

The Ins and Outs of Community and Business Partnership Programs

This paper was presented by Geraldine Skinner, Director of Community Business Partnerships in 2000 at an NCOSS Conference 'The Business of Welfare'. It maintains its relevance.

When confronted by the title of this presentation I had to think for a while about just what was meant by the 'ins and outs'. There are probably several ways to interpret the phrase but what I intend to cover under the headings of the ins and out are:

- How do organisations go about getting into partnerships and what might they expect to get out of them?
- But first why partnerships anyway?

Over the last 50 years or so, in response to a proliferation of community concerns and causes, the number of community organisations has grown considerably. Estimates vary depending on definitions, but it is safe to say that Australia has more than 200,000 non-profit organisations, ranging from animal refuges sporting clubs, right through to support centres for disadvantaged members of society and charities as big as the Red Cross.

Competition for scarce resources has resulted, and the public capacity for support has been strained.

Partnerships with business are one way of addressing this challenge. They can provide a new source of support and deliver outcomes that benefit not only community groups but also the business itself.

At their best they can also assist in finding more efficient and long-term solutions to community issues. They can build both bonding and bridging social capital. In fact for me, this is by far the most exciting aspect of the partnership initiative - the potential to break down some of the divisions in society and to build connectedness and greater social cohesion.

Getting into partnerships

Partnerships are relationships and they don't just happen overnight. Like interpersonal relationships, they often start small and develop slowly over time. They can begin with chance meetings or via mutual contacts.

But it is true that relationships can also be carefully planned.

There are some key steps in this process.

Selecting a partner

It is important that potential partners are a good match – that they have similar or complementary interests and values.

First you need to be clear of the external “personality” of your own organisation. You need to have a clear understanding of your own organisation and what distinguishes it from others. Values, clientele, location, subject matter are all importance.

After you have assessed your own organisation it is time to do the same for any possible partners. Research your potential partner extensively by personal enquiry, media articles, trade magazines, annual reports and websites.

Preparing the approach

Before the approach is made make sure you are clear on what you expect and what can be achieved. There are three key questions:

1. What do you want? You may be looking for funding, pro-bono professional advice, volunteers, goods-in-kind, assistance with advocacy or a combination of these
2. What are you able to offer your potential partner? You may be able to offer a raised public profile, access to key markets, staff benefits, brand or profile building, a useful network of contacts, skills that the partner organisation does not have, increased media coverage.
3. In what time frame do you want these goals reached (long-term, short-term)? It should be remembered that mutual benefit generally builds over time.

Approaching partners

Once you are clear about what type of organisation you are approaching, what you are hoping to achieve and how it can be achieved, it is then time to find the right person to contact. This doesn't mean preparation of a lengthy and detailed written submission. It means starting the dialogue.

The right person may not necessarily be the Chief Executive or General Manager. It could be the Community or Public Relations Officer or Sponsorship Manager.

Depending on the type of partnership being proposed, you may want to approach a different section of the potential partner's organisation. If you are proposing to increase brand image or media coverage it may be more suitable to approach the marketing or communications manager. If you anticipate your partnership will have a staff involvement component you may benefit by contacting the Human Resources Manager.

These initial meetings are important in assessing the fit or the chemistry between the partners, to find out whether there is potential for development of a relationship. It is important to stress that you are not simply asking for funds

Reaching an agreement

For an agreement to be reached from both partners it is important that the relationship be approached openly and honestly. This is necessary from the beginning of the relationship. Both partners must be explicit about their expectations of the partnership. A good example of this is in pro bono work. It needs

to be clear from the beginning that the client should be treated the same as paying client, not put to the bottom of the pile when commercial clients deadlines clash.

Documenting the agreement is sensible so that the corporate memory is not lost if particular personnel move on. In some cases, it may also be appropriate to draw up a formal agreement or contract.

Maintaining the relationship

Like any other relationships, partnerships need to be nurtured and carefully maintained. Open and regular communication, both formal and informal is the key. In more extensive and formal partnerships, performance indicators and benchmarks established at the outset provide a basis for discussion and useful feedback.

What can come out of partnerships?

Partnerships can provide various benefits that have often been summarised under the banner of the 7 Ps:

1. Product
2. People
3. Premises
4. Purchasing Power
5. Promotion
6. Power
7. Profit

More fundamentally, though the outcome of partnerships is increased sustainability for organisations, particularly when partnerships become more formal and agreements are in place for several years.

Predictability about the level of resources allows organisations to plan ahead with confidence.

Interestingly a recent study undertaken by the Business Council of Australia, in conjunction with the Centre for Corporate Public Affairs has demonstrated that sustainability is also one of the main reasons that businesses enter partnerships.

The great majority of companies in the study supported involvement with the community as part of an expanding social role that contributes to the continuing health and growth of their businesses. Long-term business sustainability, not profitability, was at the heart of corporate community involvement. The benefits businesses recognise are in the boost to intangible assets – reputation, community support and the ‘license to operate’.

And perhaps that is the bottom line for the community as well - that partnerships founded on mutual respect and delivering reciprocal benefits will contribute to the sustainability of society.