

Making Business Connections Work for You

How to triumph over the four barriers to productive relationships



By Paul Kiley

“It’s impossible to get real money from a corporation to sustain our nonprofit. We tried, and it didn’t work.” Or, “It’s impossible for a small nonprofit to partner with the business sector; there’s just too much competition.”

Have you heard this kind of talk from board or staff members? Does it seem as if nonprofits with successful business connections are working some special magic? Do you want to learn how to get started doing impossible things?

How do your achievements uniquely benefit the business?

There are no 15 magical tricks to making business connections work, but there is a strategy that will help businesspeople see the rich possibilities of working with you. The impossible can become the possible and the do-able.

This strategy combines research and relationship building, each dependent on the other. When applied with patience and tenacity, this strategic approach fosters success in making business connections work.

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Be Prepared: Do Your Research

First, use brainstorming to identify types of businesses available for contact. In large cities it may be corporations or their subsidiaries — the major employers. In small towns, it may mean the merchants on Main Street.

Take stock of each company's stake in the community and its likely affinity with those you serve and what you deliver. Ask questions like these: Which companies are we engaged with now? Which new ones should we contact? Why? In what order of priority? How do our achievements uniquely benefit each of these businesses?

Do some valuable homework to pinpoint each company's culture. Mine each company's annual reports, media communications, newsletters, and other in-house publications. Ask a diverse array of people for their opinions about the firm, pro and con, and see how the media portrays it.

Such research will show you how the company views the world. How does it support the community? How does it treat its employees? Does it have a policy regarding education or healthcare? What

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employee benefits does it offer? For example, the company that promotes educational opportunities for its staff or offers on-site services like day care may connect more easily with you than one that doesn't.

Your research will also identify which individuals (for example, the CEO, the director of public affairs, the store owner) might support your mission and services. A strong advocate can bring the company along to connecting with you.

Also, be sure you know your own organization's profile. What are the business executives' and store owners' perceptions of you and your nonprofit? Do they consider you an educational enterprise? A social justice or healthcare program? Both? Neither? To what extent do key community and business leaders know about and value your ability to deliver on your promise to the community you serve? How would they know this? What resources do you invest in telling your success story to target audiences? Checking your perceptions of your organization's profile

and updating your knowledge about businesses on a regular basis are crucial to ongoing success.

All this research leads up to meetings with businesspeople. The next step is to develop productive relationships.

Build Relationships: The Four Hurdles & How to Surmount Them

You've probably made many business connections already, and you're undoubtedly using those contacts to make others. You can make many more valuable connections when you understand and overcome these four obstacles:

- No Trust
- No Need
- No Help
- No Hurry

Knowing how these factors get in the way of building a relationship is critical to success. Here's how to triumph over these four stumbling blocks:

Getting from No Trust to Building Trust

"I don't know you at all, and you don't know me" could well be a businessperson's unspoken thought when you're introduced. Then, and throughout the relationship, you will face tests of propriety, credibility, and competence.

Your research has given you the tools to meet these tests. Build common ground by showing that you know the business and how it operates. Be confident and clear about what you offer. Advance rapport by stressing the things you share, such as an interest in the community or in education.

Getting from No Need to Identifying the Real Need

Businesspeople may be aware of community needs, but there's usually a gap between awareness and action. Before many businesspeople acknowledge that gap, you'll probably hear statements along the lines of "I don't see a need here that we can address."

Pinpointing the need takes time and a willingness to listen — not just in one conversation, but many. In our zealotry to help the people we serve every day, we often forget to take the time to listen to the businessperson's needs. Ask what you would do if you were the businesspeople being approached. Rather than promoting your agenda, discover how you can meet their needs.

Businesspeople act when it benefits them. When they feel that taking action will lead to a higher return on investment, a lower long-term cost, greater recognition, and more respect, they'll be more inclined to say, "We need to address this."

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Getting from No Help to Seeing the Benefits of Working Together

Even if your business contacts now trust you and see the need, they may not understand how you can help meet that need. From what you've learned about the company, you're well positioned to demonstrate the benefit of working together.

Show what's unique about your way of helping people. Connect your achievements with the company's needs. With this understanding of

mutual benefit, you and your business contact can formulate a plan to work together.

Getting from No Hurry to Productive Action

One last challenge remains. You can expect a "There's no hurry" reaction, especially from businesspeople who fear making a mistake or repeating one they've made before. Suppose, for example, that the company agreed to sponsor a special event but never received the recognition that was promised.

You can address this fear by appreciating the situation, offering reassurances, and seeking the person's perspective. Ask, "What stands in the way of going forward together?" and, "Where can we begin, right now?"

Beginnings are the key to making business connections work. For example:

- A merchant offers space for your posters for one month. It's not much, but start there. When you return to remove the posters and say thanks, ask how customers and employees reacted to them. You're building a small but valuable connection. That merchant may later become an advocate for your endeavors.

- A public affairs director may be willing to promote your mission through volunteer sign-ups onsite or in the company newsletter but be unwilling to provide funding for your program. Go with what can be done now and keep on working.

What's in Store?

Once you understand what's important to one business contact, use that experience — and that contact — to make others. Your knowledge base will accumulate over time. What you learn about company A may be useful in contacting companies B, C, and D — especially if company A can initiate the contact for you. Once you make the right connections, here are a few of the ways companies can help you:

- **Employee volunteer programs:** Employees can contribute their talents to your organization.

- **Money:** Individual employees

or employee groups can donate funds to your organization.

- **Corporate policy:** Businesses can make fulfilling your mission a company priority and commit financial resources.

- **In-kind contributions:** Corporations or their foundations can contribute space and materials as well as money.

- **Promotion:** Companies can promote your cause through internal and external communication strategies.

- **Business leadership and influence:** Business leaders can work with their peers to set up connections, talk up your cause on the golf course, host luncheons or dinner parties to introduce your achievements to others, serve on your board of directors, and more.

Is it impossible to make business connections work? No, it's not. With the right information and approach, you can help companies large and small recognize the need, value how you deal with it, and address it as an important challenge — one they're eager to meet. ■

Resources

Frede, Nancy, "Take the Money, But Don't Run," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 6.

Mullen, Jennifer, "Nonprofits Must Take the Lead in Business Alliances," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 2.

Weisman, Carol, "The Care and Nurturing of Corporate Friends," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 1.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

Paul Kiley (paul@kileycommunications.com) is the owner of Kiley Communications, 206 Euclid Avenue, Suite 408, Long Beach, California 90803, www.kileycommunications.com. With graduate and undergraduate degrees in communications from Ohio University and Boston College and over 20 years' experience, he provides consulting and training services to help nonprofit executives prioritize, clarify, and plan their communication strategies to better align them with their organizational objectives and values.