

Sharing the joy of anniversaries with beneficiaries

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DESIGNATING an entire day for a company's staff to be off from work might not seem to make economic sense.

But the sums certainly did add up for the accountants at Nexia TS. To celebrate its 20th anniversary, the local accounting firm put aside all its work on May 15 to pack and distribute groceries - which its 160-odd employees contributed out of their own pockets - to more than 150 poor or underprivileged people living in Yishun Ring. And this is far from an isolated example of a business choosing to celebrate its milestone anniversary by doing good.

While the concept is not entirely new, National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) chief executive Laurence Lien told *The Business Times* that it is getting "increasingly popular" in the corporate sector. Last month, in response to NTUC FairPrice's \$40 million handout to mark its 40th anniversary, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that such forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR) could be "an important draw for younger employees who want to work in an organisation that is a responsible corporate citizen". Jonas Kor, chairman of NTUC FairPrice's CSR committee, agreed that "CSR initiatives will definitely be a draw to all employees who want to work in an organisation that resonates with their values". Nexia TS managing director Henry Tan noted that CSR movements appeal to the "actualisation needs" of younger employees today. Although CSR can play a useful role in engaging, attracting and retaining employees, BT has found that the rising trend of commemorating milestone anniversaries by doing good is probably driven by other altruistic motives.

In NTUC FairPrice's case, Mr Kor said the decision to dole out \$40 million to the community stemmed from its commitment to ensure that as the co-operative does well, it benefits the community as well. Giving a different perspective, Nexia TS's Mr Tan said: "As an employer, we have a responsibility to not only train our employees in technical and professional skills, but also to train the minds and hearts of employees to encourage and change their way of thinking beyond I, me, ourselves, but they, others, and them." "We were looking at celebrating by making a difference to others - those who are not as privileged or fortunate as us. By celebrating with them and spending the day with them, we are blessed," he added.

Mr Tan's views were echoed by Clinton Ang, managing director of Hock Tong Bee - CornerStone. The company, which claims to be the oldest surviving wine merchant in South-east Asia, will be commemorating its 75th anniversary next month. Said Mr Ang: "We should count our every blessing and remember that someone out there needs a little help." Besides holding an online charity wine auction from May to June, the company is organising a "charity food and wine crawl" around Singapore on board a London bus. Along the way, guests will be encouraged to make donations to its nominated charity - Food from the Heart (FFTH). Hock Tong Bee - CornerStone will also donate \$50 to FFTH for every strike made in a charity bowl, where gutter guards will be raised on every bowling lane to facilitate a higher strike rate.

While NVPC's Mr Lien said it was heartening to see more companies stepping up to do good for the community and finding creative ways to do so, he said that "companies should take a longer-term view on their giving and build a more sustained relationship with their selected beneficiaries". Agreeing, NTUC FairPrice's Mr Kor said: "It is not just about incorporating CSR in anniversary celebrations. More importantly, it is about finding a sustainable CSR approach that can be melded in the company's business strategy and values in the long run." He cited the co-operative's annual "share-a-textbook" project and a staff volunteer programme launched last May as examples of its long-term community initiatives.

Nexia TS, too, has been actively involved in annual charity events held by its regular partners. The accounting firm has been a sponsor of "POSB Run for Kids" since 2009 as well as a participant in the Boys' Brigade's "Share-a-gift" project since 2008. It also awards bond-free scholarships and study awards to financially needy students at the local universities and polytechnics. Nexia TS's Mr Tan quoted the adage: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Taking that philosophy a step further, he added: "He will even be able to teach others to fish, or help others to learn to fish, and this is perpetuating and powerful."

Celebrating milestone anniversaries aside, it seems that businesses will feel good if they do good.

"When we are about to leave this world, no one would talk about what achievements you have made in your life in terms of material things, but many would remember if you made a small difference in someone's life," said Mr Tan.