

# FOCUS

PROFILE 15 IN THE LEAD 20 PEERS 22  
BOOK EXCERPT 25 LOCATION LOCATION 28 HOW-TO 32

PROFILE

## Soap for Hope

Through the Global Soap Project, Garth Peterson connects Minnesota to Africa one bar of soap at a time. >>

BY AMANDA FRETHEIM GATES

■ Garth Peterson picks up boxes of soap from the Hilton Minneapolis.

PHOTO BY TODD BUCHANAN

**On a given Saturday morning you might find Garth Peterson and one or both of his children driving from his home in New Brighton to any number of 20 hotels around Minneapolis–St. Paul.**

He'll go inside and carry out 10 to 12 printer-paper boxes and load them into his truck. Peterson will then make his way to Shakopee where he'll unload his cargo into a rented storage facility. He'll close it up and make the 45-minute drive back home. He's taken a similar route on different days for more than two years time.

So, what's in those boxes? What's in that warehouse? Soap. Thousands of pounds of soap.



Peterson has been in the hospitality industry since he graduated with a degree in hospitality and tourism management from the University of Wisconsin-Stout. He led a typical life pattern of one in hospitality, living in seven cities in seven years. He worked as an assistant general manager at a couple properties out East; he became a general manager; and then he was encouraged to become a director of sales at another prop-

erty in Pittsburgh. He found he liked sales and stuck with it, eventually moving back home to Minneapolis. He took a job as the director of revenue management for the Sofitel Minneapolis and later was recruited to his current position as regional director of sales for IDEaS Revenue Solutions—a SAS Company, the Bloomington-based provider of pricing and revenue management software, services and consulting to the hospitality and travel industries.

When he started out at IDEaS, Peterson decided to get involved with the Minnesota chapter of Hotel Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMIAI). He helped the chapter form a larger board of directors, plan some events and generate money, and he sat as president for three years.

Around Christmas in 2009, Peterson read an article about a hotel in Boston that was one of his prospects. This hotel was taking the time to collect all its used bars of soap and

once they had enough, shipped the load down to Atlanta, the headquarters for the Global Soap Project. From the article, Peterson learned that the Global Soap Project takes the donated soap, breaks it down and makes new bars for vulnerable populations in places like Haiti, Uganda and Kenya.

"This idea resonated instantly with me because it was a very clear two-part value proposition," Peterson says. "First, here in the U.S., it's a very environmentally conscious initiative—all the soap isn't going in landfills.

On the other end, the recipients of the soap, these vulnerable populations, that don't have reliable access—either physical or monetary access—to soap, for those folks, soap represents the first line of defense against disease."

It's a worthy and important cause. According to UNICEF, 3.5 million children die each year from diarrheal diseases and pneumonia—illnesses and deaths that could be greatly prevented by washing regularly with soap. So, when more than 2.5 million bars of soap are thrown out by the hotel industry each day, it only makes sense to recycle that soap instead.

After reading the story, Peterson got in touch with Global Soap Project founder Derreck Kayongo. Kayongo, a Uganda refugee, founded the Global Soap Project in 2009; he was named a CNN Top 10 Hero in 2011. Kayongo was happy to have help with the project, so Peterson got to work.

Through his job and his position with HSMIAI, Peterson was able to contact several hotels around the Twin Cities, educating general managers and directors of housekeeping about the Global Soap Project and getting them to join the cause. "Of the hotels I met with, almost every one of them was instantly onboard," Peterson says. "Each saw the same valuation that I saw, 'I'm throwing less into a landfill and it's going to go to good use.'" Since the housekeeping departments really

steer a project like this, he gave presentations about Global Soap to the staff to help them get excited about what they're contributing to. It makes all the difference, he says.

Approximately 20 local properties agreed to save the used bars of soap in boxes in the housekeeping department. Once they reached at least 10 to 12 boxes, they called Peterson and within the week he'd make his way over and pack them up in his truck. He found a storage facility in Shakopee that was donated (for the first year, he now pays a preferential rate) and has a loading dock, heating and cooling, 24-hour keypad access and a management team. He stocked the 10x15 garage with pallets, shrink wrap and a scale and slowly started filling it up with boxes of soap.

While storing, weighing and shipping cargo aren't in Peterson's work background (good thing he's a fast learner), he could still pull from his expertise as a revenue management professional. He created a forecasting tool for soap: Take a hotel's forecasted occupancy, the average length of stay and the weight of soap and he can project that hotel's soap generation.

By the end of 2010, Peterson had collected 7,000 pounds of soap and somehow he needed to get it to Atlanta. Penske Truck Rental agreed to donate a truck to transport

the soap. "So my wife and I loaded up the truck with 7,000 pounds of soap and she and I drove it down to Atlanta and said, 'Here,'" he says. "They were absolutely blown away. We got to meet the entire board of Global Soap Project. They were stunned. I thought it was no big deal." The Global Soap Project board was so pleased with his efforts that in January 2011 they asked Peterson to be on its board of directors, too.

Since its founding, the Global Soap Project has come a long way. More than 300 hotels participate and donate soap. In November, Hilton Worldwide made a commitment to



■ Penske donated a truck for Peterson to use to drive thousands of pounds of soap to Atlanta.

not only donate soap, but invest \$1.3 million over the next three years and provide operational input to help grow the organization. The Hilton Minneapolis is Peterson's largest contributor, donating up to 4,500 pounds of soap each year. "Hilton Minneapolis is thrilled to assist in the welfare of the thousands of refugees in Africa with the donation of soap," says John Luke, general manager. "The program truly supports our commitment to the international community as well as sustainability."

Throughout 2011, Peterson continued to collect the soap on his own. Through con-

erty in Pittsburgh. He found he liked sales and stuck with it, eventually moving back home to Minneapolis. He took a job as the director of revenue management for the Sofitel Minneapolis and later was recruited to his current position as regional director of sales for IDEaS Revenue Solutions—a SAS Company, the Bloomington-based provider of pricing and revenue management software, services and consulting to the hospitality and travel industries.

When he started out at IDEaS, Peterson



TOP PHOTO COURTESY OF GARTH PETERSON; BOTTOM PHOTO COURTESY OF GLOBAL SOAP PROJECT

versations with professional friends, he grew awareness throughout the region and now knows of a handful of leaders and dozens of properties in South Dakota, North Dakota and even Manitoba collecting soap as well.

By the end of the year, Peterson had more than doubled his 2010 effort, gathering nearly 16,000 pounds of soap. He filled pallets according to each hotel's brand of soap, weighed the pallets, wrapped them in plastic and put them on the truck. His parents got in on the game, bringing down one truckload—a truck can hold about 8,000 pounds—in

soap into crumbles, moisture is added to those crumbles and the batch is processed into a continuous stream of soap, which is cut into four-ounce bars. Each batch of soap is chemically tested by an outside source to make sure it's safe for use.

While Peterson continues to collect soap from the current properties involved, he's at capacity for what he, as one man, can do. If he wants to grow the regional support for Global Soap, he can't continue to pick it up and drive it down himself. He's excited about the Hilton commitment and his place on the board of



■ New soap dries on racks at the Atlanta plant.

*"I have this dream of meeting planners driving the communication vehicle and spreading the word of the Global Soap Project."*

October, while his wife and he drove another truckload down in December. (Yes, he pays for the gas himself.)

"It's not as efficient to ship 40 pounds at a time as it is to take a truckload down at a time," he says. "We're striving to find the most environmentally and financially efficient way that is practical to get soap to Atlanta."

Once the soap gets to the plant in Atlanta, it's inventoried and pulled into the production process. Volunteers (church groups, school classes, work colleagues, even birthday parties) help sort, inspect, clean, cut and pack bars of soap. A machine grinds the old

directors, hoping with additional resources they can streamline the collection, storage and transporting of the soap.

"We want to reach out to the hotel community and ask for their participation in our decision making," Peterson says. "While a lot of people on the board have hotel experience, none of us today work in a hotel. So we don't want to forsake our audience but rather bring them in and ask them what works for them, what's reasonable, what's achievable and ask for their input on solving some of these issues."

He wants to tap in to meeting planner

support, too. He knows planners are asking about hotels' green practices on their RFPs. "I have this dream of meeting planners driving the communication vehicle and spreading the word of the Global Soap Project" he says. "Hey, our attendees are going to be using soap, are you going to be recycling that soap?" Peterson will also come to any chapter meeting of planners to deliver the message of the project.

To continue to spread the word, Peterson takes photos and videos and shares about his trips on Twitter and Facebook. And while he's been charitable in the past, it's never been to this extent. "The difference here is that it's within my industry and it was a space that I could directly impact with my skills and experience," he says. "My sales experience helps me plainly and simply explain the concept and the value for the hotel and the value for the people who get the soap. But I don't think of it as sales, but as telling a story. All the stars kind of aligned for me there." ■

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■ Global Soap Project founder Derreck Kayongo in Kenya.

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