



FALL | WINTER 2008

One Night Over Pizza

By Mark Jacobs

“We are seeing a very inspiring shift in social-mindedness and public compassion,” says CharityFocus founder Nipun Mehta. “Suddenly, ideas like service, selflessness, and philanthropy are cool. Our objective has always been to help create the tools that allow people to play joyfully in this space—to express their fundamental generosity, gratitude, hopefulness, and desire to be a more integrated part of the collective human experience.”

When Mr. Mehta brought together a few friends over pizza one night in 1999, the social culture was quite different. Those were the salad days of the technology and multimedia booms, and attitudes of selfishness and consumptive materialism were at their apex. He challenged the group to develop systems to help busy, professionally oriented people put service back into their lives. They decided to create an online volunteer community to build free websites for small nonprofit organizations—and CharityFocus was born.

“In the early days, we concentrated on the process of collective volunteerism,” explains Trishna Shah, an early volunteer coordinator, “the idea that when you and I come together, our activity does more than simply create good in the community as an end-result, it also creates a powerfully synergistic dynamic and exciting opportunities to serve.” In short order, CharityFocus grew to include nearly 10,000 volunteers, who built thousands of websites—all at no cost to the nonprofits.

Other projects quickly followed. CharityFocus took over management of ProPoor, an internet portal for South Asian non-governmental organizations and PledgePage, which had been a for-profit portal to assist in participatory philanthropic fundraising events. Not only did CharityFocus bring new levels of technical excellence to those endeavors, they operate them essentially unbudgeted as all-volunteer projects. “We have always tried to show that volunteerism is more powerful than financial support in most nonprofit contexts. Not only can volunteerism often accomplish more than money, the service of volunteers is personally meaningful—even transformative—in a way that check-writing can never be,” Mehta says.

In recent years, CharityFocus has moved beyond collective volunteerism to pioneer other ways to nurture and incorporate service to others in the routine activities of our daily lives. It is a leading exponent of cutting-edge concepts such as the gift economy and micro-philanthropy, and has launched an innovative awareness building game of everyday pay-it-forward known as ‘Smile Cards,’ which turn anonymous acts of kindness into a worldwide game of tag. It publishes daily and weekly inspirational content with strong communitarian messages to circulation lists in the tens of thousands.

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Updated Nov 11, 2008

