

Application Questions

What was the overall business objective of the programme?

The business objective was to facilitate a program in which our members' efforts and donations could be combined to provide a greater impact than if offered alone. The program is truly an industry initiative wide initiative.

How did the element of social responsibility tie in?

The RRR program is unlike any other community program in the tourism industry in North America. Through the RRR program, Tourism Toronto provides parents of children with special needs a much-deserved break. Sometimes the best way to help these inspiring children is to give mom and dad a break. With the assistance of members and partners, we provide weekend getaways for parents that include a limousine pick up, a two-night hotel stay, tickets to shows, museums and other attractions, and meals at local restaurants, and even a gift for the parents to give the child in care when they return. Two families benefit from these weekend getaways every single week, for a total of approximately 100 per year.

How does the programme fit with the overall organising company's objectives or CSR commitment?

In 2008, Tourism Toronto developed a comprehensive Corporate Social Responsibility program based on three pillars: Sustainability (wide-reaching green program), Training (scholarships at nine Ontario schools of Hospitality and Tourism) and Families in Need (the signature Relax, Recharge, Renew program). This application asks the panel to consider the **Relax, Recharge, Renew** (RRR) program as a unique initiative that engages the community.

How and why was the charity chosen for the programme?

When we were formulating the plan for this program we first considered the strengths we had to draw on, namely our many partners and members in the hotel, restaurant and attractions business. We determined that these assets would be a good fit for helping families in difficult circumstances who don't have the resources (time or money) to do many of the things in the city we often take for granted. With those things in mind, we consulted with members of the government who were responsible for children and youth services and professionals in the children's services sector to see if we could fill a need. We observed that, although there are many wonderful programs for special-needs children (and there can never be enough), there were few for the parents and siblings. We further consulted with several local respite care centres where children with special needs are cared for and designed the program, with them as central partners.

How was the idea communicated?

We have a website dedicated to our social responsibility programs where participating members are recognized and family testimonials are shared. Members are continually updated on the program through newsletters and at events, with thank you notes from families being shared with the participating partners as and when they are received.

What was the positive effect on the beneficiaries?

Reactions from the families and facilities Tourism Toronto has worked with have been overwhelmingly positive. Attached are some of the testimonials from several of the families. In addition the participating members frequently express their excitement at being involved with the program.

How did it make a difference in the lives of the beneficiaries?

As mentioned above, the feedback from the families and respite care professionals has been overwhelmingly positive. The feedback we have had suggests that parents truly feel relaxed, recharged and renewed after receiving an extremely rare chance to getaway.

Award Criteria

1. SUITABILITY

How did your programme integrate into the local community?

The programme links the entire tourism industry of Toronto with a community group who would otherwise have little interaction. The programme allows the industry to utilise and pool its resources to have a more powerful and positive impact.

2. CREATIVITY

What were the programme's most creative ideas? We believe the entire concept of the programme is creative- as far as we're aware this is the only programme of its kind. Reactions from our community partners have lead us to believe that this is a unique approach in partnering.

3. SUSTAINABILITY

Did your programme have any long term sustainability objectives? In researching the programme before inception we were made aware of the hardships that families can suffer. Children with severe special needs often require round the clock care and attention, often requiring one parent to remain at home full time that can lead to a reduced income for the family. There are statistics also that suggest families in this situation go through a higher rate of divorce and separation than average. Although we have not measured the impact of the program statistically we hope that a small break from what can often be a very stressful routine improves the quality of life for the family. Tourism Toronto is fully committed to carry on this program on an ongoing basis. Respiteservices.com have noted that publicity garnered from the program has lead to families approaching them seeking information about the RRR which has

lead to the family being able to enter the whole network provided by respiteservices.com and its partners, adding to the long term benefits.

4. OUTCOME

What did you learn through this experience? I think that we have learned that by reaching out to partners and with some time allocated for coordination and management that the outcome and benefits for others delivers a tremendous return on investment for all concerned. The programme relies on a number of Tourism Toronto staff to volunteer their time in preparing the weekends, encouraging members to participate, and general management of the program, and has provided the organization with a real feel good factor.

For more information on the programme please visit www.seetorontonow.com/socialresponsibility where you will find a list of the more than 150 participating members.

Family Testimonials

Below are two testimonials from families who participated in the programme. For more you can visit this page.

Relax and Enjoy Time Together...

We would like to thank you for a wonderful weekend. It was more than we could have imagined. The hotel was amazing, like nothing we had ever stayed in before. Your choice of restaurants was perfect.

Getting away, yet being able to stay close to our daughter helped us to re-connect as a couple. We knew she was well taken care of, so we were able to relax and enjoy our time together. We have never left the City without her so this was like a mini-vacation, yet not being away.

Understand Our Daily Challenges...

Wow, what a fantastic weekend! We didn't think that we would have so much fun and be pampered like we did.

We are very appreciative of the fact that Tourism Toronto and Respite Services truly understand the needs of parents who have a special needs child. It is often the parents who sacrifice for their special needs child at their own expense. It is really nice to know that others understand our daily challenges and realise we need a break once a while to recharge and re-focus.

Toronto Star Article

The Toronto Star interviewed three families on a weekend away. Below is an excerpt. For the full article please visit <http://www.parentcentral.ca/parent/article/539273>.

A break for parents of children with special needs, November 22, 2008

Pamela Dabene almost pinched herself as she gazed through the flickering candlelight into the eyes of her husband Dave...Earlier, the Dabenes had marvelled at the crystal facade of the Royal Ontario Museum and admired the view at dusk from the top of the CN Tower...For the Scarborough couple, both 36 and the parents of three sons, it was the first adult holiday in more than 16 years. Their 14-year-old, Kevin, has Down syndrome and autism. He is non-verbal and has behavioural problems...Both parents work full-time on the early shifts – Pamela as a hospital clerk, Dave as a postal worker. They have always been on call.

A weekend getaway has never been an option. Until this month, thanks to a new program offered by Tourism Toronto aimed at parents of special needs kids in Toronto, Mississauga and York Region.

The programme, called Relax, Recharge & Renew, provides parents with an all-expenses paid weekend in the city tailored to their tastes. Equally important, it arranges respite care in a registered facility for their disabled child.

"It was so stress relieving," Pamela says of the weekend respite. "We reconnected with each other and strengthened our bond. This made us (remember) we are a team, we can do this together."

Lorna Powers, supervisor at respiteservices.com, was thrilled when first called to see whether the network, which links families to residential care, camps and personal care workers, wanted to get on board with Toronto Tourism.

"I thought, 'Are you kidding me?' No one has ever come forward with this kind of idea," she says. "This is just what families could use, as they are under such tremendous stress when caring for an individual with a disability."

Many are living on one income because someone needs to be home full-time to care for the child, so they can't afford a holiday, never mind find the time to plan one.

For more information please contact

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