

PLANTING THE SEED FOR PARTNERSHIPS WITH BUSINESS

Forming partnerships between business, government and community organisations is now seen by many as a key strategy for building community capacity and developing relationships for mutual benefit.

Whilst there has been a prevailing view that the role of business is business and government or charities are responsible for addressing social problems, there is now evidence of the changing nature of relationships between non-profit organisations and business.

No doubt the Government would like to alleviate funding pressures, and its recent welfare reform document encourages strong and active collaboration between the community and business sectors. 'Participation Support for a More Equitable Society' highlights social obligation and states, "Business has an obligation to work with government, communities and individuals to generate more opportunities for economic participation. All these groups will need to be more active in identifying and developing opportunities for social participation." The Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership (the Partnership), established in 1999 is a group set up to develop and promote future directions of the partnership concept. They have developed several taxation measures to encourage and facilitate philanthropy by business, individuals and families.

Despite the challenges of breaking new ground and building new ideologies upon which to relate, there are already many successes to inspire us. In their paper 'Business and Nonprofit Relationships in Australia: Promiscuous or Monogamous?' (Edwards & Onyx) the authors explore the different types of intersectoral relationships, which can vary enormously in structure and length of relationship. They are also interested in the scope of social capital, beyond that of economic gain. In this informative paper they refer to a number of encouraging examples.

The Australian Women's Cancer Foundation (AWCF) and Bread Makers, a franchised bakery business, claim to have developed a relationship of mutual respect and understanding. Bread Makers provides AWCF with free, fully furnished office space, IT support, accounting assistance, corporate advice, marketing, volunteers and a host web site. Without formal contracts, the relationship is based upon informal connections. According to the Bread Makers' Executive Director this

has been in line with our philosophy that our support of community groups should be through active participation, rather than merely donating money (BM Website, 2002).

Caring for Families (CAF), a non-profit organisation with a specific focus on crisis support and education were selected by Computer Systems, a major international IT specialist, for the establishment of a relationship in 2002. The key project for the partnership is the development of a virtual learning centre. According to Chief Executive of CAF:

What is unique about this partnership is that we agreed to work together and then sat down and planned the whole program based on what we needed and what Computer Systems felt it could best provide.

Edwards and Onyx (2002) conclude that from their samples, all the relationships have reaped benefits to suit their objectives.

For a fine model within our own fold, we can turn to WestClub, a division of Westworks, a non-profit organisation who provide work and leisure opportunities for people recovering from a mental illness. WestClub believe they have been extremely fortunate in the fifteen months of their existence to have attracted substantial sponsorship from many small, medium and large businesses. The Manager of WestClub, Josephine Enoch believes that it is due to the hard work of their members, volunteers and staff, that they now have a sponsorship base of over 90 organisations. To ensure clarity of direction and be prepared for surprise opportunities each of the

WestClub branches has written a wish-list, which they have found to be an effective tool.

As business groups have been known to contact community organisations without notice, the value of a primed response is paramount to taking full advantage of an offer and showing you are serious and ready for further discussion. A wish list should contain a variety of workable ideas such as volunteering possibilities, to in-kind and financial support for specific projects you have in mind. Develop detailed ideas about the scope of involvement, so the company can consider how much support they may want to provide with staff volunteering or the amount of in-kind assistance. Importantly, always provide a flexible range of options to ensure your organisation fits into their criteria. (Partnerships with Business: Murphy, Thomas, Glazebrook)

With success behind them WestClub are now embarking on the next stage of their business plan which calls for larger amounts of sponsorship. With this in mind, a marketing and presentation package has been developed. Ms Enoch explained that early experience in marketing to larger corporations produced the usual 'we already are sponsoring somebody'. A more target-specific approach has since been developed, which has seen a much higher success rate in corporations' willingness to at least listen. Rapport is being established with some major corporations. It is expected that they will consider future sponsorship requests, and embrace the opportunity to become better informed about mental illness.

"Our sponsors have a strong emotional attachment to WestClub and are excited to witness our development. These relationships and our members are the life-blood of the organisation. The relationships have been forged through personal contact and the development of rapport with the companies" says Ms Enoch.

For those who would like to know more, 'Partnerships with Business' (Murphy, Thomas, Glazebrook) is a guide for small community groups who are interested in forming a working relationship with business groups. The authors attempt to demystify the process and provide practical advice on forming such partnerships. They attempt to present an accurate picture of the task at hand and do not omit to address the negative factors.

Building partnerships with business can seem daunting and appear to require more effort than there are resources. However, the first step only requires developing a new awareness and interest in the small businesses in your local area. By gradually building a friendly relationship and finding out what they do for the community, you are already planting the seed for an opportunity for something more productive and enduring.

A successful relationship with the right business can provide a community group with additional knowledge, energy and skills. Most obviously, it may increase limited resources or provide an additional source of volunteers but the association may also help to build wider networks and increase influence in the community.

One might be more likely to ask why a business would want to build a partnership with a community group. The reasons may be varied but the business will ultimately need to find value in the association. Whilst some business people are just more community-minded, others will recognise that business prospers best in strong communities. Socially responsible businesses are also more attractive to consumers and 'good deeds' can be an effective marketing strategy.

Consequently, a successful partnership is a co-operative and mutually beneficial arrangement between a community group and a company. Whilst donations from companies can be very helpful to small community groups, they are not the longer-term relationships discussed in 'Partnerships with Business'. Rather it is suggested that projects and activities might include: involvement of company staff in voluntary activities; strategic projects to address social and health issues; education and research projects; staff mentoring in management, finance, computers, etc; employment training projects; ongoing financial sponsorship of projects, services and events; and a variety of in-kind contributions.

Whilst your community group may not be quite ready to jump into a relationship with a local business, there may be value in considering the pros and cons. If a company was to make the first contact with you, it may have been worth the time preparing a readily accessible wishlist which includes a range of options appropriate to your organisation, or being alert to sensible reasons to decline.

References:

Murphy, Thomas, Glazebrook (2002) *Partnerships with Business*. A Guide for Small Community Groups. Triple A Foundation, NZ. www.communityconnections.com.au

Edwards & Onyx (2003) *Business and Nonprofit Relationships in Australia; Promiscuous or Monogamous?* Third Sector Review 9:1 Australian and New Zealand Third Sector Research Limited