

SERVING WESTERN MICHIGAN BUSINESS SINCE 1988

## Mission driven

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HOLLAND — A slowdown in sales often times results in not enough work to keep employees productive and busy. Employers could logically respond by downsizing a number of workers and wishing them the best of luck in their job searches.

Not so at Fleetwood Group Inc.

Despite a 20-percent reduction in its educational furniture sales, Fleetwood Group President and CEO Doug Ruch developed a creative way for the company to keep all of its employees through a program of voluntary service assignments.



Ruch

Fleetwood Group, made up of **Fleetwood Furniture** and **Fleetwood Electronics**, specializes in manufacturing mobile and modular furniture for flexible learning spaces, and designs and manufactures radio frequency wireless electronics.

To navigate the period of declining furniture sales, Ruch developed the “Win-Win Mission Project” where 24 employees from the company’s ranks of 165 workers in Holland maintain their full pay and benefits and volunteer full-time at four nonprofits in the Holland area — the **Holland Rescue Mission**, **City on a Hill Ministries**, **Geneva Camp & Retreat Center** and **Habitat for Humanity**.

Ruch said retaining a committed and seasoned team is important to Fleetwood Group to be well-positioned when sales pick up. There have been no employee layoffs in Ruch’s 14-year tenure at the helm of the company.

Fleetwood Group has a long history of offering a short-term mission benefit, which

### Made in Western Michigan



Fleetwood Group offers a variety of keypads and base stations that incorporate wireless (RF) technology for audience response. The company’s Reply Ativa, suitable for government and healthcare applications, uses advanced RF technology and a full-color, configurable touch display.

Reply Ativa, made of high-impact plastic, comes with several response input modes including multi-digit, multi-character, text, multiple choice and moment-to-moment. The 3.2-inch backlit LCD displays all user interface information and system diagnostics.

A basic Reply Ativa system includes individual keypads, a base station, application software and keypad recharging rack.



allows employees to invest up to 10 days every 24 months in short-term assignments while retaining full pay and benefits.

The new mission program started in September and runs for eight weeks. The Fleetwood workers are involved in answering phones, cleaning and assisting with maintenance projects.

“We look at it as a very good strategic move to retain workers while helping to support causes in our community,” Ruch told *MiBiz*. “It’s a way for us to keep our team members fully on our payroll with benefits.”

He noted the volunteer work by Fleetwood employees is basically a charitable gift to the nonprofit organizations. It’s good timing for nonprofits, too, because they have experienced cuts and are more dependent on volunteers.

“At Camp Geneva, the assistance we received during these past weeks from Fleetwood Group employees has allowed us to address some deferred maintenance issues and take on projects that we would not be able to do with our own staff,” explained Dave Vanderwel, executive director of the Geneva Camp & Retreat Center.

Vanderwel said the economy has forced the center to run lean, so having the extra workers has been a tremendous help.

Ruch said employees in the furniture group view the nonprofit assignments as a way for the company to respond to the lack of work and as an experience in a different work assignment and setting that is good for others.

He recommends that other business leaders

follow suit with similar endeavors.

“First of all, retaining employment in this economic climate is incredibly important,” Ruch said. “Leadership needs to look under every rock to find ways to navigate through these tough times.”

Orders for the Fleetwood Group’s educational furniture began to slow in June after four back-to-back years of record sales and earnings. Ruch noted education projects typically lag the impact of the struggling economy and unfortunately will also lag an up-tick in the economy.

### New business unit

Fleetwood Group is working to expand its radio frequency keypads into healthcare and government. The company currently builds wireless devices that are used extensively in K-12 schools, universities, conferences, corporate events and television shows.

Fleetwood Group hired Don Beery as the director of new business development for the electronics division. Beery has 17 years of Fortune 100 experience in business development.

Besides new healthcare and government contracts, Fleetwood aims to help U.S. manufacturers reposition electronic production from offshore to domestic sources.

Ruch said efforts to expand the market are going well and the company has a memo of understanding for its first significant contract for a wireless project and another one possible with a Michigan firm. **MiBiz**