



Greengiftz.com products include eco-friendly handbags, journals and water bottles.

Karen Scarpino Helps Corporate America Give with (Re) Purpose

By Angela Klinske

When given the choice of managing a New York media tour or staying home with her kids, Karen Scarpino opted for the latter. But that hasn't stopped the owner and president of Promotional Impact in making a lasting impression on her clients.

Scarpino, a former public relations and advertising executive – she was the first female vice president of one of Grand Rapids' oldest and largest advertising agencies – still uses her skills and talents to help large corporations make an impact on their customers, employees and even on the environment.

Promotional Impact, a 15-year-old company which Scarpino owns with her husband Lou, is an advertising specialties company in Grand Rapids, Mich. Last year, they launched a new division, Greengiftz.com, as an option for companies and organizations to market themselves while being environmentally conscious.

"We use second-use design principle in the products we create with clients," said Scarpino. "We use the scrap material from their products to make functional, useful executive gifts."

Take Haworth, for example. At the recent opening of its new Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certified headquarters in Holland, Mich., the company gave guests small wooden boxes made from wood salvaged from the bottom of Lake Michigan. Inside the refurbished box, the perfect size to later store pens, business cards and sticky notes, was a collection of Endangered Species chocolates, a Fair Trade Certified candy company that gives part of its proceeds to the protection of endangered species.

The boxes were locally manufactured and inscribed in the box was the story behind its production. The look was organic, artful and useful, and representative of Haworth's commitment to caring for the environment.

"It's not only the materials [we use], but it's the life use of the product," said Scarpino. Long after the original use of the gift, it still holds a practical purpose. At Haworth's request, her company also used scrap wood and metal from the company's former headquarters to make eye-catching employee recognition awards.

Scrap material from the office furniture manufacturer's high-end chairs are used to make executive tote bags, electronics/eyeglass pouches, and credit card/coin pouches – attractive, sturdy bags that their employees use with pride. Haworth distributed these bags last June at NeoCon, the office furniture industry's annual trade show in Chicago.

Creative Strategy

Taking the approach of an advertising agency, Scarpino's group works with a client to help establish the goals of the end product and to determine what kinds of emotion the client is trying to draw from its customers. When Promotional Impact works with a client, they always ask, "before you throw it in a landfill, what can you do with it?"



"We pioneer a lot of things with our customers. The clients' ideas are so great, the solutions don't even exist," said Scarpino.

That's where Scarpino and her team get the chance to experiment and tout their expertise.

When the Grand Rapids Art Museum, who built the first LEED-certified art museum in the world, approached Promotional Impact to come up with a line of organic tees for its gift store, Scarpino's team worked diligently to get exactly what their customer wanted.

"They wanted organic T-shirts in bright colors." After a global search for the right raw materials, Promotional Impact found what GRAM was looking for.

For their client Kellogg, Promotional Impact used scrap cereal boxes to make covers for attractive spiral-bound notepads to present to visitors and guests at its corporate headquarters. Even the metal from the spiral binding was repurposed metal. Another local company, Rockford Construction, had their old blueprints made into notepads and journals.

But browse through Promotional Impact's samples (see www.greengiftz.com), and you won't find anything that "looks" recycled. They've simply found a way to turn its customers' scrap material into something that is beautiful, useful and represents the client.

"One day we're specialists in fabric. One day we're specialists in metal or wood," explains Scarpino. "We use the best mills and best workers and manage a project well on behalf of our customers."

Greengiftz.com looks to the expertise and experience of Aquinas College, home of the first sustainable business degree program. Greengiftz.com is also a member of the Sustainable Business Forum and West Michigan Environmental Action Committee.

Keeping Her Business Family-Centered

As a certified "Woman Owned Business" by Women's Business Enterprise National Council, Promotional Impact serves a vast list of clients, including Herman Miller, Cascade Engineering, Steelcase Inc., Bissell and Edelman Leather. And with a staff of six, Scarpino values the importance of family. Each employee has remote access on their computers. As a mom herself, Scarpino understands there are days an employee just can't come into the office. The office – a cozy, open setting in the Brassworks Building in downtown Grand Rapids, offers space to innovate, converse with clients and even hook up the Playstation 3.

Scarpino has two children, ages 12 and nine, who assist her and her husband with the business.

"Kids see Mom and Dad working hard, and it's good for them to see. Our kids might have to be entrepreneurs. As our economy changes, we can't rely on big employers. Our future is in small, innovative companies," said Scarpino. - WL