



DIANE STAFFORD

A benefit that builds good will

Jenny Ferguson returned Monday from Costa Rica, where she played with children in an orphanage — on her employer's dime.

Previously, Lisa Aguirre and Mary Byard spent a week caring for special-needs children in Ecuador.

Rachel Blincoe and Joy Merritt worked in a Romanian orphanage.

Derek Rippe went to Thailand to advocate for sick and abused elephants.

And Bob Houston traveled to the Philippines to work with homeless children in a halfway house.

All trips, taken in recent weeks, were paid for by their employer, Bob Cutler at Creative Consumer Concepts in Overland Park.

Earlier this year, Cutler left his brand marketing agency, which specializes in children's menus and toys, in the able hands of his 45 employees to go on a mission trip to Russia and Israel.

Cutler came back with an appreciation for global mission work and for his "C3" staff. In quick order, he budgeted \$25,000 in extraordinary expenses to pay for his employees to have similar experiences this year.

Previously, Cutler had offered a week's pay (without cutting into workers' vacation time) for staff members to do a week's worth of work at Kansas City area charities. That offer didn't elicit much participation.

Maybe it was the somewhat selfish lure of a paid trip abroad, but the response in just the first four months of the global mission work offer was strong.

"It's just incredible," Cutler said. "They're going all over the world."

The rules are fairly simple: The employee must write a proposal to benefit a selected charity and research the costs, logistics, immunization requirements and relevant dangers. All proposals received to date have been accepted, Cutler said.

Cutler pays the employees' salaries and all costs associated with the trip for the week they're on their mission.

He expects about a quarter of the staff to take advantage of the offer each year, but he says it would be fine with him if every worker went on a mission trip every year.

"We hope to help them to become part of an organization's success and then come back to be advocates in this community for the organization and its cause," he said.

"We also hope this strikes up interest among other business leaders and encourages them to do the same. We'll be happy to share information about our program and help them any way we can."

Cutler's largesse definitely swims against the employee benefits trend in recent years. Cost-cutting pressures, especially because of ever-higher health insurance costs, have led to benefits cutbacks at many organizations.

But at Cutler's \$35-million-plus agency (perhaps best known for creating the Sonic Drive-In kids' meal packs), a different business model is at work.

"We believe in putting profits back into the community — and the community can be the world," Cutler said.

The word is getting out. The company is already getting applications from people who want to work there because of the benefits program.

At a time of year when good will to all is emphasized, it's a pleasure to see a business owner put it into action.

Diane Stafford's workplace column appears on Thursdays. Reach her at stafford@kcstar.com or (816) 234-4359. To read archived At Work columns, go to www.kansascity.com and click on "Business," then "Columnists."