

Welcome to "Your Profitable Nonprofit." In this new column, we'll explore remarkable ideas that leading nonprofit organizations are using to increase their income. Each column will share a successful funding concept, plus adaptations for your use.

Mastering the Art of Getting Expert Help

Expert help at no cost? It's possible with this invaluable strategy.

By Karen Eber Davis

Has anything like this ever happened to you? Smack at your busiest time of year, a key leader resigns. Or, your board endorses and funds a new program. You're delighted, but short-staffed and concerned. You lack the time and expertise to complete the program's new tasks.

Both these situations actually happened to two different nonprofits. Let's look at these real-world cases and see how both problems were solved. As you'll see, the first case represents a short-term approach, the second, long term. But both solutions were based on the same strategy: using in-kind donations to maximize human capital.

Short-term Excellence

The first situation occurred when the executive director of a foundation resigned because of health issues. To find a replacement, the foundation turned to one of its board members, who led a large firm. He asked his firm's personnel department to lead the national search for a successor.

This strategy succeeded because personnel departments do this kind of work regularly, while the foundation did so infrequently. The contribution saved time, reduced risk, and enabled the foundation to tap into the expertise it needed. Another benefit: The foundation's leaders interacted with the personnel department, establishing new relationships.

Long-term Results

The second example comes from an award-winning program that helped renters become homeowners by providing down-payment assistance in the form of a small loan. A big challenge with running the program was the need to gather and collect information on applicants. Instead of the program's staff gathering critical mortgage information, the program used the materials collected by the loan companies for the closing.

This strategy succeeded because of the companies' expertise in data collection and their need to gather the majority of the information for their work. Since the program allowed the mortgage companies to do more business, they were interested in helping. The down-payment assistance program recruited, qualified, and trained 20 companies to participate. It saved the program weeks of duplicative work.

“The strategy saves time and money while providing superior results.”

What Is The Strategy? How Might You Use It?

This strategy proactively uses volunteer experts to provide high-skilled, in-kind expertise to solve important operational needs. The first example works with one firm to solve a need; the second, over a dozen. Both examples benefit the volunteers. The first example honors a board member's gift, the second the businesses' bottom line.

To adapt this strategy in your nonprofit, be intentional and creative about identifying expertise you need. Technology tools such as Skype have created new possibilities for communicating with experts.


The examples identified help in processing applications and hiring. They are just two ways to apply the strategy. Consider other areas of your operations. Ask yourself:

- **Could you use this strategy** to solve an IT need?
- **How about personnel issues**, like training?
- **What about help with purchasing?** If you occasionally purchase vehicles, might expertise from a vehicle-orientated business get you a better price and streamline the process?
- **What skills might help you improve a task or tasks?** What expertise saves time?
- **What external process already in place can, with tweaking, reduce your work** either one time or on an ongoing basis?

In your planning, consider how this gift of expertise helps the donors. Can they use it to increase their business or enhance their brand? Will it reduce stress for an existing expert just to complete a task right, rather than teach you how?

Also, as you explore the strategy, consider how you'll handle the risks involved. What measures can you install upfront to ensure that your nonprofit's needs are met?

High-value experts value their time. Both examples involve volunteers providing services efficiently where they work, which saves them travel time. Can you identify tasks volunteers can do in their own offices? By eliminating the need to be in traffic, can you attract new help?

Success with this strategy reaches beyond passive wish lists. Obtaining results stems from intentional efforts. How can you be more intentional about obtaining in-kind expertise? 



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