



madison.com news sports opinion forums entertainment marketplace

SEARCH: all current news



ARCHIVES >>>

[Back] [Email to a Friend] [Printer Friendly Version]

Religion In Business

Practicing What You Preach Can Be A Financial Challenge

Wisconsin State Journal :: CAPITAL REGION BUSINESS JOURNAL :: 2

Tuesday, April 1, 2008
By Ellen Williams-Masson

Edward and Carol Knapton are growing more than flowers in their Cottage Grove greenhouses – they're also sowing seeds of faith.

"We try to live our lives as close as we can to Jesus' principles of being kind, generous and helpful to mankind," Edward Knapton said.

"Most business owners are afraid to let religion become part of their business. For some reason – Carol and I don't know why – the Lord has just called us to wear our religion on our sleeves."

As an expression of their Christian beliefs, the Knaptons donate one percent of gross sales from their business, America's Best Flowers, to their loyalty customers' charity of choice. With more than three-quarters of patrons participating in the free loyalty program, more than \$15,000 a year is divided among schools, churches and four nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofit groups can also raise money by selling the company's gift cards and retaining 25 percent of the proceeds.

Knapton said that giving back to the community is one way his family shows appreciation for God's blessings in their lives.

"We started with nothing about 30 years ago and now we are about a \$2 million a year business," Knapton said. "It's not the amount of money you make or even what you're selling – it's how you take care of your customers and the people you have working for you."

Dan Olszewski, director of the Weinert Center for Entrepreneurship in the UW-Madison School of Business, said America has a long heritage of mixing religion with business.

"In the early years in the United States, the Quakers actually were very much an economic powerhouse," he said. "They were open with their religion but were also considered very trustworthy business partners."

In more modern times, the national Chick-fil-A franchise, founded by Truett Cathy, a devout Southern Baptist, remains closed on Sundays so that employees may "rest, spend time with family and friends, and worship if they choose," according to the franchise Web site.

RESPECT FOR BUSINESSES THAT STAND BY IDEALS

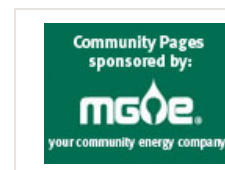
Olszewski said that whereas Chick-fil-A may be "leaving a lot on the table" by closing one day a week, it can also be appealing to those who respect a business for standing by its ideals.

"You may be giving up certain revenue streams in a company by not having alcohol or not being open on the Sabbath, which reduces your sales potential, but at the same time, you probably have a lot of other people from the same religion, or people who respect that decision that's being made, that may be more likely to shop or use your services," Olszewski said.


Restaurant owner Meshel Aldae fields frequent requests for wine with dinner at his restaurant, King of Falafel, on 453 W. Gilman St. Aldae avoids alcohol and pork as key tenets of his Islamic faith, even though alcohol sales would undoubtedly add to his business' bottom line.

"I would make more money, more profit, but I don't want to do something against my religion," Aldae said. "Sometimes that's a blessing – if you are not doing it just for God, God will help you."

Aldae attracts Moslem and Jewish clientele by offering halal, or "permissible," meat selections such as lamb, chicken, beef and goat.



place ad sponsored by:




Sell your car.
CHEAP!
(We mean it won't cost you much to sell it.)

Get one week of Complete Coverage for
\$24.99!

Call (608) 257-7777, or click here.



Some restrictions apply. Click for details. Offer expires August 30, 2008.



Sell your car.
CHEAP!
(We mean it won't cost you much to sell it.)

Halal meat has been ritually slaughtered in the name of Allah to drain maximal amounts of blood as well as minimize suffering for the animal.

Due to similarities between Islamic and Jewish butchering methods, halal meat is sometimes considered an acceptable substitute for kosher, and vice versa.

Finding sufficient quantities of halal meat to supply a restaurant in a community with relatively few Muslims has been a challenge for the Kuwaiti-born entrepreneur.

"It's hard for me to open a business in Madison because suppliers don't have halal meat, or even kosher," Aldaee said. "I believe I am the only restaurant in Madison that serves halal meat for the Muslim community, and I am trying to push myself to have halel meat all the time, but sometimes it's hard."

Sharon Siegel Langer, proprietor of Cafe Osher on the northeast side of Milwaukee, also courts financial success in a niche market. The restaurant's kosher menu attracts people of Jewish faith as well as those who appreciate the extra care taken in preparing kosher foods.

Diners who are lactose-intolerant or allergic to dairy products also embrace the restaurant's dairy-free selections.

"For the people who keep kosher, it's a godsend because there has not been a kosher restaurant in Milwaukee in ten years," Langer said. "All of the food in our restaurant is kosher - it's the way we eat, the way we cook, the way the animal is fed and slaughtered. We do not eat meat and dairy foods together so we don't have any dairy products in the restaurant."

Food is prepared under the supervision of three rabbis, and the restaurant closes on Jewish holidays, the Sabbath (Saturdays) and three hours before sunset on Fridays in preparation for the Sabbath.

Cafe Osher is an oasis for travelers as well as those who attend events where Langer caters, and Langer said she finds satisfaction in helping others adhere to their Jewish faith.

"I feel like I'm doing a service to the community and a service to the Jewish people that they would not otherwise have," she said. "It's how I grew up, so it's second nature to me to cook kosher."

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

Salih Erschen, director of the Madison Muslim Dawa Circle, said that some "find it too difficult to go against the trend of society" and abide by their faith. Erschen, who is also Amir of the Masjid Al-Madinah Mosque in Madison, cited a friend who lost his restaurant business rather than serve alcohol to boost profits.

"I feel like he actually made the better decision, but a lot of other people would compromise to the other side of things," Erschen said.

Mohammed Ehtas-ham, owner of Tobacco Deals and the Halal Meat Market at 2618 E. Washington, said that Islamic law forbidding the charging or paying of interest can complicate financial dealings.

"You can't grow as fast as you want to," he said. "If I had the money now - about thirty to forty thousand dollars - I could definitely expand the store, but I am growing at a very nice rate because I don't have to pay anybody (interest)."

Ehtasham, a native of India, saved up the seed money for his business and also borrowed (and repaid) interest-free capital from his siblings, a common practice in the Muslim community. He pointed to the rising rate of foreclosures as a caution against going into debt to expand.

"It's going to come out of your bottom line either way, and (paying interest) reduces your profit margin," he said. "I grew in four years from a small tobacco store into a convenience store, and I did it with cash."

Islamic business principles, clearly outlined in the Qur'an, can build customer trust that benefits companies in the long run. For example, Muslim shopkeepers may sweeten the deal by tossing in a few extra figs when weighing a customer's fruit purchase.

"You are always supposed to tip the scale toward the buyer because that's how you win your customers," Erschen said. "If you are in business, you are supposed to make a profit - don't shoot yourself in the foot - but you are always supposed to make your business cater toward the customer."

BENEFITING SOCIETY

Businesses can also be a stabilizing factor by providing moral bedrock for a community.

New Hope Christian Dance Academy at 1276 S. Park St. offers Christian dance instruction for children ages 3-17 in an atmosphere that owner Thelma Lindsey said creates a "safe haven" for children.

"This is a place where, if home is not good, or school is not good they can come and be free, and know that this God that we say exists, he really exists," she said. "They feel the power of him through love, through the studio."

Lindsey, an ordained minister who visits prisons, schools and churches, has been dancing since she was three years old. She said Christian dance helps build motor skills, intellect and self-esteem while exposing children to love and Christian values.


"To know how to dance to Christian music and for the glory of God, that is just awesome," Lindsey said. "A lot of times our children only know what they know, but if you take them out of their own environment and give them something different, then they can have something different to work with."

Strengthening moral fiber has been the focus of the YMCA since its London beginnings in 1844. Reid Stangel, executive director of the Green County Family YMCA, said that the community-based organization helps people succeed in a healthy

you much to sell it.)







Get one week of Complete Coverage for \$24.99!

Call (608) 257-7777, or click here.









Some restrictions apply. Click for details. Offer expires August 30, 2008.

:: TOP JOBS

- HVAC Sales
 - RNs and LPNs 
 - Receptionist/Billing
 - Sleep Lab Techs 
 - BE YOUR OWN BOSS 
 - The
 - Biotech Scientist 
 - Direct Service Professional
 - Energy Efficiency Program 
 - Director of Nursing 
 - Heart and Vascular RN
- [VIEW ALL VIDEOS](#)

:: TOP JOBS

- HVAC Sales
 - RNs and LPNs 
 - Receptionist/Billing
 - Sleep Lab Techs 
 - BE YOUR OWN BOSS 
 - The
 - Biotech Scientist 
 - Direct Service Professional
 - Energy Efficiency Program 
 - Director of Nursing 
 - Heart and Vascular RN
- [VIEW ALL VIDEOS](#)

:: SERVICES <<<

- Subscribe
- Renew
- Sign up for EZ pay
- Temporary stop
- Account inquiry
- Delivery concerns
- Commend carrier
- Place a classified ad
- Media kit
- Digital file requirements
- Photo reprints

lifestyle while instilling positive Christian values like honesty, respect and caring.

More than one in nine members of the YMCA in Monroe receive financial assistance through the Y's Partner with Youth Fund, ensuring a blended community connecting people of all ages, economic status and religious beliefs. The YMCA relies on volunteer support and financial contributions from private donors and the United Way to sustain its programming.

Private industry has challenged the YMCA's tax-exempt status in various states over the years, citing unfair competition, but Stangel said the nonprofit organization earns its stripes every day by virtue of its service to the community.

"I don't think there is as much advantage as there is responsibility," he said. "Being a charitable organization gives us an advantage, tax-wise, but as a Christian-based organization, we have to take on the responsibility of making sure that we live our mission to provide programs that build healthy body, mind and spirit."

ENACTING YOUR BELIEFS

For Ed Knapton at America's Best Flowers, being open about his faith "is not a material reason for success or failure," but rather an expression of personal philosophy.

"The flower business and Christianity is who we are - it's our whole lives," Knapton said. "There are some individuals who believe that religion and business shouldn't mix. I believe that if you are going to establish a personal relationship with a customer, the customer should know something about you and what you stand for."

Knapton does, however, caution Capital Region businesses not to exploit religion for profit, since customers will expect businesses to practice what they preach.

"I think if a business owner and the key people involved in the business said, 'OK, we are going to start operating this way because it makes us more money,' the customer would eventually find that out and it wouldn't ring true," Knapton said. "It helps us because it's who we are, it's part of our lives and it's what Carol and I have always grown up with."

News Reprints

