

# Pay It Forward

The charitable giving experience.

BY SHAREEF MAHDAVI



I found an exemplary customer experience that is revolutionizing philanthropy at the Web site of a nonprofit organization called Kiva. This site (<http://www.kiva.org>) has blended the concept of microlending with the global connectivity of the Internet, seamlessly joining those who have with those who need. This portal offers a study in how a Web site can engage its visitors.

## A NEW MODEL FOR GIVING

A visit to the organization's Web site reveals how any person can loan \$25 or more to help one of hundreds of individuals around the globe who are working their way out of poverty. The "featured business" on the Web site at the time of this writing is a woman in Samoa who is raising \$850 to purchase a fishing boat so her family can increase their catch to sell the excess at the local market. She's received \$250 so far. All loans are managed through an on-the-ground field partner, whose track record and complete statistics are also listed. This high level of accountability—including the repayment schedules—eases the nagging doubts people sometimes have about charitable giving.

### HERE'S AN IDEA

Most practices thank their LASIK patients by giving them a small gift, typically a logo-identified T-shirt or coffee mug. This type of premium is designed to stimulate other referrals. A unique idea is to give each patient a Kiva gift certificate (available in \$25 denominations) that they could use to donate to one of the small businesses listed on Kiva's Web site.

Think about the impact you could have, both *on* your patients ("Wow, I've never gotten anything like this before!") and *through* your patients to improve the lives of others. This idea will work well for those of you seeking to differentiate your practices by creating unique and memorable experiences for your patients.

What I love about this site is that it directly connects the givers with the recipients. Along with their requests, entrepreneurs in developing countries post photographs of and updates about their endeavors. Donors' ability to see their contributions put to direct use transcends the traditional experience of writing a check to a charity. The site is a great tool for teaching people of all ages about basic human needs, and it empowers individuals to help one another.

## APPLICATION TO THE REFRACTIVE PRACTICE

Many of you have maintained a Web site for your practice for years and realized its value as a marketing tool. Kiva's portal, however, uses the following elements, which yours could incorporate to foster more personal interaction:

**Educational**—Kiva teaches without trying to sell. *How would you evaluate your Web site's educational value?*

**Fun**—Kiva allows donors to track the progress of their entrepreneurial recipients. *What's the fun factor on your Web site? What elements encourage return visits?*

**Exploration**—Kiva's Web site lets visitors read the personal stories of individuals who are working toward a worthy goal. *How well does your site encourage people to explore the various facets of their vision?*

**Connection**—Kiva allows visitors to connect emotionally and financially with people around the world. *What opportunities exist for you to bond with your Web site's visitors?*

## CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

On another level, Kiva's Web site can become a unique part of your overall professional offering, allowing you and your patients to pay goodwill forward (see *Here's an Idea*). Successful surgeons with whom I speak are continually seeking ways to give back to their communities, and I encourage you to visit the organization's Web site after reading this column to check it out for yourself. ■

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