

BEST PRACTICES

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HiFive invests in, connects with people

Gives half of profit

By Jeff Wallner
Enquirer contributor

MASON — To survive the recession, HiFive Development Services cut salaries and bonuses, canceled vacations and stopped the weekly free lunch.

What the design and construction services firm didn't do was stray from its mission: investing 50 percent of all profits back into the community and charity projects.

"A lot of companies market themselves as giving back to the community, but it's usually around 10 percent," chief executive Mark Davis said. "It's not smoke and mirrors with us. It's part of our business plan."

Last year, HiFive posted \$14 million in revenues and \$325,000 in charitable contributions, slightly more than 50 percent of net profits, Davis says. Some contributions are in cash, but most are pro-bono architectural, design and other services.

Beneficiaries have included Cincinnati Christian University, Athletes in Action, River Hills Church, One City Foundation and CityLink Center. HiFive helped fund Little Miami High School's sports stadium and recently wrote a \$7,500 check to the Anthony Munoz Foundation, Davis says.

Mark Householder, president of Athletes in Action, says HiFive's sponsorship makes possible that organization's annual Cincy Challenge soccer tournament. "We deeply appreciate HiFive and their commitment to partnering with us and with many others in the nonprofit world," Householder said. "Their purpose as an organization lines up well."

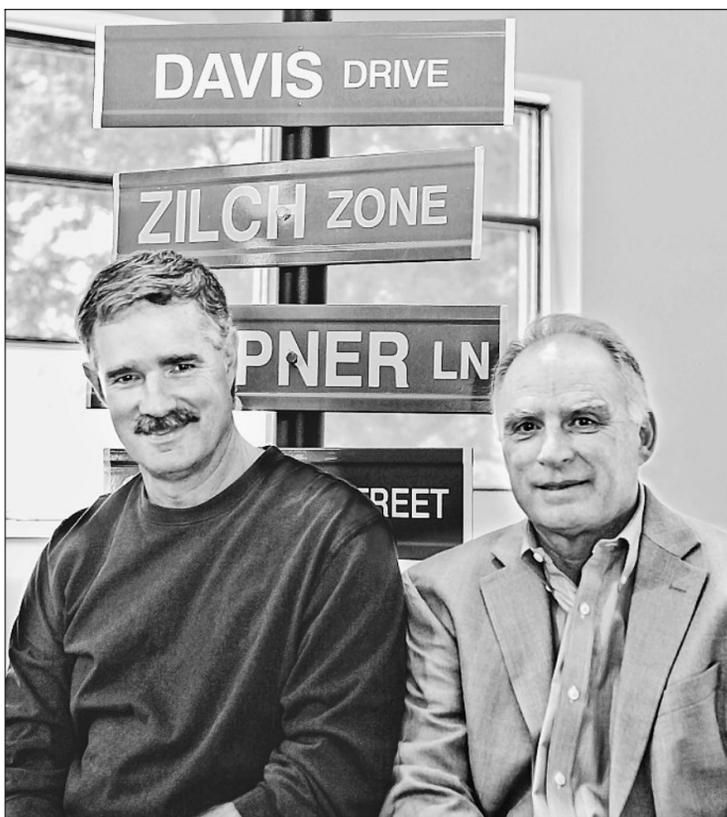
The commitment to community doesn't always come easily.

In 2009, Davis' executive team met with HiFive's employees and advised them that layoffs were imminent if drastic cuts weren't made.

"Everybody in the company took a cut," Davis said, "but I was encouraged by the positive response."

It also paid off. HiFive didn't lay off a single employee during the recession and has restored most salaries to previous levels. The company now has more than \$30 million in new projects in backlog. It recently hired additional project managers and designers, bringing the total staff to 32, plus four interns.

"We had our own internal recession," Davis said, "but we came out of it intact."



Mark Davis, chief executive officer, left, and Brian Zilch, president of HiFive Development Services, are photographed in their office in Mason. The two are co-founders of the company that runs a full-service construction firm. HiFive invests 50 percent of all profits back into the community and charity projects. In the office, each employee has his or her own street sign. THE ENQUIRER/LIZ DUFOUR

HIGH FIVES FOR HIFIVE

Cincinnati Christian University will give its Distinguished Christian Leadership Award on Sept. 20 to Mark Davis, CEO of HiFive, which annually contributes 50 percent of profits to community work and charity.

HiFive helped construct the university's entry pavilion, the largest structure on campus, and its new dining hall. It also donated a portion of the design work for both projects.

"They look out for the best interests of their clients," said David Faust, president of Cincinnati Christian University. "(Davis) is a gifted architect. What lights his fire is helping churches and other organizations grow."

Today, HiFive is providing design-build services for a \$3.5 million expansion of the Mason Christian Village retirement community, expect-

ed to break ground in the fall.

The Vineyard Church in Springdale and the CityLink development in the West End are among HiFive's most visible projects.

HiFive touts its one-stop-shop approach for giving it an edge in the highly competitive design-build industry. Clients receive a range of construction services, including financing, architectural design, engineering and interior design.

HiFive's largest market segments are churches and hotels, followed by retirement and health care facilities. The firm also assists with retail, office and industrial developments.

Although it receives calls from prospective clients as far away as 300 to 400 miles, HiFive maintains most of its business within a 100-mile radius of its Mason headquarters.

"Hotels and churches are word-of-mouth communities," Davis said. "They involve a lot of people who hear about our efforts."



River Hills Christian Church is described as a "postmodern barn in a rural setting." River Hills was designed by Mark Davis from 2005 to 2006 and constructed by HiFive Church Group in 2007. At the 23-acre campus, under the leadership of Jeff Metzger, senior pastor, the church has grown from 350 to well over 1,000 people. PROVIDED/MARK DAVIS

Rahns

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the namesake for the company, switched completely to flowering plants and retail sales in the early 1960s when competition from large farms in western states made it unprofitable to grow vegetables locally in greenhouses.

Today, loyal customers are the saving grace.

In the busy spring planting season, A.J. Rahn sells more than 225,000 potted flowering plants, ranging in price from \$1.50 to \$10, at least 2,000 hanging baskets, 1,000 container gardens and larger shrubs and a selection of ceramic pots and garden-themed gifts.

Patten's brother, Joe Rahn, grows all the flowering plants from seed year-round, from primroses in January to poinsettias and cyclamen in December. The Rahns also offer indoor plants, which are purchased from a grower in Florida.

Sondra Merusi of Finneytown has been a customer "forever" and says she shops at Rahn's for the consistent high quality and service she receives from employees, many of whom have worked there for decades.

"If you have a problem in your garden, you can count on



Robin Schwartz of Cleves, who says she has been buying her spring flowers and Christmas poinsettias at A.J. Rahn Greenhouses for 20 years, shops for flowers on a recent morning. THE ENQUIRER/CARRIE COCHRAN

them to offer a solution," Merusi says.

She loves visiting just to browse the historic greenhouse aisles.

"It's always just beautiful," she says. "The (pet) cats are roaming around, and they have special plants for each season.

In winter, I go there just to lift my spirits."

Jinny Berten of East Walnut Hills, another longtime customer, says Rahn's is a favorite spot to escape from stress.

"When 9/11 happened I went there," she says. "I wanted to go to a place of beauty and peace,

and I knew right away that Rahn's was it."

Patten says the serene atmosphere is not contrived, but a result of the age of the greenhouses and the sense of calm that comes from being close to natural beauty.

"Customers respond to the



Eileen Weisenbach Keller
THE ENTREPRENEUR

Coming up with solution is creativity

Lack creativity? Short on good ideas? Become an entrepreneur!

Say what?

Many people who would not describe themselves as creative find themselves studying markets, exploring and investigating as they look for opportunities. In the process they consider firms both large and small and the suppliers who work with them. They study the customer base for companies — the large customers like retail partners and the individual customers. Pursuit of this line of study often comes from experience and deep knowledge of a particular market.

The entrepreneur who immerses himself or herself in understanding these chains of business relationships will discover an occasional chink or weakness in the chain. In this weak point there is opportunity; some describe it as pain that the entrepreneur can relieve.

Ta-da, a business idea is born, not by the most creative person in the room, but by the one who was willing to learn and look for opportunity where others might not see any. The ability to provide a solution and seize this opportunity is an opportunity to create value, which is the essence of success in entrepreneurship.

Although this may seem self-evident, consider an example from a young, developing entrepreneur. In a recent competition, this local student pitched a software program designed to assist restaurants with management of server effectiveness, job satisfaction and retention.

With experience as both a chef and owner of a catering company, this young man discovered that a higher turnover rate for restaurants deteriorates service, increases expenses and costs the industry millions of dollars annually. With this discovery, the student who has already dabbled in entrepreneurship using his ability as a chef now pictures himself providing software as a service in the global restaurant industry. Rather than cooking the food and supplying it to patrons, he will be a supplier to the restaurants.

If one were to categorize this student as either a "creative/innovative" type or an "entrepreneur," he would no doubt fall into the latter group. But can it really be said that he isn't creative? The ability to take knowledge gained from deep experience in a particular area, search for pain, inefficiency or trouble in the supply chain, and determine a viable solution is certainly a good description of entrepreneurship. But a clear argument could also be made for using this as a description of creativity in problem solving.

Is this young man a creative genius? Probably not, by most standards, but the judges at IdeaStateU (the Kentucky State Business Plan Competition for Undergraduates), felt his idea was worthy of a second place out of seven competitors in his category. The prize? Seed money to encourage him to persist and develop the idea, which he is now doing.

The bottom line: Creativity comes in many forms. Sometimes it's more colorful, other times more practical. In entrepreneurship, solving a problem in a way that others have not is a good, creative way to begin.

Eileen Weisenbach Keller is director of the Fifth Third Bank Entrepreneurship Institute at the Northern Kentucky University Haile/U.S. Bank College of Business.

A.J. RAHN GREENHOUSES

» **Who:** Operated by the fourth generation of Rahns, once one of 19 family-run operations on Gray Road.

» **What:** Pansies, petunias, impatiens and thousands more flowers and plants.

» **When:** Open year-round: 9 a.m.-8 p.m. weekdays; 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Saturdays, and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays.

» **Where:** 4944 Gray Road, Cincinnati, 45232

» **More information:** Call (513) 541-0672 or go to ajrahngreenhouses.com

color of the flowers," Patten says. "Because we don't sell chemicals or supplies, people just come in and see the beautiful color, and they feel relaxed. We don't set it up that way. It just happens."

Her hope is that the family business will still be around once she and her brother move on.

Joe Rahn's son, Andrew, 25, is considering taking over the business someday, and he is exploring potential new revenue sources such as Internet sales.

"It would be nice if it could continue with a fifth generation," Patten says. "We'll just have to see."

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