



Fuel for the Fire

Catchafire pairs professionals with groups trying to extinguish problems

A common New Year's resolution is to give more to charity. Many people can't donate as much as they would like in these tough economic times, so volunteering their time may be a better option.

With so many worthy causes, it can be hard to decide which ones to help. And if you have special skills, such as accounting, computer or design expertise, maybe you can offer something more than just another set of hands. So how do you match your unique skill set to an organization that shares your values?

Catchafire.org was founded to do just that. The stated mission of the site is "to provide talented individuals with meaningful pro bono experiences in order to build capacity for social good organizations." That's marketing speak for matching volunteers with specialized skills to groups that need them. The groups don't have to be nonprofit, but they do need to be in the business of trying to help those in need.

Doing well by doing good

Catchafire is not a nonprofit, and it charges organizations for pairing them with professionals. It's a certified B corporation, otherwise known as a benefit corporation. This is a fairly new designation for businesses that focus on social or environmental problems. Some states give B corporations the tax benefits of nonprofit corporations because they can provide desirable social benefits.

The way Catchafire works is sort of like an online dating service. Professionals register on the site with a description of the services they can provide and the causes they are interested in. Organizations register with a description of their mission and the projects they need help with.

Professionals who want to volunteer their services can review the lists of projects that organizations have posted. They also will be sent project descriptions that match their criteria. If they see one that interests them, they can fill out an application on the site. The organization seeking help reviews the applications and selects a volunteer it thinks will be a good fit. Catchafire arranges a phone meeting between the two to discuss the project. If everyone is in agreement, the two sides work together on the project.

Many ways to help

The needs of the organizations are many and varied. There's a link at the top of the website that takes professionals to a page where they can search for open projects. On the left side of the page is a list of 25 professional skills you can check to filter your search. The list includes specialties ranging from accounting and advertising, to finance and fundraising, to marketing and multimedia.

Below the list is a drop-down menu of causes from animal rights to women's issues. Below that is a box in which you can enter a geographic location. Catchafire works with organizations all over the world, but most of the volunteer work can be done from anywhere via phone, the Internet and mail. Check the

filters of the skill sets you want to search, the cause you're interested in and the region where you would like the organization to operate in, and a list of available projects appears.

I checked off design for the area of expertise, children for the cause and all for the location. The search returned a list with brief descriptions of 16 projects that matched my criteria. They included designing print pieces, Web pages, logos, graphics and illustrations. Clicking on a brief takes you to a page with more details on the project.

A second link at the top of the site takes you to a page on which organizations can find professionals to help with their projects. The page is organized into categories like the ones on the professionals' search page. An organization can zero in on the type of help it needs and register its project to find a match.

Marketing good

The design of the website is professional and slick. The color palette and typography are unified across the site. The content on pages is organized well, with good use of images and logical navigation. For how well done the site is, there's a surprising number of typos.

The language on Catchafire is heavy with marketing jargon. While the company's mission is to help do good things, the focus on also making money is tangible throughout the site. Of course, there's nothing wrong with turning a profit while doing good.

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