

SERVING WESTERN MICHIGAN BUSINESS SINCE 1988

Green Gifts

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GRAND RAPIDS – Most people have been to a meeting that involved some sort of token of the host's appreciation for your attendance. Often, it's something that isn't terribly usable or memorable and its final destination is usually a nearby trashcan – and fast.

But **Promotional Impact** owner Karen Scarpino set out to change that. She'd been in the promotional gift business for about a decade when, after listening to her clients, she realized there was a market for sustainable, so-called "green" gifts.

With Herman Miller, Scarpino designed and manufactured an assortment of binders, bags, totes and other items out of the scrap material used in the popular Aeron chair. For Haworth, she created gift boxes out of leftover pieces of Timeless Timber used in the renovation of the company's headquarters. The wood was salvaged from the bottom of the Great Lakes after being lost in the lumbering days. For Kellogg's, Promotional Impact took leftover Frosted Flakes boxes and turned them into notebook covers.

More than anything, Scarpino knew that if she wanted the gifts to be sustainable, she needed to ensure the gifts were usable after the meeting or event. She didn't want to make trinkets that would wind up in a landfill.

"We really try to think through something that would have an appeal to the audience and we really try to have some functional use," she told *MiBiz*.

Moreover, Promotional Impact, and new online company www.greengiftz.com, wanted to look within companies to find new uses for scraps, as they did with the Herman Miller Aeron material and with Edelman Leathers in making a leather teddy bear and other small items out of scrap leather.

"It's second life design thinking," Scarpino said. "No one thought beyond (the material's) intended purpose. We're about opening people's minds."

In the case of working with Herman Miller, Scarpino found a company that prided itself on being sustainable, so it was a natural that they wanted to give out sustainable gifts at various meetings and tours.

"West Michigan has been a leader in sustainability and Herman Miller has been one of our largest clients for 12 years," Scarpino said.

Six years ago, clients started asking for gifts with "wow factor" that were also sustainable, but Scarpino said it was tough to meet the



PHOTO: JOE BOOMGAARD

Karen Scarpino, owner of Promotional Impact, has been making sustainable gifts for companies to give out at events or special meetings. The bags she's holding are made of scrap material samples that were destined for the landfill, but found a new, unintended purpose in her designs.

sustainability requirement and still meet the price point the companies were willing to pay. Material costs simply were too high and people weren't willing to take the next step. That's when she started using scraps and leftover material samples. Rather than have the material wind up in a dumpster, she gave it life as an unintended new product.

Promotional Impact's clients expected more than selecting the best-selling gifts from a catalog, so Scarpino and her team spent time asking them what they wanted to accomplish with the gift. With that information in hand, they'd come up with a custom solution.

"All of a sudden a light went off and I said, 'There's a need here, there's a market for it and there's not enough gifts that are green,'" Scarpino said. "So we've been custom-making gifts – why not custom make green gifts."

Promotional Impact was involved in planning for the launch of the new Grand Rapids Art Museum about two years before the facility opened. Scarpino said her company was involved in helping the GRAM with gifts for donors and the board of directors, as well as items for the gift shop.

"What they wanted was recycled, sustainable and having a high design element and innovation," Scarpino said, noting she had the same challenges when working with Herman

Miller. "There might have been recycled things out there, but they were cardboard looking or they were off-white, cream or plain. (The GRAM) wanted to be earth-friendly and bright colored."

For two years, the company worked on developing the right gifts and researching sustainability. Scarpino talked with the professors in the sustainable business program at Aquinas College, joined the West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum and the West Michigan Environmental Action Council and "little by little" got a grasp on the topic.

"We're all learning, even at the level of a Herman Miller," Scarpino said. "It's about testing materials and what will and won't work and what's feasible."

"What's fabulous about the triple bottom line is that, as a corporation, you need to do what's right for your company and what's right for the environment, but it's still OK to profit. It's also about the people and making sure the people that worked on the project are working under reasonable working conditions and making a fair wage. One way to ensure that is if you're sourcing within the U.S. If it is coming from another country, we make sure our factories are fair trade certified, meaning we know that there's no child labor and ... that they have higher standards." **MiBiz**