

**"Last week I attended a program at the Westchester County Association. The topic was planned giving. I was intrigued, but as a small business I have limited resources to put towards philanthropy. Please talk about the pros and cons of committing both time and money to nonprofits."**

Giving to nonprofit organizations can definitely be good for business. It does take time to unfold a philanthropic program. It is important to be strategic about which organizations to commit to and how to commit. It is also possible to use philanthropy as part of the company's hiring and employee retention strategy. For ideas on how to get started, look to your customers, peers and employees.

Lining up with a nonprofit can lead to more positive exposure for your company. Many charitable organizations also provide significant opportunities to network. From joint marketing, to participation in activities, to board membership, belonging to a charity can open up your world of contacts.

### People and Partnerships

Having the right charitable partner(s) can help make the difference with some clients. Buyers, both corporate and individual, have more choices today, and they are generally becoming more socially conscious. Give them a reason to choose your firm because you demonstrate that you have similar philanthropic values.

However, if the nonprofit has problems, any publicity about those difficulties may rub off on your company. Look no farther than Oprah and the PR challenges her organization faced related to scandal in an African school project. So select your partners carefully and do your homework on their executives and board.

Anything you initiate with a nonprofit program will take time to unfold. When looking for organizations to align with, think in time frames of two to three years minimum. It can take you that long to put a program together and mine its full potential.

When you're starting out, look for organizations that have a track record of working successfully with small, privately held businesses. If this is your first venture into the nonprofit world, you don't want to be both learner and leader. Reduce the learning curve by picking an experienced partner.

On the employee front, experience with nonprofits can lead to skill development, improved time-management ability and greater connections to the community. Individual employees can increase their capacity to contribute to your company. You can also increase retention of key employees who may think twice about leaving when their volunteer efforts are sponsored by their employer.

When interviewing, be sure to ask candidates if they have done any volunteering. Remember the old adage: if you want something done, ask a busy person. If you have two equally qualified candidates, give preference to the volunteer. That person is most likely able to think beyond himself, has experience working with teams and has probably handled a bigger than average workload.

### What's Your Strategy?

When searching for nonprofits to partner with, consider your clients and employees. Survey all of them to find out where their interests lie. Make a list of organizations that they work with. Find out what connections they have that you can learn from.

When starting to search for your company's philanthropic partners, make a list of values that are important to your company. Review your company's goals, mission and vision. Look for nonprofits that have similar goals, mission, vision and values.

Carefully interview the person you'll be working with. Do you get along? Do you contribute to each other's ideas? Do you see the world through a similar lens? Make sure you can see yourself working closely together for a significant period of time.

Be realistic when looking for a partner. Most nonprofits have limited resources. They are usually looking to their corporate partners for dollars and labor. Don't expect they'll do the work for you. Do look for an organization that can contribute ideas, and that will lend its brand value to help increase yours.

When considering which nonprofit, start with strategy. What does your company want to accomplish as a result of aligning with a philanthropic organization? Examples include: making a difference in the world, increasing the company's visibility, beefing up skills, gaining increased awareness of a marketplace, having a partner to accomplish goals.

Looking for a good book? Try, "To Profit Or Not To Profit: The Commercial Transformation of the Nonprofit Sector," by Burton A. Weisbrod.

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