to find a way we could make money from these entrepreneurial activities and corporate gifts seemed obvious. One of our first clients was Old Mutual. We pitched the idea of hand-crafted invitations for their annual dinner to them, and they were very open to it."

Among their most popular gifts are beaded cutlery and beaded and boxed wine glasses.

"We change ranges each year for Women's Day and the Christmas season, and we've just launched a range specifically for the Fifa World Cup including fridge magnets and clocks."

Another long-time buyer of their gifts is Ernst & Young. Princess Andries, their senior

manager of diversity and inclusiveness, raves about the handbag holders which clip onto tables at restaurants and pews at churches. They used them as their Women's Day gifts last year.

"Ernst & Young has major strategies around developing women and giving back to the community, so The Hope Factory's work speaks directly to this."

Andries maintains that buying a quality gift for clients or staff from which a percentage goes back to the community is the way corporations, and even individuals, are moving when it comes to gifting.

"We always tell our clients about the story behind the gift

and often they start using The Hope Factory too."

Phase three of the enterprise development initiative is encouraging the now skilled and business-savvy workers to move into their own business.

"Throughout all the phases we offer mentorship and counselling," says Pearce. "And buying local products produced by empowered companies or NGOs is a way companies can earn BEE (black economic empowerment) points."

While some insist it's better to give than receive, buying as well as giving gifts with an empowered social provenance seems like a way to receive and still feel good about it.

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