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By **Margaret Marchuk** on **05/24/2011 06:57 PM**

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A business metamorphosis is unfolding in Asheville. It's not about business as usual, but rather unusual ways of doing business: One of those approaches is creating a "conscious business" — trying to be aware of the effects your business has on the community and to make an extra effort to affect people in a beneficial way.

Pair this trend with another, and you get something uniquely Asheville: According to AdvantageWest's 2010 annual report, the Blue Ridge Entrepreneurial Council figures show entrepreneurship is higher in Western North Carolina (17.5 percent of the work force) than that of our state or our nation (15.2 percent). Given Asheville's creative environment, perhaps this emerging value-based economic idea will really take flight here with local entrepreneurs leading the way.

Here are three local entrepreneurs who are exploring the approach.

Home Free Bagels

Chris Sullivan, owner of Home Free Bagels, is more concerned with solving social-justice problems than creating personal wealth. After a decade in the corporate world, she started the bagel company in late 2010: Sullivan employs homeless people to make and distribute her product here in Asheville. Her employees were not yet living on the street, but perilously close — living in vehicles, couch surfing with anyone who offered it, says Sullivan.

Voicing hope for the local community, she remarks, "Asheville is on the brink of setting a national example of how to bring about social justice through a market-based economy. The emergence of successful social enterprise in Asheville will act as a beacon of hope for other cities struggling to strengthen their communities."

Even though Sullivan's bagels are successfully selling, in March she had concerns about cash flow. Unfortunately, businesses that do not fit in the traditional business model may not have access to traditional funding. Sullivan says, "Capital is always an issue with any startup, but we are trying to do it without incurring any debt. We are staying small, growing slow and have received some donations from a grant that is helping us along."

She remains extremely optimistic about her business succeeding. "We are being received

wholeheartedly and enthusiastically by Asheville.” Sullivan sees her model of socially conscious business as an experiment in capitalism. “I do think people really want to make a difference. The intention is there.”

Asheville Profits

Helping businesses get more in the black and less in the red is what **Gwen Wisler**’s pay-it-forward business Asheville Profits offers. She provides business consultation to clients who, in return, must agree to help someone else. As former president and CEO of Coleman, the \$800 million outdoor recreation company, her professional track record includes positions as CFO and CEO with other major companies, expertise in mergers, acquisitions, divestitures and debt financing. “I’m really good at helping other people make money,” she says.

So while Wisler counsels a local business how to increase profits, the company in turn agrees to pay for her service through time and/or in-kind contributions to the Western North Carolina not-for-profit community. The one stipulation she has is that the nonprofit of choice should be nonreligious and nonpolitical.

Asheville Profits is Wisler’s way of contributing to more nonprofits than she could do as an individual. She sees it as her way of utilizing her skills in the highest and best use. “It makes more sense for me to use my expertise in a way that impacts more than one entity, rather than me volunteering at one agency.”

You Get We Give

Asheville resident and marketing consultant **Bob Perlstein** advises small business clients and organizations. Knowing the economic challenges they are facing, he’s always looking for creative ways to help them. When he heard about the Groupon phenomenon — a national deal-of-the-day website that features discounted gift certificates usable at local or national companies — Perlstein saw a way to improve on the model.

He launched You Get We Give, which lets merchants increase business, consumers get a price break and organizations earn 10 percent of each transaction — a triple benefit. Mission Children’s Hospital, the Asheville Art Museum, the Asheville Human Society and the Jewish Community Center quickly signed on, Perlstein reports. Since launching in late April, word’s been spreading, and YGWWG is seeing a daily increase in calls from other groups that want to sign on, says Perlstein.

“We don’t see this as a one-time deal,” he says. Perlstein points out that You Get We Give is unlike any other online deal company. He doesn’t just sign up a company for a deal and walk away. “We are a marketing-strategy company that works with the merchant to advise them about ways to retain those new customers after they cash in their discount certificate. We help business owners consider various marketing strategies to put in place, ways to develop an ongoing relationship with that new customer

before he even walks through the door.”

Perlstein also says he’s more than willing to make the extra effort for local businesses because he has a vested interest in his community. He loves living in Asheville and wants to see area business and organizations prosper.

“We’re all in this together when it comes to the reality of where business is going due to the uncertainty of the economy,” Perlstein says. “We need each other, and we all have to give a little. As business owners we all may make a little less, but we’ll give so much more back to the community.”

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