



Lightning and Thunder: Making Partnerships Work for You

By Karen Eber Davis

Oil and vinegar? Zombies and ballet? An orchestra and a hockey team? Have you ever created a surprising partnership to change your image and reach your goals?

In each issue of *Nonprofit World*, “Your Ingenious Nonprofit” explores remarkable ideas that nonprofits are using to increase their income and reach. This month, we explore an unusual partnership between a nonprofit, the Florida Orchestra, and a for-profit NHL hockey team, the Tampa Bay Lightning. The sports team partnered with the arts group to, among other activities, play its new theme song, “Be the Thunder.” (You can hear it at tampabay.com/sports/hockey/lightning/florida-orchestra.) Their ongoing partnership brings together two of Tampa Bay’s greatest assets.

The Strategy

Over the past two decades, symphony orchestras have struggled. The public attends all sorts of events, including performing arts and sports, less frequently than they once did. When they do attend, they purchase smaller ticket packages.

“Look for potential partnerships beyond the obvious.”

In response to this climate change, the Florida Orchestra decided to help people see its orchestra in new ways as part of its strategy to thrive. They began offering a rock series featuring the music of Pink Floyd, Queen, and Led Zeppelin. They started a cultural exchange with Cuba’s Music Institute of Havana. They also created a partnership with a professional sports team, the focus of this article.

Unpacking The Strategy

What fundamentals create this strategy? How can you adapt it to benefit your organization? Let’s take a closer look.

A key component of this strategy is a partnership with an unexpected bedfellow. There’s something alluring and irresistible about the surprise of the unexpected.

This partnership mixes a for-profit and nonprofit, a music group and a professional sports team. It brings together experts who specialize in fine finger movements with those who use large muscles to move a hockey puck across the ice. Not the usual partnership. Offering the unexpected brings attention to both.

How Can You Use This Strategy?

Seek out and be open to unusual partnerships.

Create a surprise to help you further your most important strategies.

Look for potential partnerships beyond the obvious and beneath the surface.

Hone your networking skills. Talk to people from many types of groups. Don’t dismiss the possibility of commonalities with for-profits, government agencies,

and the academic community, as well as with all sorts of nonprofit organizations.


Always ask yourself what you can offer a potential partner. Keep reaching out and staying open to collaborative possibilities.

Burrow deep. Ask lots of questions to uncover all the things you and your potential partner have in common and the places where your interests, values, and goals overlap.

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The alliance also succeeds because it creates a discrete product. In this case, the product is a recorded theme song played at the hockey games and in the Bolts' marketing materials. The product creates the opportunity for spin-offs, such as press releases, press conferences, photo ops, and special events. For example, at a special concert for young people, the musicians wore hockey jerseys, while the hockey team's mascot, Thunderbug, conducted. In turn, the theme song offers opportunities to engage the media and expose the hockey team's audience to the power of the orchestra.

It's not apparent at first glance, but when we dig deeper we learn that the two groups have more in common than just geography. The connection between the two began when a board member of the orchestra and the owner of the hockey team met at a luncheon. They were both aiming for audiences that overlapped. The Florida Orchestra was trying to speak to a broader audience, and the Tampa Bay Lightning was trying to rebrand itself as being less blue collar. This partnership involves more than picking another entity to create surprise. These deeper commonalities offer the potential for continued engagement.

Most important, from the nonprofit's perspective, the partnership is part of its larger strategy to help people see their orchestra in new ways. By itself, developing an alliance with a hockey team, while fun and innovative, might have been a distraction from the Orchestra's goals. Instead, the partnership has become a tool to help the Orchestra fulfill its vision. In the past two years, the Florida Orchestra's subscriber base has grown by an astounding 29%. 

Karen Eber Davis (karen@kedconsult.com) is an expert in nonprofit innovation and author of Nonprofit Income Without the Mystery. For over 20 years, Karen has helped leaders make dramatic improvements that "move the needle" in excellence, effectiveness, and bottom-lines. Sign up for her free newsletter "Added Value" at ked.consult.com.

TEAM UP FOR GREATER POTENTIAL

To find the right partner and make the partnership work, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

How Do Leaders of Nonprofit Partnerships Foster Collaboration? (Vol. 22, No. 3)

High-End Strategic Alliances as Fundraising Opportunities (Vol. 19, No. 5)

Six Keys to Successful Nonprofit-Academic Collaboration (Vol. 21, No. 1)

How to Partner for Success (Vol. 24, No. 6)

Take the Collaboration Quiz (Vol. 24, No. 3)

Four Steps to Effective Networking (Vol. 30, No. 1)

A Collaboration Checklist: Ten Questions for Success (Vol. 24, No. 1)

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