

Faith & Community

A higher calling: Chris Booth gave up corporate life to bring bargain high-tech supplies, services to nonprofit organizations

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As an executive vice president in the information technology industry back in the 1980s and early 1990s, Chris Booth saw a need that wasn't being met. That need was for nonprofit agencies — from churches to organizations such as the March of Dimes — to be able to afford current computer software and systems that would enable them to do their jobs serving people.

Academic and government agencies, after all, had been getting discount rates on such products for years. And Booth, a longtime Racine resident, felt that nonprofits should be given similar treatment by the industry.

"It didn't make sense that charities and churches were not taking advantage of similar savings," he said.

So, in 1991, Booth, founded Consistent Computer Bargains Inc. — a company whose mission is to offer nonprofit organizations the widest selection of affordable technology, support and services to accomplish their missions more efficiently and affordably.

Initially working out of his basement, Booth took on his own crusade to bring the concept of charity pricing to manufacturers with a passion. One by one, he met with companies including Microsoft, Adobe, Hewlett-Packard, Dell and Semantic. And one by one, he convinced them that charity pricing was a good idea.

It wasn't always easy. With one particular manufacturer, Booth had to make 17 presentations over a five-year period before the company agreed to offer the discount to nonprofits. And, some of his peers in the industry were less than encouraging when he shared his decision to leave his successful executive position to take on this project.

Still, Booth never gave up. What kept him going, he says, was his faith.

Answering the call

"I was called to do this, and when you are called to do something you don't give up," said Booth, whose business cards and headquarters building at 2823 Carlisle Ave. have a Christian fish symbol logo. "If you believe in something strongly enough, you continue to push until you find a way to make it work."

Booth certainly has done that. Since it opened for business in 1993, CCB has grown to become the leading authorized reseller of name brand computer technology to nonprofit and charitable organizations throughout the United States. His company — which employs more than 40 people in Racine and has six offices in other cities — serves more than 25,000 customers nationwide, ranging from a variety of churches and faith-based missions to such nonprofits as the Girls Scouts of USA, the Nature Conservancy and Milwaukee's UMOS, an advocacy organization that provides programs and services which improve the employment, educational, health and housing opportunities of under-served populations.

Grace Church, 3626 Highway 31, is one of its customers.

"CCB's competitive, nonprofit pricing has allowed us to keep our computer systems upgraded and has given us access to many programs that allow us to do ministry in a creative, cost-effective manner," said Matt Geary, manager of information systems for Grace Church. "Their volume license pricing for non-profits has given us access to many programs we would not have been able to afford by standard means."

The relationship between Grace Church and CCB was described as a partnership by Randy Due, church administrator for Grace.

And that word seems to fit well with Booth's vision of his work with customers.

"I represent the nonprofits," he said. "I feel called to protect them and be their voice."

Serving the people

In its 15-year existence, CCB has saved nonprofit organizations across the nation more than \$250 million, according to estimates from Booth, the company's president and CEO. In terms of sales, CCB is a \$25 million company, but without the break that the nonprofits are getting through his company, that figure would be \$120 million, Booth said.

Such growth isn't something Booth was really focused on when he set out to create charity pricing. While he was driven to achieve certain monetary goals while living the corporate life, he measures his success with CCB in different ways, said Booth, who first came to Racine from the Southern U.S. about 30 years ago to work for Western Publishing. He also worked in sales and marketing with STP Racing before entering the world of technology.

"In this role, I had a vision to help people," Booth said of his work with CCB. "Am I amazed at \$25 million and still growing? Absolutely."

What is more important, however, is CCB's mission to make a difference in other people's lives, he said.

"We help others save money so that they can help others who can't help themselves, And it is wonderful to know we are helping."

Booth's dedication to serving through faith can also be found outside of CCB. Twenty years ago, he and his wife, Patti, founded the Marina Ministry, an organization which conducts worship services at Racine's Reefpoint Marina during the boating season.

That ministry is still going strong today, with an average of more than 50 people attending services.

His Christian heritage is something that Booth says plays an important role in all aspects of his life.

"I am not ashamed of my faith," he said. "I don't promote it or flaunt it, but my integrity is based on the fact that I'm accountable to a higher calling."