Constructive contributions: March Associates builds community as well as buildings by supporting multiple causes

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Louis March Sr., founder of March Associates Construction Inc., signs a check for $105,703 raised in a golf outing for Tackle Kids Cancer at Hackensack University Medical Center. Also pictured, from left, Louis March Jr., president, and Bryan Murray, director of marketing, March Associates Construction, Inc. (AARON HOUSTON)

As a successful construction management and general contracting firm, Wayne-based March Associates Construction Inc. has started or completed more than $1.85 billion of construction projects since its 2003 launch, including a 350,000-square-foot FedEx distribution center in Robbinsville; the “Vivian,” a 196-unit luxury apartment building in Englewood; and the iPic Theaters in Fort Lee and in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., entertainment centers with amenities like reclining seats with table service, a full bar, and upscale restaurant.

But March Associates isn’t just about building commercial, retail, residential, big box and specialty projects. Under president and founder Louis D. March Jr., the family owned company has also given back to the community in a big way. This month, for example, March Associates Construction presented Hackensack University Medical Center’s Tackle Kids Cancer project with a check for $105,703. Also in October, the business was honored by Wayne Township as 2017 Corporate Citizen of the Year.

“We get together as group to suggest worthy causes to support,” said Bryan Murray, director of marketing at March. “I research a variety of causes and then present my findings to a committee that includes the CFO and others, and Lou—who is also a cancer survivor—decides what to give to each charity. I’ve worked at other companies that gave back to the community, but none to this extent. It’s important to make these donations because, in addition to directly supporting the causes, we hope that as others hear about March Associates’ contributions, they’ll decide to help too.”
The company raised funds for the Tackle Kids Cancer contribution from a number of sources, including its own money and proceeds from a golf outing and sports memorabilia auction at the Upper Montclair Country Club. March Associates also encourages employees to get involved in volunteer efforts.

It's great when smaller businesses get involved with corporate social responsibility efforts, but there's often a limit to what they can do alone, said Jeana Wirtenberg, associate professor of professional practice in the Management and Global Business Department of Rutgers Business School-Newark and New Brunswick.

Play it safe when you pay it forward

It's usually a win-win for everyone when businesses do good deeds, but companies still need to consider legal issues when employees engage in volunteer work, according to John Sarno, president of the Livingston-based Employers Association of New Jersey, and counsel to the Newark law firm Robinson Miller LLC.

"If it's voluntary and takes place outside of normal work hours and off the company's site, then there usually are no wage-hour issues," he said. "But say a company has a table at an event and asks an employee to volunteer there. The business is now enjoying a direct benefit, so the employee may have to be compensated for his or her time, and the company should have liability insurance in case the employee is injured at the event, or possibly getting to and from the event."

Some companies may ask employees to identify a charity they'd like to work with, and invite the workers to submit a request that may or may not be approved by the employer, who may then allocate paid time off, similar to holiday pay except the employee is using the time to volunteer. A company may also set certain standards for an organization to be eligible for the volunteer program, like considering only bona fide 501 C (3) charitable organizations.

"An alternative is for the employer to identify a number of charitable activities and say this is what we'll sanction," Sarno said. "Some companies may wish to exclude political or other activity that isn’t compatible with the employer's business and reputation. So it's a good idea to set some ground rules at the beginning."

"A study of Fortune 500 companies indicate they collectively spend more than $15 billion a year on CSR activities, and that number is on the rise," said Wirtenberg, who is also president and CEO of Transitioning to Green, a Montville-based training and consulting firm that helps companies and organizations make sustainability and corporate social responsibility a mainstream, routine business practice. "To make a greater impact, smaller companies need to band together, perhaps through business associations and other organizations." Her company, Transitioning to Green, has created a model called "Shared Value to Collective Impact," that offers a kind of blueprint for small businesses to gather and leverage their muscle.

She is also trying to get more businesses and individuals aligned with the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which has been adopted by world leaders.
For example, she recently worked with the Rutgers Sustainability committee to create a Sustainability/CSR event called “RU Sustainable to the CORE” that attracted about 200 students and faculty from throughout the University. “The focus was on what we can do to support the UN SDGs through curriculum, operations, research and engagement (CORE). The message is that people can work together across disciplines, sectors, and functional boundaries to address hunger, poverty and other issues,” she said.

Wirtenberg noted that there is extensive research that indicates companies that embrace corporate social responsibility activity may report improved employee engagement, and also find it easier to recruit and retain talented employees. Among other studies, she pointed to a 2017 Junior Achievement survey of employers that found just over half (54.5 percent) reporting that CSR programs are “a way to increase employee satisfaction and retention.” About 40 percent noted that they gave associates paid time off to volunteer, while many corporate responsibility professionals promoted their volunteer efforts as part of their employee recruiting, organizing days or months of service with nonprofit partners or tying skills-based volunteering with professional development plans.

"It’s interesting that, even as overall company engagement is at all-time lows, especially when it comes to millennials, companies of all sizes with robust CSR programs find that their employees—particularly millennials—are more likely to work harder, stay engaged and remain at the business for a longer time," Wirtenberg said. "Getting people involved in giving back not only helps society but also helps the business."

That seems to be the case at March. “March Associates Construction Inc. and the predecessor firm started by Lou’s dad, March Associates, have been headquartered in Wayne for 30-plus years,” said Murray. “Many of our employees live here and are involved in town activities. We also support local programs like the Wayne Boys & Girls Club, the Wayne Council of PTOs and other organizations. Lou’s father was also deeply involved in the community, so I guess you could say we’ve been working with local organizations from inception. The positive publicity doesn’t hurt, but that’s not our intention. Mainly, we want to help and we hope to set an example that draws in other people, too.”

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