Because It Matters

Our award-winning, three-year civility initiative aimed to improve quality of life in our region by increasing civic participation, civil discourse, and social capital—one encounter at a time.

Research shows that emotions are contagious. When we communicate in a more respectful and effective way, our brain chemistry causes us to feel better about the world around us. When we do, we pass those good feelings on to others. That’s the essence of Because It Matters.

Back in 2003, our Gulf Coast region was fortunate to become part of a landmark study called “Better Together,” which monitored the effects of social capital, or the levels of connectedness in communities. Sponsored locally by Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice, the study measured social capital in all of Sarasota County plus Boca Grande and Englewood, first in ’03 and again in ’05. While we scored well in bonding social capital—birds of a feather flocking together—we did not fare as well with bridging social capital—making connections among more diverse groups.

In 2007, we took “Better Together” a step further by inviting psychologist and author Dr. Daniel Goleman to discuss his book “Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships.” Dr. Goleman cited data from the emerging field of social neuroscience that suggested interpersonal relationships actually shape our brains and thus alter our physiology. Our encounters with one another, then, are critical factors in the equation for a healthy and successful life. After the event, we invited our community to continue exploring how we could improve social capital. With the help of more than 100 volunteers, an initiative for civility was born.

Keys to Civility

Because It Matters, which launched in October 2007, was built around 10 Keys to Civility, simple guiding principles to raise awareness and change behavior in our community. A comprehensive multimedia campaign, including TV commercials with celebrity spokespeople, promoted the keys to civility. A dedicated Web site, BecauseItMatters.net, served as the clearinghouse for information and collateral materials made available at no cost to the community.

The initiative focused on improving civility in four key areas of our community’s life: workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and civic organizations. Dozens of organizations representing more than 30,000 people registered through the Web site to initiate civility programs. In its second and third years, the Because It Matters campaign shifted from awareness to more programmatic elements in two areas that showed the most traction: schools and workplaces.

Communities of Caring and Civil Workplaces

A partnership with the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Center for Community of Caring brought the nationally known Community of Caring character education program to more than 20 Sarasota County Schools. In 2009, Gulf Coast was named the Community of Caring Community Partner of the Year, and local schools and a local student were honored with other national awards. What started in primary and secondary schools has now been expanded to local preschools as well.
Area professionals, meanwhile, participated in a “sold out” series of workshops on fostering a culture of civility in the workplace. To extend the reach of the initiative, Gulf Coast also trained a group of local consultants and created a workplace-civility curriculum, both of which are available to local employers.

**Owned by the Community**

From its start, Because It Matters was described as “owned by the community; supported by Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice.” The viral nature of the campaign encouraged community members to take ownership of the messages and incorporate and share them in their own daily lives.

While our formal three-year initiative ended in late 2010, Gulf Coast continues to provide tools and support that enable the community to sustain this civility effort. This includes hosting of the BecauseItMatters.net Web site and continued production of collateral materials. Gulf Coast also offers complimentary training by our workplace-civility consultants for local businesses, and funding for local schools to continue their participation in Community of Caring.

**Resources:**

[BecauseItMatters.net][1]