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On fire: inferno donates 10,000 hours of civic service [The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tenn. ::]

Sept. 21--A Memphis marketing firm calculates that in its 15 years of existence, its employees have reached a milestone: They have given more than 10,000 hours to help nonprofit, charitable organizations.

The Downtown-based inferno greases the way for its employees. In addition to their normal vacation and sick leave, the 36 employees can receive a week of paid leave each year to help a charitable cause of their choice. About 80 percent participate.

Employees at a lot of companies volunteer for good causes, said Barbara King, executive director of the Exchange Club of Memphis. "I think the amount of inferno's involvement is unusual," she said. "I could be wrong but I have not seen another give this much away."

The Exchange Club provides counseling and other services for children and their families rocked by domestic violence. Inferno has supported the agency for years with everything from designing its annual report to producing newsletters.

"All of this, we just do not have the money to do," King said. "And they make (the printed materials) look so wonderful, so professional."

The agency values each of those service hours -- now numbering 10,235 -- at \$100, meaning the workforce has donated more than \$1 million worth of its time.

Ten thousand hours may seem even more substantial expressed in other ways. It equates to 416 days of donated work at 24 hours a day, or 1,250 days of volunteering at normal, eight-hour days, or 250 weeks at typical 40-hour weeks, or 4.8 years at 40-hour weeks.

For a relatively small business, 10,000 hours of civic service is an achievement. Big enough that Memphis Mayor A C Wharton and Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell are proclaiming Thursday as "Fuelanthropic Day" and are scheduled to attend the firm's celebration it calls "A Million for the Mid-South: A Fuelanthropic Initiative."

Principals Tim Sellers, Dan O'Brien and Michael Overton founded inferno in 1999, employing

only themselves at the time.

"We had always been very active as an agency with our pro bono and nonprofit work," Sellers said. "In an attempt to strengthen the benefits that we provide to our employees we integrated the added week of paid leave for their personal investment time, for organizations or causes that 'fuels' them.

"It's really grown to be an important part of our culture."

Inferno occupies 11,000 square feet on the ground floor of The Lofts at South Bluffs condo building, 505 Tennessee. In the southwest corner of the office, just off a conference room, is a room dominated by an orange wall dedicated to employee volunteering.

There are spaces on the wall for the names of participating employees, the names of nonprofits where employees can volunteer, and photos of employees at volunteer sites.

"We're just so blessed to have their support," said Sandy Howell, development manager and database administrator for Hope House. The nonprofit provides childcare and other services for parents infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

In addition to providing professional marketing services to the nonprofits, inferno employees are not above grunt work. A few years ago a large team of them descended on Hope House and fixed everything from rotted woodwork to the gutters, Howell recalled.

Often, volunteers at the Human Society of Memphis want to be with puppies and kittens, but on Aug. 22 inferno workers tackled the less fun chore of helping set up for the big Paw Prints Party fund-raising event, said Katie Pemberton, marketing manager for the Humane Society.

"It was putting chair covers over 400 chairs," she said. "... It's a lot harder than it sounds."

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