

Philanthropy, Volunteerism, Corporate Social Responsibility

Steps to effective corporate-community partnerships

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Over the past 20 years, Canadian businesses have witnessed a steady growth in public expectations around community involvement. Today's savvy consumers and employees demand that companies go beyond financial donations or a Christmas Food Bank drive. Leaders in corporate social responsibility (CSR) are now partnering strategically with community organizations to work towards common social or environmental objectives.

At their best, these partnerships can generate mutual benefits for both parties. Corporations can receive increased brand equity, improved employee engagement, and more effective use of community investment resources. Community partners can gain greater organizational capacity, better communications with the private sector, and greater value than a financial contribution.

At their worst, poorly constructed partnerships can destroy the legitimacy of a community investment program for years and lead to a confusing and alienating experience for the community partner.

This past summer, Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR) polled its corporate membership and asked 33 community organizations across the country what makes an effective corporate-community partnership. The result is five broad recommendations that will help ensure maximum value for both the business and the non-profit partners.

1 Develop a community investment plan that aligns with your overall business strategy.

The most natural focus for a partnership is a cause that aligns with existing business objectives. For example, a pharmaceutical firm may choose to invest in community health, or a book retailer may invest in literacy training.

Partnerships like these allow a company to leverage its own people, resources and expertise, and create a "natural" connection that may be better received by the public. Where no such "natural" match exists, companies should look to their stakeholders for issues that most resonate with them.

2 Choose a partner organization whose size, capacity and culture are compatible with your own.

Similarities in organizational culture and size will maximize value for both sides over the longer term. When assessing the size of a potential partner, consider first whether the organization has the capacity to engage in the type of partnership you want (such as dedicated staff and established programs).

Next, think about which size of organization best fits your needs. Larger organizations may have greater profile, but being a small supporter of a large organization will not generate the same recognition for your business as being a large supporter of a small organization.

3 Share partnership expectations with the community partner and listen to their needs and expectations.

Outlining expectations early is critical. Before proceeding, both sides should have a clear understanding of the length and nature of the partnership, reporting expectations, accountability for project

deliverables, shared decision-making process, and marketing and communications objectives. Taking the time to draft a formal partnership agreement will prevent future conflict and ensure consistency across staff changes.

4 Spend time becoming familiar with the partner organization.

Amongst the community organizations CBSR surveyed, 63 per cent identified "greater understanding" as a critical need for future partnerships. Non-profits want to be sure that corporations "get" the importance of the work they do. They said trust was built when businesses came to meet the non-profit face-to-face and spent time with their staff and clients. It is equally important that businesses understand the resource constraints under which non-profits work. Often, non-profit employees carry out newer corporate partnerships on top of their regular responsibilities; this can stretch non-profit resources to the limit and lead to friction in partnerships.

5 Communicate partnerships internally and be cautiously strategic with external communications.

For the business, effective internal communication about the partnership will help achieve organizational buy-in, motivate employees and reduce complications. Most partnerships require the collaboration and co-ordination of a range of staff and the board. To be involved effectively, all parties need to understand their responsibilities for the partnership, and the benefit of the partnership to the community and the business.

Companies that plan to publicize their community investment initiatives externally should ensure their

communication is clear and does not exaggerate the impact of their involvement in the partnership. Provide concrete examples of project outcomes, and consider utilizing the brand equity of the non-profit by encouraging the non-profit to lead external communications or by issuing joint communications.

As businesses increasingly transition to more involved community investment programs, using these five recommendations will help ensure maximum benefit for both business and the community.

Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR) is a network of Canadian companies focused on environmental, social and economic solutions that lead to better business and a better world.

To learn more, visit www.cbsr.ca.



ATB Financial has successfully partnered with the Stollery and Alberta Children's Hospital foundations in the Teddy for a Toonie campaign.

Case Study: ATB Financial

ATB Financial's stakeholders identified children's health care as a priority issue early on, which led to a natural partnership with the Stollery and Alberta Children's Hospital foundations. Every May, ATB's 163 branches, corporate offices and agencies raise money by asking customers to donate a toonie for the chance to win a custom-made teddy bear. ATB also engages its employees in head-shaving cam-

paigns, silent auctions, and golf tournaments in support of the "Teddy for a Toonie" campaign. Since the campaign started over 10 years ago, it has raised over \$3 million for sick children. ATB's partnership with the hospital foundations is based on familiarity, fondness, respect, trust and a desire on both sides to build internal engagement and external publicity through creative and memorable tactics.

Thanks to our volunteers

The Edmonton Chamber of Commerce appreciates how important the efforts of our hard-working volunteers are to the success of our organization.

With a focus on creating the best environment for business, we live up to this challenge by utilizing many volunteers to complement our staff. These volunteers sit on our board of directors, in a governance capacity they sit on our com-

mittees and policy forum, helping to create the policies that give direction to our advocacy and lobbying efforts; and they are Chamber members, who act as ambassadors, championing our cause and helping out at the many special events we hold.

The Edmonton Chamber of Commerce also knows full-well how important volunteers are to companies and organizations other

than our own.

Volunteers truly are the backbone for charities, minor sports and cultural organizations, and schools, to name just a few benefactors. We encourage everyone who has benefited from the hard work of these giving people to show your appreciation.

To all of our valuable volunteers, we would like to officially thank you for your commitment.

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Warrior with Lance | Keith Nolan | oil on canvas

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