

Partnering with corporations

A Key-To-The-Sector Workshop from Hilborn

Partnering with corporations is “an excellent opportunity, given our changing times and new social circumstances,” but the relationship needs to be carefully thought out in the first place, and managed well by both partners

So says **Suzanne Gibson** of **Suzanne Gibson & Associates**, leading a *Key-To-The-Sector Workshop* on partnerships.

“Partnerships require a long-term commitment and an outlay of resources, time and energy,” she says. “They also result in exciting spinoff effects.” It’s important, she stresses, to commit to results and to building an ongoing mutually supportive relationship with partners. “If we all work together, we can ensure more opportunities, resources and success for the people we serve.”

Keys to successful partnerships, says Gibson, include

- long-term commitment and willingness to adapt;
- shared values, missions and goals;
- understanding of partners’ agendas, goals and desired outcomes; and
- clear messaging and alignment to partners’ images.

Shared standards, decision-making

Also important are agreed-upon standards for reporting and accountability, shared decision-making, leadership, a defined process, enough planning time up front, and stakeholder input and feedback.

Partners must also make sure they’ve planned for prompt and professional communication; have an understanding of their different languages, communication, culture and management styles; and that both partners understand clearly a nonprofit’s advocacy and public education role.

Potential partners for nonprofits, says Gibson, include foundations, churches and faith groups, service clubs, corporations, independent businesses, new technology companies, local industry, associations, unions, the media, and student and seniors’ groups.

The urgency of developing partners is underlined by current trends and realities in the environment in which nonprofits are operating, she says, as the roles of government, business, community associations and nonprofits are all in flux, and the numbers of volunteers are decreasing just as demand for services offered by nonprofits increases.

Demands on funders are exploding, resulting in greater saturation and competition among nonprofits, simultaneously with an increase in sophistication among funders and greater demand on their part for accountability and measurement of the impact of their investment.

Investment strategy

As both corporations and funders pursue more of an investment strategy vs. straight philanthropy, they tend to focus on fewer causes or organizations. They offer more in the way of non-cash donations, and encourage their employees, associates or members to volunteer and give through matching fund programs.

Corporations want to support groups and projects that benefit their customers and stakeholders and want to work in partnership with funding recipients to ensure their goals are achieved.

The way to go, says Gibson, is towards longer-term partnerships that bring many benefits to both parties, beyond the transfer of money. Such alliances can bring the nonprofit a wealth of resources, skills, expertise, networks and opportunities. And they give the corporation valuable positive publicity and a medium through which to influence developments in the community.

Before undertaking any attempt to start up a partnership program, a nonprofit should analyze carefully its readiness to go out into the market, ensuring it is clear about its mission, objectives, achievements and priorities, and that it has a strategic plan and long-term vision, quality programs, services and outcomes, and quality accounting and financial structures.

Commitment to the concept must be evidenced by the board, staff, leadership volunteers, and clients, all of whom must understand their role in the proposed relationship.

Identify right partners

A strategic plan showing exactly what the partnership hopes to realize for both parties must be in place. Careful research must identify corporations whose missions and goals are synonymous with those of the nonprofit. The more the nonprofit can find out about the company's ideals as well as its policies and procedures, the more likely is success.

Information about corporations can be found in a variety of research sources, including such things as organizational brochures and newsletters, public donation policies, information packages for nonprofits, product and service descriptions, employee associations and trusts, newspapers, trade and industry magazines, and business and trade associations.

Helpful directories and informal sources include

- **Blue Book on Business**
- **Scott's Directory**
- **Who's Who**

- the **Directory of Foundations**
- the Internet,
- and other nonprofits in the community.

A nonprofit must make initial contacts necessary before they begin forming relationships with potential partners. Its lead staff and board members can meet community leaders by attending local service groups, business and trade associations, churches and faith groups, chambers of commerce, sports and cultural events, or community events, says Gibson.

A board of directors with strong corporate representation is an asset, and directors as well as staff should focus on networking and developing contacts throughout the business community: “Never forget the power of schmooze.”

A proposal to a potential partner, she says, should start with an executive summary that summarizes the request and the partnership parameters and benefits. It should include a project background and needs section, propose the terms of the partnership, specify the recognition benefits, outline a measurable list of objectives and how they will be achieved, note plans for program evaluations, specify expected outcomes and benefits, and provide a realistic budget.

Once confirmed, a successful partnership is a matter of working closely with the corporation to ensure both parties continue to enjoy the win/win potential of the relationship, and that both are intimately aware of the benefits they are enjoying.

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