



# Corporate Partnerships for Nonprofits: A Match Made in Heaven?

What you need to know about collaborating with for-profits

By Frederick G. Thompson

Any serious discussion of development strategies reaches a point where someone asks, “Why aren’t we doing more with corporations? Our organization is a perfect match for corporate sponsors. So why aren’t we pursuing those opportunities more aggressively?”

Well, perhaps your nonprofit is a perfect match for corporate sponsorship support. But attracting sponsorship dollars is a complicated process that puts the cultural differences between nonprofits and for-profits under a magnifying glass. Here are keys to making the process run smoothly.

## Think before You Leap

Before exploring corporate sponsorships, step back for a moment and consider a few threshold questions:

- **What does your organization want or expect** from a sponsorship? Is it merely an unrestricted gift? Or are there other benefits?
- **What cultural differences** between your organization and a corporation can you expect to confront in establishing a partnership?
- **How will you find** the best corporate opportunities? Do you have a process? Have you identified specific criteria that make for an ideal partner?
- **How would you measure** the success of a corporate collaboration?

The subtext is to eliminate stereotypes corporations have of nonprofits.

## Find the Win-Win

Every successful nonprofit corporate relationship has at its core a mutual recognition that the partnership is a win-win situation. Both parties must recognize that the relationship provides advantages that neither would have achieved without the other.

Over the past few years, nonprofit “wins” have evolved from merely receiving a check to far more strategic benefits. One environmental organization recently entered a relationship that provided access to new donor segments and wider visibility. The monetary grant that accompanied the program was purely a secondary consideration. What this organization really valued was greater awareness of its programs.

## Locate the Fit

Another key consideration is strategic fit. Is the proposed relationship credible? Is it consistent with—and supportive of—the way both parties are perceived or position themselves among donors and customers? If the partnership is a strategic disconnect for either party on any level, the collaboration needs to be rethought or abandoned altogether.

Take, for example, the energy company that approached our consulting firm recently. Their goal was

to achieve a more positive environmental profile by aligning themselves with a prominent conservation group. The first question that came to mind was: How believable or defensible would such a partnership be? Would the credibility of the conservation group suffer as a result? Or, if the energy company were able to establish a relationship, would it be viewed as merely an exercise in “greenwashing” accompanied by so much cynicism as to render it harmful?

Our conclusion was that this particular energy company, which had a less than stellar environmental record, would be better advised to begin its green campaign by creating more visibility for the environmental initiatives it had begun to undertake on its own—before attempting to borrow on the reputation of a nonprofit partner.

In contrast to the energy company’s potential mismatch, a women’s cosmetics manufacturer approached us a few months back looking for a partnership that would align it with a medical cause affecting women’s health, such as breast cancer. This partnership offers the possibility of a strong win-win and an attractive, cause-related purchase incentive for the marketer.

In some cases the strategic fit may exist only in a broader context, as when a corporation is recognized for “supporting the arts.” Recognizing a larger responsibility to “give something back” is a perfectly acceptable partnership rationale, regardless of whether the give-back relates to specific marketing objectives.

Noting that you were referred by the company's foundation can be a powerful attention-getter.

### How Doable Is It?

Any nonprofit seeking to pursue corporate partnerships must be prepared to commit the resources essential to managing its end of the relationship. This means assigning someone in the organization to "own" the relationship and share accountability for its progress in a responsive, consistent manner. Too often a major complaint from the corporate side is that their nonprofit partners aren't sensitive enough to reporting, budgeting, and timing considerations.

### Will It Last?

The best partnerships are sustainable. Over time, they offer the possibility of establishing a "branded" relationship that can evolve to accommodate changing priorities and new initiatives under the partnership's broader thematic umbrella.

Sustainable relationships require both parties to promote the partnership. Nonprofits should ask at the outset whether their corporate partners are prepared to invest in marketing the relationship. The partnership's longevity is strongly linked to the extent to which it is merchandised.

### Consider Whom to Approach

Ask yourself, "What are our organization's strategic attributes? What do our supporters find most attractive about us?" Your answers will help you find the best partner for your needs.

Take the case of a nonprofit such as MADD, which is focused on eliminating deaths caused by drunk drivers. Where's the linkage with corporate interests? Who would such an organization motivate? Is it moms? Parents of kids who drive—or are about to drive? Insurance companies? Automobile manufacturers? Liquor companies?

All of the above entities might benefit from a strategic relationship with MADD. The key is to identify reasons for both parties to collaborate. You can then use those reasons when you approach a potential partner.

Talk to your donors, board members, and staffers to get a sense of what they value about your organization. Follow up with questions about corporate product or service categories they feel might be aligned with the organization's mission. The objective is to build a strategic framework within which to explore future partnerships.

### Build a List of Prospects

After completing the above process, it's time to prepare a threshold list of prospective partners. These are opportunities that could provide a win-win relationship if

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## Creative Fundraising Ideas

### Turn Trash into Cash

Generate cash and protect the environment with a recycling fundraiser. Sign up with the FundingFactory recycling program, which pays groups for sending in old cell phones and used printer cartridges ([www.fundingfactory.com](http://www.fundingfactory.com)) or EcoPhones, which pays between \$1 and \$300 for each used cell phone, depending on model and condition ([www.ecophones.com](http://www.ecophones.com)). Ask residents and businesses to chip in their used recyclables. Or charge a small fee to help people get rid of unwanted TVs, computers, and monitors, which are considered toxic waste.

### Hold an Adult Prom

Starry Night Prom in Sarasota, Florida, draws hundreds of adults and raises some \$20,000 each year. The evening includes dinner, drinks, dancing, a silent auction, and the election of a prom court. Other nonprofits have done the same thing on a tight budget by holding an adult prom the night after the high school prom, using the same theme and decorations. Some adult proms add a pledge drive component, bestowing the king and queen designation on the biggest fundraisers.

### Appraise People's Treasures

Hold a Trash or Treasure fundraiser. Ask people to bring in old items from their attics, basements, and garages and see if they're sitting on untold treasure. Ask local collectibles experts, antique shop owners, and estate sale professionals to do the appraisals and a librarian to bring price guides for on-site reference. For more creative fundraising ideas, see *FUNdraising* (Corwin Press, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).



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they're structured to benefit both parties and if the timing fits within the corporation's marketing life-cycle.

A quick word about timing. Timing is no small consideration when seeking a corporate partnership outside of a foundation gift. Unlike foundation gifts, which follow scheduled cycles, corporate marketing budgets are linked to product-introduction calendars and market conditions. These conditions are driven by any number of factors, including competitive pressures, seasonal consumer-spending cycles, and even issues as difficult to predict as the weather. If a sponsorship proposition is marketing-related, timing will always be a factor.

A final consideration in developing your short list is "ownability." The partnership should be unique enough that it will become a branded equity people will associate with both organizations. Good examples are Avon's breast cancer crusade, Macy's "Wear Red" campaign for the American Heart Association, or Whirlpool's support of Habitat for Humanity. Each of these has become a long-term win-win partnership for all participants.

### Create the Proposition

After you complete the short list of potential partners, the next step is to outline a business proposition that explains how partnering with your organization will benefit the corporation. While the short list might include businesses from any number of industries or product categories, the best opportunities tend to cluster around a single theme. Among all the concepts being considered, a few major ideas will emerge consistently as the most obvious and viable.

And "obvious" and "viable" are good things. The clearer and more realistic your proposition, the more likely a corporation will find it attractive and compelling. If the benefits aren't immediately obvious to the partner, they probably won't be obvious to the partner's customers and employees. Here's how to present your proposition to a potential sponsor:

Asserting your organization's preparedness will convey a strong results-oriented image.

- 1. Begin by introducing your organization.** Don't assume people know who you are and what you do. Highlight your mission and how your organization makes a difference. If you have statistics that speak to awareness of your organization and the number of people it serves, be sure to include them. Provide any information that "dimensionalizes" the scope of your organization's reach and effectiveness. The aim is to ensure that a prospective corporate partner sees your organization as viable, effective, and recognized for its accomplishments.
- 2. Explain how both partners would benefit.** Lay out ideas, showing how they meet both organizations' strategic needs. This is the core of the proposition. It outlines how the partnership would be structured, how it would work, and the anticipated outcomes. Pay particular attention to success measurement criteria, such as products sold, consumer awareness, contributions, supporters attracted, and employee satisfaction.
- 3. Summarize how your organization is committed to ensuring the partnership's success.** Include services you bring to the table and ways you will merchandise the relationship to your donors. For example, the staff of one nonprofit had considerable curricula development expertise. They used this skill to create the partnership's on-line communications materials and received a fee for their efforts over and above the program's core sponsorship contribution.
- 4. Propose a preliminary timetable and management team.** The idea is to demonstrate that your organization is prepared to play an active role in making sure the part-

nership succeeds and that you've thought through the major implementation issues. The subtext here is to eliminate stereotypes many corporations have of nonprofits not being well organized and accountable from a management perspective. By asserting your organization's preparedness, you'll convey a strong results-oriented image.

5. **Conclude by recapping the collaboration's main benefits.** Emphasize not only how the partnership will address the corporation's marketing and community-image needs but how it will engage and inspire the company's employees.

### Get the Meeting

Once you've outlined the basic proposition, the next step is getting in front of prospective partners to review how the proposition will benefit them. Here are strategies that work well:

- **Ask board members** if they know anyone in the corporation. If so, ask the board member to be the one who initiates contact.
- **Use the networking resources** of your organization's executives and marketing consultants to identify senior contacts in the prospective partnering company.
- **Contact your prospective partner's foundation representatives** or directors. They can steer you to appropriate decision-makers on the corporation's marketing staff. You can then begin your dialogue with the corporation by noting that you were referred by the company's foundation, which can be a powerful attention-getter.
- **Approach senior executives** in industry associations or non-competing nonprofits for suggested contact names.
- **Using industry directories, reach out directly** to senior contacts in the corporation.

Timing is no small consideration when seeking a corporate partnership.



### Consider the Benefits

There's no question that corporations and nonprofits have much to gain from collaboration. And increasingly, savvy nonprofits are taking the initiative to explore corporate relationships. By positioning themselves as being well-prepared, proactive partners with innovative, win-win ideas, nonprofits can attract corporate support that will yield not

only new revenue but increased donor awareness and volunteer participation. ■

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### Do Your Homework

Learn more about collaborating with for-profits by perusing these articles ([www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members)):

- **Making the Business-Nonprofit Partnership a Win-Win** (Vol. 22, No. 1)
- **Unlock Fundraising Potential with Affinity Marketing** (Vol. 29, No. 6)
- **Boost Your Share of Corporate Sponsorships** (Vol. 29, No. 4)
- **Enlightened Self-Interest: Selling Business on the Benefits of Cause-Related Marketing** (Vol. 15, No. 4)
- **How to Target Corporations to Diversify Your Funding Mix** (Vol. 25, No. 1.)
- **For-Profits and Nonprofits Meet Missions Together** (Vol. 25, No. 4)
- **Learning Institute Programs On-Line: Strategic Alliances, Resource Development, and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits** (<http://www.snpo.org/lino>).