



Christie's puts its art and soul into communities

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Art is naturally at the core of what constitutes corporate social responsibility at Christie's, one of the world's top auction houses.

Toby Usnik, the company's chief corporate social responsibility officer and international director, said it operates a series of different philanthropic initiatives, aimed at not only helping worthy causes but also engendering social awareness among its own staff.

Whether facilitating the sale of artwork to benefit important causes, offering its salerooms as venues for fundraising events, or providing expert charity auctioneers, Usnik said Christie's believes passionately in the power of art to society.

Speaking on the sidelines of the second Integral Conversation forum, held recently in Guilin, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, he said the firm endeavors to use its prominent position in the art world as a positive force to leave an enduring impact on the communities in which it operates.

He likes to illustrate his approach to the company's CSR activities using three concentric circles.

The inner circle is the workplace, with the firm believing that all of Christie's employees have to be more aware of the impact their actions have on each other.

The middle one represents the marketplace, and how its employees can be more aware of the impact its activities have on clients and the community.

And the outer circle represents how the company and its employees can be more responsible in how its activities affect the entire planet.

The Integral Conversation forum brings together sustainability and CSR experts from around the world, and from a variety of fields, to explore a more holistic approach to development. Organizers say its aim is to inspire enterprises, community leaders, policymakers and individuals to take positive action in all aspects of work and life.

“Sustainability has always been a key part of our business,” said Usnik, during what was his third trip to China.

“If I can help my colleagues think more about the impact their activities have on each other, their partners, our clients and the planet, then in theory, they are going to be more informed and more responsible for the decisions they make on a daily basis.

“I firmly believe that if our clients see us being more socially responsible, they will be more inclined to work with Christie’s versus another auction house.”

Christie’s allows every fulltime employee to work eight hours a year in a voluntary service, non-profit organization or charity, without losing pay.

Usnik admits, however, not everyone takes up the offer. “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink,” he said.

But to encourage more to volunteer, for example, Christie’s has held special charity action days, or so-called arts assemblies for the past three years in Hong Kong, London and New York.

During these events, it invited senior executives from arts-related charitable organizations that need volunteers, which gives the company’s own employees a platform to find out more about their work, and potentially convince them to get involved.

In Hong Kong, the company has worked closely with many organizations, in particular, three charity organizations:

Asia Art Archive, which responds to the urgent need to document and secure the recent histories of contemporary art in the region; Hands On Hong Kong, which mobilizes and empowers communities to meet pressing social needs in the city through volunteer services; and Kely Support Group, a bilingual charity dedicated to offering inclusive, non-judgmental support to poor or disadvantaged young people.

In August, Christie's also introduced its first "global volunteer day", when employees in those three main locations were encouraged to invite students from disadvantaged groups to have a closer look at art.

In New York, the youngsters were taken to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the city's Natural History Museum; while in Hong Kong, trips were organized to the Hong Kong Heritage Museum.

"These visits are really meaningful, because you are not only getting the kids out for a day and exposing them to these great institutions, you're also sparking their interest and enthusiasm in art, which might inspire them to pursue in arts career," said Usnik.

He said the Christie's volunteers might also become more socially conscious of the services the company offers as a result, as they are not just accompanying the kids for the day but making a genuine difference to their lives.

Many of the children who came on the trips were from broken homes, or don't see their parents as often as they would like, said Usnik, and so they genuinely value being invited to go to these special kinds of places.

The real benefit of this initiative, however, is it shows these kids that they matter, he said, and it helps them gain in confidence as well as being inspired by the art they see.

"These volunteer programs are so exciting as the beneficiaries are young people," he said.

"There's even the possibility that one day they too might become an artist, a museum director, or work in an auction house like ours."

Full story :

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2015-11/19/content_22483462.htm