

# SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, October 26, 2001

## How can I help you?

*Response to Sept. 11 showed business at its best*

By Jo Hawkins Donovan, for *Small Business Times*

It's the language of business: "May I help you?" — the question from business to customer. A few years ago, some advisors to the business world decided it was more effective to say "How may I help you?" so we're more likely now to hear that when we call into commerce, or walk into a retail establishment.

When my grandson Brandon was a running back for his sixth grade football team in Pewaukee, early in the season he was charging down the field, the ball tucked tightly into his chest. He was on his way to a touchdown when his best friend got hit, tackled hard and on the ground, not moving a muscle. Brandon stopped in his tracks, football and all, to go over and check on his buddy, who popped up just as OK as you please, but too late for Brandon to make that particular touchdown. He's made many more, but I've never felt better about him than that afternoon.

On and after Sept. 11, I thought about that action. We know that a democracy is the place where capitalism works. And we know that, together, those two systems do more for more people than anything else we've come up with so far. And we know that competition in a free market is key. Where would we be, what products would we have, how skilled or unskilled would management be, without competition?

Yet on Sept. 11 and in all the days since, what I've observed that has stopped me in my tracks is corporate heads saying to competitors, "How can I help you?" Before lunch on Sept. 11, I heard that Paul Purcell, head of R.W. Baird, made calls to Morgan Stanley and others in his industry whose New York offices had been wiped out. Paul offered whatever would be helpful - executives, equipment, just name it, he said. When I heard that, I started to fill this column with stories about how the business community was stepping up in this crisis. Harley-Davidson sent a bunch of motorcycles to replace smashed police vehicles. Harley executives themselves drove a number of them right up the highway to New York. GE Medical sent millions of dollars worth of sophisticated equipment, then millions of dollars period. My favorite was the pet store in Rhinelander that sent four hundred sets of dog shoes for the rescue dogs, much needed in that terrain. The Brady Corp. sent all those US flag stickers you kept seeing on the helmets and hard hats of everyone at the disaster site. They did much more, as did everyone you can think of.

Trying to list all these, I began to feel an avalanche was coming down on me. Almost every business leader, every corporate head, was

finding some way to respond, to put the competitive spirit in the back room for now, and rack their brains for ways to be of help. It's still going on. Joe Bartolotta, a respected Milwaukee restaurateur, is having a fund-raiser dinner in his Wauwatosa restaurant. He's donating a hundred percent of the proceeds to restaurant owners and employees who were victims of the Sept. 11 attack. Many, many other restaurants are part of a fund-raising effort of the Wisconsin Restaurant Association, aiming to help families of the estimated 300 hospitality industry workers who died in the attack. It's the same in every state and in many countries overseas. It is difficult to find a business leader anywhere who has not put everything else aside to ask, "How can we help?"

And it is difficult to imagine how much worse off we all would be without this help. Business is probably the most powerful institution on the planet, whether we like that or not. It gets swiped at a lot. In times like these, with corporate generosity so evident, we might reflect on the good that business does, beyond providing jobs and nifty products, and a standard of living we wouldn't trade for any other, even now.

How many events have you attended in your life, sat back to read the printed program, and seen the list of corporate sponsors? Where would the arts in any of our cities be without that support? Where would half the social programs be without that support?

Many years ago a client recommended that I join the World Business Academy. The mission of this organization is to promote socially responsible actions among its corporate members, and actually non-members as well.

I'm sure there are times when all members ask, "Are we getting there at all?"

In the past few weeks, we've all felt grateful down to our bones for the heroic actions of firefighters, police officers, rescue workers. It's a good time, as well, to pause and salute our business community. We have thousands of stories, and more every day, of corporate leaders reaching out to help, knowing that, for now, something was more important than scoring that touchdown.

Jo Hawkins Donovan has a coaching and psychotherapy firm in Milwaukee, and can be reached at 414-271-5848 or [jo@hawkinsdonovan.com](mailto:jo@hawkinsdonovan.com). The firm's Web site is [www.hawkinsdonovan.com](http://www.hawkinsdonovan.com). Hawkins Donovan will respond to your questions in this column. Her column appears in every other issue of SBT

