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Website makes charity connections B-Cause it can

BY GABRIELLE SAULSBERY

As a visually impaired person, Michael Benson can see clearly the benefit of getting help from others.

Benson, who says he was the youngest baby to undergo glaucoma surgery when he was born in 1961, overcame his disability to become a successful businessman. Reflecting on his personal experience launched him from the world of corporate sales to the nonprofit sector, where he experienced firsthand the dog-eat-dog world that not-for-profits can be while fundraising for his organization, Visual Experience Foundation in Spring Lake.

"Here's what happens when you move into the nonprofit world - *you're in competition with a million nonprofits working independently, calling on the same businesses to support them, all doing walks, all going after the same friends,*" Benson said.

"I call a really good friend that I've had for years saying 'I want to do a [charity] walk,' and she said she can't go because she just did one with other friends. People are called to do this work, and they don't realize they're stepping into this real competitive environment. It becomes overwhelming and takes you away from the actual work."

Theorizing a way to bring money to more organizations, Benson found inspiration from online deal website Groupon and Amazon's charity arm AmazonSmile when he developed B-Causes, a website that offers discounted vouchers for things like restaurants and massages that donates up to 80 percent of profits to the buyer's preferred charity.

Based in Manasquan and recently launched out of beta, B-Causes offers hundreds of thousands of deals all over the country that can align with dozens of causes such as the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths & Adults.

Consumers can sign up for free and a portion of all purchases they make goes to the charity they selected at the start. If someone else purchases the same deal but prefers a different charity, their money goes to that one instead.

"The business no longer has to say 'yes' to one and no to 100," explained Benson.

Each supported charity shows up on a business' B-Causes page as an aligned cause, so consumers can see that dollars from the business are going toward charities they support. Beyond the philanthropy, B-Causes' back-end gives businesses (and nonprofits) smart data on their consumers.

"Take an example where 100 different people buy a dinner for two at Drifthouse by David Burke. He can see that 10 of those donations were to leukemia, 10 were to vision and so on," Benson said. "When the



Michael Benson, CEO, B-Causes, showing his company's standalone data capture pedestal, which registers customers into B-Causes' Business Plus program. - AARON HOUSTON

consumer purchases [a deal], the business owner in their dash will be able to get the smart data — [the customer's] name, their email and what cause they're associated with. Maybe they want to hold a lunch for epilepsy [and specifically invite] the list they just built."

This smart data is free for business owners. They list on B-Causes for free as well, so the only cost is the piece negotiated in advance for the donation.

"We're building an ecosystem connecting consumers, nonprofit causes and businesses. We're connecting them together," said Benson.

B-Causes is signing up nonprofits daily. Meridian Health Foundation recently signed a contract to promote its program to its 35,000 supporters. President Joseph Stampe hopes this will attract more dollars toward clinical programs and patient care research, and be a win-win for those already supporting the organization.

"We hope to raise money to support not just our hospitals like Jersey Shore Medical Center, but also for network-wide initiatives for Hackensack Meridian Health," Stampe said. "Giving an opportunity to people who are already supporters of the health network to purchase everyday

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- Michael Benson, B-Causes founder

items while supporting a research project, we thought it was a great way to go."

According to Benson, nonprofits like Meridian Health are going to need to further tap into technology to get the funding they need.

"They expect \$13 billion in donations to nonprofits to go away [because] 90 million people are no longer going to itemize, because they have a bigger tax credit this year [with] the new tax program," Benson said. "The nonprofits are saying, 'How do we use the technology out there today [to get donations]?' We [built] a platform free for nonprofits that encapsulated Groupon and AmazonSmile under one umbrella and provides services to help nonprofits. Instead of them competing, they feed each other."

Businesses, on the other hand, need to take advantage of the growing cause-marketing trend to appeal to millennials.

"Cause marketing is going from \$2.6 billion to a \$20 billion market by 2025," Benson said. "Every businessman knows they need to participate, but who do they say yes and no to? Do you pick a cause based on your consumers or your own feelings? If we both go to a cleaner and yours gives 10 percent of proceeds to Seeing Eye dogs, mine loses me as a customer."

Kevin Kenny, a Jersey Mike's franchisee from Spring Lake with businesses in California, offers 50 percent off a giant sub at his franchises through B-Causes. Fifteen percent of the purchase price goes back to the cause the consumer cares about.

"[Jersey Mike's] gives out seven days of free subs to the community when a location opens. B-Causes allows us to continue the grand opening feeling of giving back even after a store has been open for two years, five years, seven years," he said.

When it comes to nonprofits, "I really don't want to say no to anybody," Kenny said. And now he doesn't have to.