

A festive lifeline for charities?

Funds shortfall this year sees them banking on donors' Christmas spirit

LEONG WEE KEAT

weekeat@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE — This time last year, the recession-hit festive season held gloom for charities as donations dropped. This year, charities hope the year-end season, on the back of an economic recovery, will help make up for their shortfall of funds suffered in the earlier part of the year.

Take Bizlink, which provides employment to the disabled. Sales fell by a third earlier this year, and chief executive Alvin Lim said he hopes a recovery now will prevent any retrenchment of its 130 sheltered workshop workers.

It is hoping its collaboration with retailer Toy Outpost, which began earlier this month, will allow its cards and gifts to be sold at busy shopping malls. "We are trying to catch Christmas. The year-end is especially critical before numbers start slipping towards the red," said Mr Lim.

Besides the usual flag days, charities are teaming up with corporate partners. The Children's Cancer Foundation, for example, is partnering with cosmetics brand Kiehl's, with the charity getting a cut from merchandise sales and donations from shoppers.

The Foundation also sold silk-cocoon tulips last Sunday to raise funds, and is pairing up with Toys "R" Us on a free

gift-wrapping service.

Traditionally, the festive season has brought out the more generous side of people, noted Singapore Children's Society executive director Alfred Tan — people get their year-end bonuses and have more time to be involved in charitable causes.

Still, with the economy only just picking up, donors are remaining cautious. While the overall number of donors has not dropped, Assisi Hospice administrator Irene Chan noted, they are contributing smaller amounts.

The charity, which supports 1,000 beneficiaries, has only achieved half of its \$300,000 target for its annual Christmas Light-Up charity drive. For every \$10-donation, a bulb will be lit on a Christmas tree at the hospice's Thomson Road premises.

"Christmas is about hope and giving," said Ms Chan. "We hope lighting up the tree can give our patients that."

At least one charity has seen encouraging response thus far. The Singapore Heart Foundation, which has partnered with Isetan retail outlets to place donation boxes and sell pins at its cashiers, said more than 10 tin cans have been filled and some 2,600 heart pins sold, since the campaign began on Nov 13.

The foundation hopes its partnership will also raise public awareness of cardiovascular disease, especially during this time of merry-making.

"The festive season, with all the tempting food, is a good time to remind members of the public to keep their hearts healthy and practise moderation," said a spokeswoman.