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What GozAround Comes Around: Start-Up Delivers Convenient Volunteer Opps to Your Inbox 🗨️ 0

BY HELAINA HOVITZ ON NOVEMBER 12, 2014

SOLUTIONS IN ACTION

Wouldn't it be nice if we could all volunteer how we wanted, when we wanted, and have those opportunities handed right to us? If you've ever thought, *I'd love to just visit with an old person who's alone, or, I'd love to help a shelter animal the next time I have a free weekend*, you're among the growing number of people looking for the right opportunity to lend a hand but not quite sure how to do it—and lacking the time needed to make a regular commitment. Or hey, maybe you're shy, and want to pitch in quietly by buying a few extra groceries for a needy family. Thanks to what's being dubbed in its early days as "Uber for favors," the four-month-old online platform [GozAround](#) helps make it quicker and easier for people to find ways to give back in their community. We spoke with Ben Block, founder of GozAround, about his grand plan to change the world and help us all score some digital karma.

How did this all begin?

After the Boston marathon bombings, I saw a quick shot of a bulletin board on the news. Someone had posted a handwritten note asking people to help make meals for the firefighters that had come into the city, but a paper flyer on the wall wasn't going to do much. That person had taken amazing initiative, but he or she needed something better, like the internet, as a way to really get the message out there. Long before then, I'd often heard people say it's too hard to find volunteer opportunities, yet there are lots of people out there that need some help. People had no way to connect to people willing to step up.

Tell me a heartwarming success story...

We had a single mom here in Edmonton, Canada who had been removed from an abusive situation and placed in a hotel with her children for her safety. Unfortunately, it was her 7-year-old daughter's birthday that weekend. Out of her home and without a kitchen, she couldn't even bake a cake, much less throw a birthday party. Thankfully, she posted this on GozAround and a stranger responded, bringing decorations, a small gift and a cake to the hotel so the

birthday girl could have her special day.

Another! Another!

Another example came from a family in difficult times who asked for help putting Thanksgiving dinner on the table (Canadian Thanksgiving is in October). Someone responded by delivery a turkey and all the rest to her home. What I love about this is it takes a really common need and tears down the awkwardness of asking for help. There are lots of food programs out there, but sometimes a family may be unable to access them for one reason or another. That leaves few options, and I doubt many would be willing to knock on their neighbor's door to ask for help. By using GozAround, a family like this can anonymously make a request for help and only when someone willing to step-in is found reveal who they are and where they are located. I know I throw leftover food out all the time. If there was someone in need in my area that posted, why wouldn't I share?

What advantages are there to being a lawyer when spearheading something like this?

Well, my days in the courtroom screaming things like "You can't handle the truth!" make me a fairly convincing spokesperson. Ok, going to court is actually nothing like that, but being a lawyer does have some advantages. For example, the universal respect people have the profession –that's sarcasm, by the way. Ok, ok, time to get serious. The years spent working with people in difficult circumstances did give me a real taste for lending a hand to someone in need. Add in some experience dealing with contracts, insurance, intellectual property and all sorts of other things an entrepreneur runs into and yes, it has been very useful so far.



Ben Block is serious about his start-up.

Why do you think it's taken so long for a platform like this to surface?

The concepts of volunteerism and random acts of kindness are certainly not new, it just took time for the features that make GozAround unique to mature. From a business perspective social networking, gamification, online community marketplaces, locally targeted web services...I hadn't even heard of some of these things five years ago. Now, they are common concepts being applied by countless businesses in a variety of industries. At the same time, I think the recent recession and environmental changes we are seeing have started to shift our culture and mindset from "me" to "we." There are lots of volunteer posting sites out there, offline volunteer centers, classified sites and so on. These are all doing a good job, but in today's age of instant information it just needs to be quicker and easier to find that perfect opportunity. At the same time, there are proven engagement tools like gamification and social networking that have been begging to be applied to community service. GozAround is working to become the best and most fun place to ask for help.

What's everyone's first reaction when you tell them what you do?

There are some people that don't get it. I occasionally get, "Why would you help a stranger?" but it's rare and overwhelmed by the positive responses.

What's up with the Digital Karma system?

GozAround functions on a point system. Some people have called them "digital karma" points, but whatever the label, they are earned when you help someone else, and pay it forward when you receive help. As you earn more points, you increase your rank on the site and can eventually redeem those points for rewards. Kind of like frequent flyer miles for giving back. Of course, the real reward is the giving and receiving of help, but a little pat on the back or

recognition doesn't hurt.

How can people sign up and get involved?

Right now, we're big in Canada and starting to trickle into the East and West Coasts in the U.S., but we really need people to get involved, so we're trying to spread the word. Individuals, businesses or volunteer organizations can all register for free at GozAround.com by clicking the Sign-Up button. We collect some information about you or your organization, helping us to verify your identity as we talked about and to ensure you receive only targeted help requests. From there, you can start by browsing current opportunities or post a request for help. And don't forget to find us on Twitter (@gozaround) and Facebook.

What's it like to have to rely on word of mouth and get people to sign up?

That is our biggest hurdle. Our site is built in a way that allows people and organizations all over the world to get involved, but we need to reach them. We really count on our those who believe in what we are doing to share the site with others. There is no better advertising than word of mouth, but contrary to popular belief, it's not something money can buy. You have to earn that kind of support and it takes time.

So anyone can post a question for help? Do you screen them?

We have done our best to build in some assurance tools. There are identity verification options including email, phone number confirmation and the ability to connect your Facebook and LinkedIn accounts. The idea is that someone with a confirmed email and mobile number and 300 Facebook friends is probably a real person not some fake account set-up to scam users. Finally, after every task both users have the chance to provide feedback. Over time this track record will give some idea of what you can expect from that person and help you decide whether to connect with them. Of course common sense and care is important when dealing with anyone on the internet, but we believe the vast majority of experiences will be positive ones.

Who's your main audience right now?

Organizations that rely on volunteers for their programs and people looking for community service opportunities. Those include everyone from students with volunteer hour requirements to meet, to companies with employee volunteer programs and just concerned citizens. As word spreads we are seeing new members joining of all ages and walks of life from literally every continent...ok, not Antarctica...but all the rest. It proves that goodwill and a desire to help is universal.

What's the quirkiest project/need someone has posted to date?

There has been a huge range of posts. Everything for delivering hot meals to seniors, giving a ride to the doctor, resume assistance, baby clothes donations... you name it. Probably the most unique project yet has been looking for musicians, producers and other contributors to come together in support of a LGBT rights music video. I think that posting is still live, so we'll have to see how it turns out. But that's one of the best parts for me as a founder. When I get to see how this idea gets used by those who need it in ways I never would have thought of, I'm sure we have only scratched the surface.

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