

'Homeless Hotspot' stunt stirs debate at SXSW

March 13 2012, By JAKE COYLE , AP Entertainment Writer

(AP) -- A charitable marketing program that paid homeless people to carry Wi-Fi signals at South By Southwest has drawn widespread debate at the annual Austin conference and around the country.

BBH Labs, a unit of the global marketing agency BBH, gave 13 people from Austin's Front Steps Shelter mobile Wi-Fi devices and T-shirts that announced "I am a [4G](#) Hotspot." The company paid them \$20 up front and a minimum of \$50 a day for about six hours work, said Emma Cookson, chairwoman of BBH New York.

She called the experiment a modernized version of homeless selling street newspapers. All of the money paid for Wi-Fi - an often difficult thing to find at SXSW - went to the participants, who were selected in partnership with Front Steps. (\$2 was the recommended donation for 15 minutes of use.)

But many have called the program exploitive. Wired.com wrote that it "sounds like something out of a darkly satirical science-fiction dystopia." Technology blog ReadWriteWeb called it a "blunt display of unselfconscious gall." The topic became one of the most popular in the country on [Twitter](#) by Tuesday.

Critics have claimed the experiment turned [homeless people](#) into inanimate objects for the benefit of well-heeled techies. In an online op-ed, The [Washington Post](#) wondered "Have we lost our humanity?"

Cookson took pains to say BBH was listening to criticism of the experiment, which ended Monday. It had been meant to begin Friday but rain delayed its full implementation until Sunday.

"It gives a personal interaction, a connection for homeless people with regular folks with whom they don't often connect and get walked past," says Cookson, who declined to give financial totals but said it was "more than we anticipated."

She said BBH doesn't currently have plans to continue the plan, and that "lots of lots of questions have been raised." Still, she called it "a big success just in terms of getting attention for the issue and getting debate going."

One of the participants, Dusty White said that the experience of talking with SXSW attendees and earning some cash "made me feel proud."

"I felt like it was a positive thing," said White. "They could have done this with anyone."

Mitchell Gibbs, director of development and communications at Front Steps, said he was initially skeptical after being approached by BBH, but was won over by previous work they've done with the homeless. He put the offer to participants in the shelter's Case Management Program, a step-by-step program to move people out of shelters and off the streets.

"Everybody was educated and aware about the process," said Gibbs. "Everybody was excited by the opportunity to make some money."

Gibbs said the shelter's participants roundly enjoyed the experience.

"We've had more community conversations about homelessness, affordable housing, employment opportunities and shelters than we've

had in I can't tell you when," said Gibbs. "We count that as a win."

Said White: "I would do it again."

More information: <http://bbh-labs.com/>
<http://www.homelesshotspots.com>

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