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### 'Tis better to give than receive, TisBest says

Firm's gift cards allow recipients to aid local charities



TisBest, a Seattle-based charity gift card company, picked four local charities this year.

By Andrea Damewood  
Columbian Staff Reporter

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It all started four years ago with Erik Marks' feeling of dread around the holiday season.

People are giving way too much stuff for Christmas, he said. Stuff everywhere — sweaters, toys, trinkets — that nobody really needed. So, with the goal of shaking the feelings of claustrophobia and doom he felt every winter, Marks founded TisBest, a charitable gift card company. It's his way of cutting down gratuitous gift giving.

TisBest, itself a nonprofit company based in Seattle, markets gift cards with a charitable twist. Instead of being used to buy merchandise, the charity gift cards are, in essence, donations

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**Charity gift cards**

• **What:** TisBest, a Seattle-based nonprofit, sells charity gift cards online. The cards resemble a store gift card, but instead of using the card to buy merchandise, recipients spend the money through donations to any of TisBest's selected charities.

• **Local angle:** This year, the site expanded to include Clark County and Portland charities for the first time. In Clark County, the Vancouver-Clark Parks Foundation, Share Inc., Columbia Springs and Project Access NOW were all chosen as beneficiaries.

• **Where:** Visit <http://www.tisbes...>, or connect through the Parks Foundation website, <http://www.parksf...> and the foundation gets an extra \$2.

made on behalf of the card's recipients. Card recipients decide who gets the donation, selecting up to three different charities out of hundreds of national and local charities on the TisBest website.

"It was just my belief there needed to be a way to give gifts to each other that wasn't just more stuff," Marks said during a phone interview Monday. "It's not a charitable giving concept, it's a gift-giving concept that uses charity to make a great gift."

This year is also the first that recipients can give to charities in Clark County and Portland. The Vancouver-Clark Parks Foundation, Share, Columbia Springs and Project Access NOW were picked, along with four other Portland charities.

Parks Foundation Director Cheri Martin said she hadn't heard of TisBest, or charity gift cards, until a meeting with TisBest this year. Now, she said she's excited at the opportunity to raise both money and her agency's profile.

"Realizing that there was no obligation, no cost to us at all, I became more and more determined that we were going to be selected," Martin said.

TisBest does not charge the charities it lists, but each card carries a 3 percent credit processing fee, and a \$1.95 administration fee. Tax forms show the nonprofit did \$380,000 in sales in 2007, its first year, and Marks expects somewhere between \$1 million and \$1.5 million in sales this year.

Marks said the cards have been a big hit with businesses, which give them to employees around the holidays. He mentioned a company in Iowa that used to give mugs, T-shirts or other knickknacks for Christmas, before switching to TisBest gift cards.

"The employees absolutely loved it," he said. "You aren't going to go to all of your 375 employees, ask which charity they like and write a check for that. A gift card is a really efficient way to do that."

Martin said parents and grandparents can use them to instill the notion of giving.

"Maybe it doesn't have to be their whole Christmas present, but it teaches them that giving is what you do," she said.

Letting people get engaged and make their donation personal is also part of the appeal, Marks said. The company

is hoping to have a Facebook page running by the holidays that will allow people to share where they made their donations.

The cards can also be personalized. TisBest can send one of its stock cards, made of recycled plastic, or a gift giver can upload a photo to be printed on the card at no extra cost. Givers can also check online to see if those they gave the cards to have spent them, and also which charities they picked.

"We've got nothing to lose and everything to gain — even one donation is better than what we had," Martin said. "It's the season of giving, and we could really use some money."

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