

Play nice

Two California women decided that acts of kindness should be in the cards, and so far people around the world are hitting the deck

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When you're talking to Mary Beth Campbell, it's hard to feel cynical.

And that's tough, because we like feeling cynical.

But Campbell is the co-founder of a company called Boom Boom! (The exclamation point isn't ours.) She is determined to get people to do some good in the world, one unprompted smile or anonymous gift or "no, after you" at a time. And when she starts talking about how revolutionary these simple, easy, "intentional acts of kindness" can be, it all sounds sort of ... nice.

Campbell's small company, based in California (full name: Boom Boom! Revolution) started about three years ago with a simple deck of cards. On each card, an act of kindness:

"Buy a stranger a cup of coffee."

"Give five genuine compliments in one day."

"For one day, whenever your cellphone rings or vibrates in the middle of a conversation, ignore it ... finish the conversation first."

The cards, designed to make us mindfully considerate and serendipitously generous, first started selling in late 2007. A website - boomboomcards.com - launched a year later, urging users to log in, report their good deeds and interact. And just last week, Boom Boom! Revolution released two new editions of the cards, a family version and an eco-friendly deck. The inevitable Boom Boom! iPhone app is on its way next month. Kindness, it seems, is catching on.

Free lattes

Intrigued - but wary - we called Campbell up to ask her about Boom Boom! cards.

"It's not rocket science," she says.

Campbell is the first to admit it. And Boom Boom! isn't treading anywhere that Pay It Forward and Random Acts of Kindness haven't gone before. But she and her business partner, Hélène

Scott, have built full-time jobs out of encouraging altruism, and it's working for them.

Boom Boom! cards sell online for \$9.99 (a portion of your purchase goes to charity, natch); they've had orders from all over the United States and such faraway places as Sweden, Egypt and Australia. And every day, people log on to the website to share their stories:

"[B]ought a latte for the lady in the white car behind me in the drive-through this morning," says a user in Missouri. "Looked like she could really use a break."

"... [O]ur bill was just short of \$10," writes a woman in Iowa. "I went to the register to pay and rounded it up to \$30. The hostess looked a little shocked and started to say something. I stopped her in her tracks with 'it's right,' smiled, signed my name and headed out. It made my day to do this, I hope it made hers, too."

And this from a teacher in Wisconsin, who complimented a student: "I told her that I really liked her shoes ... which I truly did. She looked up at me like I was speaking a foreign language and said, 'What?' I repeated the compliment, her faced turned the brightest shade of red, and then she responded, 'Thanks. Nobody ever notices stuff like that about me.'"

See? It's not easy to stay jaded and snarky in the face of such guileless ... bigheartedness.

Learning to be nice

Here's how Boom Boom! cards came about. Campbell taught high-school English for seven years, and she got involved in a program that used older kids in high school to mentor incoming freshmen. Yes - the seniors, who usually just make fun of the new kids, were charged with making that first year of high school a little easier.

"I used to be a very cynical person," Campbell says. (We knew it.) "I never thought this would work."

But she was surprised, just totally blown away, by how willing the students were to help - not because there was any reward for it, but because it was the right thing to do.

"These teenagers looked at me," Campbell says, "and said, 'Be nice to freshmen? We can do that.'"

She decided then that most people, when asked, are perfectly happy to do good in the world. It's just that - get this -we're almost never really asked.

"We don't often ask each other - or ask ourselves - to step up," Campbell says. "But once you do, it's very easy."

Those high-school kids were Campbell's inspiration.

"I said, if we can ask high-school students to be these kind, compassionate people, why can't we

do this for the world? Why can't we create a structure for people to just do cool things for each other?"

That's when it all started. Campbell, who had helped found an organization that offers transition programs for middle-school and high-school students, was a writer and a creative thinker. Scott, the organization's design director, was an accomplished artist. The two decided to work together to make products that would inspire the same kind of generosity that they witnessed in students every day.

Their first idea: a deck of cards. Each card would name an act of kindness, challenging you to do something good for the world. You'd take the challenge, do the good deed, then pass the card on to someone else. One good act would inspire another, creating a ripple effect.

"It was a several-month process," Campbell says. After soliciting suggestions from everyone they knew, the two sat down with a long list of ideas, then set about condensing all that niceness into a deck of pretty, Scott-designed cards.

"We went through rounds and rounds," Campbell says. "We wanted to balance those that required money with those that didn't require money at all, and things that were difficult to do with the things people did anyway."

In late 2007, they started selling the cards at a couple of stores in Santa Cruz, Calif. They were enough of a hit that Campbell and Scott decided to expand; the Boom Boom! website came a year later, with the decks of cards sold online. And by 2009, a web community began to build, with people logging on to share the good things they'd done, received or witnessed, all prompted by Boom Boom! cards.

Back at you

Now, about that name. How did a company devoted to nice end up with a name like "Boom Boom!"?

The name comes from the concept of a boomerang.

"A boomerang goes out and comes back to you," Campbell says. "We like the notion that it makes a full revolution - boom boom - it comes out and it goes back."

A little bit of karma, if you will.

Campbell acknowledges that "kindness isn't sexy, really" - and that promoting kindness is usually associated with "this kind of schmaltzy, dippy feeling."

"We think kindness gets a bad rap," Campbell says. "We want to rebrand kindness."

'Planted a seed'

If anything has, Pay It Forward has done a lot for rebranding kindness. The Pay It Forward concept - instead of returning a favor, you pass that kindness along to someone else - became part of the zeitgeist in 2000, when Catherine Ryan Hyde published a novel called *Pay It Forward* that inspired a movie starring Haley Joel Osment. Hyde now leads the nonprofit Pay It Forward Foundation, dedicated to inspiring acts of kindness in families and classrooms.

We talked to Anna Unkovich, the foundation's education director, about whether good deeds can really be, well, prompted in that Boom Boom! Card way.

Why not? she asked.

"I think anytime we can inspire people to do kind things," Unkovich says, "we all feel better."

Unkovich started out as a teacher, too. She used to read Chicken Soup for the Soul stories to her students, and she saw how all that focus on goodness and goodwill turned her wild middle-schoolers into these thoughtful, generous, cooperative creatures that she barely recognized. In other words, kindness worked. So a few years ago, when she moved to California, Unkovich got involved with Pay It Forward.

"With the Pay it Forward concept, you never know whether they're going to follow through or not," she says, but that's OK.

"It almost doesn't matter, because the act of doing good yourself - you've done your part," she says, and besides, "you've planted a seed."

Unkovich says she looks for opportunities to commit small, unexpected acts of good. She has paid for the cars behind her on toll bridges. She has anonymously sent flowers. When we talked to her, she had just finished packing up a bag of goodies for some friends embarking on a road trip.

Since she started being more mindful about her acts of kindness, Unkovich says, it has made a difference - for others, of course, and for herself.

"I'm aware of the fact that I'm happier," she says. "Even if they haven't followed through [and paid it forward], I just feel good having done some good, nice, little silly thing."

Opening doors

And, well, that's the whole point of Boom Boom! cards, too.

"I think a lot of us want to do good and be good, but we don't know how or what to do," Campbell says. "We want to give people ideas for how to contribute to making the world better."

She can tell stories about Boom Boom! cards that have been passed on and "double played" - one

started out in Washington and ended up in Turkey. But for the most part, she says, people are logging on to the Boom Boom! website just to report what they have done. Users' stories range from the simple - I held the door open for a stranger - to complicated tales of apologizing to family members, reconnecting with old friends and going far out of the way to surprise someone with kindness.

The two brand-new editions of Boom Boom! cards put a new twist on the basic concept. One, a Green deck, encourages "intentional acts of greenness." That might mean carrying a refillable water bottle instead of getting a plastic bottle every time you're thirsty. Or it might be: "Read Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* to a child and talk about it."

The Family edition, meanwhile, is designed for families with young children to use together. It has a Command Central activity board with pictures of all the cards; when the cards are played, you cover each one with a sticker. The prompts encourage outward activities - "Gather all your used books and donate them to a school or your local library" - and some family-bonding experiences: "Create a fort in the living room with the whole family."

"We want to put products out in the world," Campbell says, "that enhance our world and inspire people to look around and say, 'Hey, I can make this world a better place. I can show up and be a positive influence on our world and on our culture.'"

It is painfully hard to be cynical about that.

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Good to know

Boom Boom! cards are available online at www.boomboomcards.com. They cost \$9.99 per kit except for the family edition, which is \$14.99.