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Fundraising

Nonprofit Partnerships With Corporations

Caution Leads to Benefits

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While there is often a fundamental difference in values held by social change organizations and corporations, creating alliances with corporations does not mean selling out. It can be done with the highest standards of integrity. Here are strategies to help organizations advance their missions by working with corporations.

Be Suspicious

Ask tough questions to establish boundaries of what your organization will and will not do. Flush out corporations that use social responsibility as a front. A healthy dose of suspicion assures that you only make alliances with businesses that believe in what you stand for.

Benefits to a Corporation

A company can expect certain business benefits from a partnership with a nonprofit: a sense of integrity and dependability for their products, which can increase sales; a more positive brand image as a good corporate citizen, thus building customer loyalty; expanded market share for products or brands by enhancing their social value; access to innovative ideas; and more favorable media coverage. It is up to you to assure a potential partner of such outcomes.

Create a Marketing Plan

Base the plan on the core values manifested in your mission statement. Identify themes for a partnership, including implementation ideas such as new products, promotions and slogans. Get sentimental about lessons your mission can teach the average person. This aligns you with how advertising agencies operate: they paint a picture for corporate clients of what the marketing idea will look like and the emotional pull it can have on consumers.

Search the Internet for ideas you think are absolutely new. Corporate marketing executives will be familiar with cutting edge ideas already in existence. Research programs currently or recently used by a partner you are considering; sometimes your suggestions can improve outcomes.

Do Your Homework

When researching companies, you gain two important advantages. First, you uncover problems. Questionable labor practices, a poor environmental record or a CEO you don’t respect are reasons enough to avoid partnership. Second, it positions you as an attractive ally. You come to the table with a good understanding of the company and solid reasons to consider partnership, speaking with familiarity about their products, competitors and marketing challenges. The more you know about your partners, the more control you will have.

Move From Plan to Action

When marketing decision makers say, “Yes, we’d like to discuss a partnership with your organization,” are you ready to proceed? The first action in sales is psychological. Are you ready for them to say yes? Do you honestly want to pursue this activity to generate income? Do you lack confidence in your ideas and expect to hear no? Be sure you are convinced of the plan; marketing executives are skilled at correctly suspecting when a proposing partner has cold feet.

See the right people. Make sure you are not shuttled to someone without power to make a decision. Nothing is more depressing than working hard on a sales presentation only to realize that the corporation isn’t interested enough to send representatives who can take action. Next, clarify what you are selling. Leave behind a single page executive summary that says concisely what you propose and why.

Finally, move the potential corporate partner from interest to commitment. This rarely happens after just one meeting. Answer their questions quickly and thoroughly. Continue to press for a decision, but be flexible. Don't let the trail go cold. Once the decision is made, promptly propose a contract. Expect their legal department to look over terms, and have your attorney do the same. Don't take a proposed marketing partnership contract to the board for approval unless your board insists.

Keep the Relationship on Track

Continue to get to know your counterparts and gain a better understanding of their objectives. Constantly track elements of the venture. At no time in your relationship with a corporation is there room to relax. Even with great outcomes, always look ahead to other considerations for the partnership.

Evaluate Outcomes

Evaluation helps develop tools for future partnerships. Candidly identify mistakes and discuss how to avoid problems. Identify your strengths and consider how you can use them better next time. What have you learned about your partners, and what can you expect to encounter among marketing executives you sell to in the future?

Quantify Data

Detail the time your organization contributed to the marketing partnership and its dollar value. What is the bottom line on income generated? Why are numbers different from projections? Can reducing certain costs increase profits in future ventures?

Certain constituents of your organization should be informed of the progress of such ventures. Keep reports brief; these stakeholders only need to know you will proceed with integrity and good preparation and will always stand for the best interests of the organization.

Nonprofits say that the biggest challenge is to find the partnerships that benefit the organization without compromising values or contradicting the mission. Following these guidelines can help assure that your organization is prepared to establish good relationships with corporate partners.

For more information on corporate partnerships, see Selling Social Change (Without Selling Out) by Andy Robinson, available from Jossey-Bass. www.josseybass.com/nonprofit.
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