

Good to Go

The economy sucks—we all know it. No matter the spin politicians and positive thinkers try to put on it, Oregonians are hoeing the hard ol' row. But some businesses are thriving despite it all. Impressive numbers: 2009 revenue of \$99.5 million bucks, wages and benefits paid to the tune of \$41.1 million, three new stores open, and millions of pounds of inventory moved. We're not talking Nike here folks, but Goodwill—specifically Goodwill Industries of the Columbia Willamette (GICW). Before you jump in with the old “it's not ethical for charities to make so much money” saw, take note that .92 cents of every dollar earned by GICW goes toward the mission of the company: to help those with barriers to employment find and retain work.

There was a time when thrift stores were just for folks down on their luck, places to unload the unwanted surplus of life, or just plain grotty little shops filled with junk no one could possibly want. Times have changed, and the aforementioned economy and the aesthetic of “reduce, reuse, recycle” has made thrift hip, green, and the smart choice for most consumers. Walk into the new Warrenton Goodwill and you'll be greeted by friendly *local* staff, a plethora of usable items attractively arranged, and a shiny new building. “You look at the store; nothing's tatty, stuff is brand new still,” enthused one browsing customer. And the stock in the store is sustained by the larger community, not full of imported stuff from Portland. “You are big donors here in Clatsop County,” exclaims GICW public relations rep Dale Emanuel. “The donation site at the Warrenton Fred Meyer gets as many donations as the store. We'll be putting in an attended donation site in Seaside soon as well. It's an economically hard hit county, but a giving one too.”

GICW is an “A” rated charity and employs 2,000 people, 2/3 of whom have some kind of barrier to employment. That could be a person with little English, just out of a correctional facility, developmentally disabled, a person who has never worked before, or a pregnant teen. Beyond the employees that actually work for the company, the Job Connections program served 27,000 folks, and placed 6,107 people into community employment (2009). This program is available at the Warrenton store, and is available to anyone who is having a hard time entering or re-entering the job market. “We help you with your resume, give you leads. You have to put yourself out there, but the program helps you do it,” explains Emanuel. GICW also offers ESL training, and long-term career enhancement services.

And all this goodwill is sustained by donations from the local communities GICW serves.

Shop 'til you drop

Emanuel is excited to share shopping strategies to help consumers get the most out of their expedition to Goodwill. The top things that we buy are readily available in quantity at most Goodwill stores: clothing, shoes, books, CDs & DVDs, housewares and electronics, and furniture. “When you need something in these categories, come here first.” Best times to shop are Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday since most donations come on the weekend. Season changes and three-day weekends are another time to find the best selection of stock. Looking for that perfect sectional or dining room table? Wait ‘til the end of the month, when your neighbors have retired to Florida and unloaded their furniture at the local Goodwill.

Many stores have a “flavor,” although the Warrenton store hasn’t been open long enough for specific themes to develop (for example, 10th Ave. boutique in PDX is the place to snag those Prada boots for hundreds less than retail), the steady donations keep the stock flowing. Items are moved through in a 3-5 week rotation, with 6000-7000 articles a day changing over in the Warrenton location. The store is literally different every day. Every Sunday half the clothing goes to half price. “Thrift does go on sale,” laughs Emanuel. Should one week be particularly low on, say, housewares, the cavernous back room of the store holds 500-700 lb boxes full of stock fill-in.

In fact, the inner workings of the moderately sized Warrenton store are eye-popping. Donations pour in on one side, and workers do what they are able, from sorting clothes, matching shoes, tagging furniture, and even baling clothes. Clothing that doesn’t sell are moved into an area to await squishing in a specially designed machine that presses textile materials into 1,000 lb bales. Want to really get a sense of how much stuff there is in the world? Visit the backroom of your local Goodwill.

But it’s all good; “GICW is the leader among all stores for recycling,” enthuses Emanuel. “We lead in donations, retail sales, and amount kept out of landfills. I mean, our Goodwills here in the Columbia Willamette region are the best in the *world*.” Where does all that squished up textile goodness go? Sold to salvagers and sent to third world countries. Non-textile items are sold for salvage too. Another way for GICW to make money toward their mission, and to keep stuff out of the ground.

No matter how good you got it, get to Goodwill where the getting, and giving, is always good.

Sidebars and text boxes . . .

North Coasters have two other Goodwill shopping options, in addition to the Warrenton store:

www.shopgoodwill.com: the best, weirdest, rarest, and most collectible items that are received nationwide go for sale on this site that functions similar to ebay. Prices begin at \$5 and sell for an average high of \$27.

www.goodwillbooks.com: Portland based, this thousands-title strong site lists between 3500 and 4000 items *a day*. To stock the store, the Portland warehouse goes through 15-20 half-ton boxes a day. (GICW gets more book donations than any other Goodwill system). State of the art software continuously monitors sales of books all over the internet, insuring that goodwillbooks.com won't be undersold. Packaging is green and if you are going to be in Town you can pick up your order at the Hillsboro location.

Goodwill mission: GICW's mission is to provide vocational opportunities to people with barriers to employment. Their retail program has two purposes: to integrate people with barriers to employment into their workforce and to generate funding for vocational programs.

Goodwill stores/regions are run autonomously with a board of directors and CEO. Although they subscribe to the same mission, all have their own level of success and prosperity. The GICW is the leader in the US for good practice and management.

You can shop Goodwill in Canada and places like Venezuela, Trinidad & Tobago, and Mexico. International élan!