

In Search of Volunteers: How to Crack a Major Corporation

Gayle Jasso

Does this sound familiar? You are the administrator of a nonprofit community organization. You have just returned from a marvelous national conference on volunteerism where you heard for days about wonderful corporations with hundreds of loving volunteers who are just dying to get involved in projects to help people. You walk into your office and sit down at your desk. Glancing about the jumbled room, you shake your head and wonder how you are ever going to get out from under all the paperwork, let alone conquer the great unknowns of the mysterious and foreign corporate world.

But where to begin? (That is the question.) And how to do the job right? (That is the challenge.) For although you think you know nothing about "corporate types," your instincts tell you that, whatever you do, you had better not bungle the job, because you will probably only have one chance to crack a major organization.

As manager of Community Affairs for Security Pacific National Bank, I have for years been approached by representatives from numerous nonprofit organizations who have asked for help, be it financial support, requests for volunteers, or participation in any number of

career and vocational educational programs. My experience in dealing with these dedicated and well-meaning representatives of community organizations may be useful to you if you are the one responsible for mustering support in order to serve clients and keep your doors open. In this article, I've outlined key steps in attracting the support of corporations and have formulated twelve "rules" to guide you.

PLAY NEW ROLES

After giving the matter much thought, I am convinced that a major corporation can be approached, interested and sold on a program and organization if that organization's representative is willing to wear a few new hats and learn a few new skills to accomplish the job.

I believe successful nonprofit representatives must add the following new roles to their self-images and careers: detective, business executive, salesperson and missionary. The latter role can only be successfully filled if the first three roles have already been effectively assimilated.

Why is being a detective first on your agenda? The reason is that you cannot sell a product if you do not have the right buyer. Ignoring this role leads to wheel spinning and burn

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out. Having doors slammed in your face does not do a lot for your ego. Playing detective in locating the right companies for you is essential to eliminate some of those slammed doors and to open many others.

USE CONTACTS

The first and often most difficult rule to learn is to think in terms of contacts. From now on, every person you meet must be regarded as a contact who may be useful in the future. Scratch your head and try to remember anyone you have ever met or heard about who is connected to a business in your area. Friends, relatives, acquaintances, strangers who know someone you know--all must be considered. Any one of these people may be able to introduce you to someone, point you in the right direction, or open a door.

The second important rule is to swallow your pride and ask for help from these contacts. You may think your all-knowing and confident image will be shattered by admitting you need help, but usually it will not. In fact, asking for help makes you more human and makes others feel more comfortable around you.

Rule three is to follow the advice you receive, or at least look into it seriously. Nothing is so offensive as to ask for help or advice when you have no intention of using or following it. Your contacts soon learn not to waste their time and energy on you.

Rule four is to thank everyone who helps you. Send a special note, letter or card as concrete evidence of thanks, and tell the person the results of his or her help and advice, especially if positive. Such a thoughtful touch will do much to further any relationship, and this is especially true with contacts.

STUDY THE CORPORATION

Being a detective is essential when approaching a corporation. These factors must be considered: (1) Which corporation might be most

likely to be supportive of your organization? (2) Whom in the company should you approach? (3) How should you approach this person? (4) What information will this person/corporation need to evaluate your request?

Question number one will be answered by you through your research and contacts. Remember that a corporation's annual report provides lots of excellent information.

Question number two is more challenging. Although corporate volunteer programs are becoming in vogue, most corporations do not have formal programs. Therefore, finding the appropriate department which has, should have or could have such a program or involvement requires a private investigation which can usually be handled through a series of simple phone calls. Expect to be passed around within the company, but eventually you will find the right department with responsibility for the help you seek. Possible departments are Public Relations, Public Affairs, Community Relations, Community Affairs, Employee Relations, or Personnel. Every company is different.

Next you need to find the right person. By sticking with the secretary in the department you have located by perseverance, you can learn who approves requests for employee volunteers, how this person likes to be approached, and what information this person will need to evaluate your request. At this point, thank the secretary very graciously and hang up. You will call back when you are wearing your salesperson hat.

Rule number five is: only sell the person who can say yes.

DEVELOP YOUR PERSONAL IMAGE

Before you contact the correct potential buyer in the corporation, you need to take a good look at your professional image and that of your organization. My advice is to think, look and act like a business executive, because that is the type of

person who can say yes to your request.

If you are daring, take a deep breath and look at yourself in the mirror. Do you look like a professional business person, or do your clothes indicate a less formal occupation? Do you own a business suit (with a skirt, for women)?

Rule number six is invest in yourself. Now is not the time to pat yourself on the back for being frugal and sacrificing. You need to pay the price to improve your image--not just for approaching corporations but in all of your professional endeavors.

Try it. Spend a little money on yourself. It will probably feel so good that you might decide to continue the investment. And remember, every professional must have a business card. If a card is not provided by your organization, print your own. You need to be able to leave a card with every contact, and in your new roles, you will need plenty of cards as you meet all of those new contacts. Nothing spoils an impression like leaving someone your name, address and phone number written on a scraggly piece of yellow lined paper.

PREPARE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S IMAGE

Can your organization present a professional image to the corporation? Does your organization have a proposal folder? Are your books in order? Do you have a current financial statement, list of board of directors, statement of purpose? These are things a corporation will probably require. If you walk into an interview well prepared, you will demonstrate that you and your organization could make effective use of that corporation's resources. Corporations are looking for winners--needy winners, but winners.

THE COMPETITION IS STIFF

I was offering comments such as these at a state conference on youth a few years ago, and many faces in

the audience immediately turned hostile. One woman stood up and said that she resented having to put time and effort into a proposal package. She thought it was humiliating. After all, she was an educated professional. And besides, she could not afford good clothes on her salary. Her voice was shaking as she shared her thoughts.

My response was then and is now, that this is life. The competition is stiff. Resources are limited. Those who receive help are those who make the best case for assistance in the most professional and well-prepared manner. Making this case includes how you look, what you say, how you say it, and the materials you present. These are the realities of life, not just of corporations. If you do not know how to act the part of the business executive, rule number seven should be helpful: learn from role models. Learn from your new contacts.

SELL, SELL, SELL

Cracking a major corporation, or any business for that matter, boils down to selling. The first sales challenge is getting an interview. When you are granted an interview by the right person, you will have that one chance to sell yourself and your product, so the second sales challenge is persuading that individual to convince his/her corporation to assist your organization. You must convince this key person that by satisfying your organization's needs, the person will also be satisfying his/her company's needs.

My best recommendation is to take a seminar or read a book on sales technique. Since getting a yes answer is crucial, you will find the investment of time and money in such training and research well worth-while. Such exposure will make you aware of various sales methods and of selling stages such as qualifying, selling and closing.

You will also need a supply of "ammunition" for your sales presen-

tation. You must anticipate the person's questions, fears and concerns and have good responses prepared. You will also need an impressive list of benefits to the corporation for helping your organization. The more specific the benefits, the better. For example, the benefit of increasing employee productivity is more specific than the possibility of creating good will or good public relations.

Consider every possible benefit to that corporation, and rank each in order of concrete payoff. A good brainstorming session with your peers could produce this valuable ammunition. If you have business friends, invite them to sit in. Their ideas will be helpful and give you more confidence in your list.

After you have presented your sales pitch, remember rule number eight: do not take no for an answer until you are sure it is absolutely, positively no. In sales, "no" does not really mean "no." Often it is just the expression of another doubt or question which, with additional input of information or time, could become a "yes!"

ASK THE GOLDEN QUESTION

Rule number nine is to ask what I call the "golden question." If you receive no for an answer, simply ask: "Well, what would I need to do to be able to get what I'm asking for?" Most often, the person will tell you exactly what your next steps should be. And if you follow this good advice, you are often on your way to a "yes."

Rules number ten and eleven go hand-in-hand. Be persistent and be patient. Think of the time you spend with a corporation as an investment. If you have done your homework and carefully donned your roles as detective, business executive and salesperson, the investment should pay off.

DEMONSTRATE COMMITMENT

At this point, we need to bring in the role of missionary. Actually, as a

dedicated professional, you have probably always been an evangelist for your cause. The things to remember are to demonstrate dedication and commitment through your enthusiasm and joy in your work. These qualities will shine through your spirit, your eyes, your smile. This missionary role can often make the difference between a yes and no answer. It can also make the difference between winning someone's support and turning someone off.

My recommendation is to aim at being a low-key, professional missionary. Such an approach can put the frosting on the cake. Too much eagerness will probably be too much.

Remember that the missionary role should be an addition to the other important roles. Even if you are enthusiastic, without the groundwork of the other roles, you may not be taken seriously. You might make an impression, but not necessarily the one you had in mind.

SERVICE THE ACCOUNT

My last piece of advice is to remember that the challenge really begins after making the sale and receiving the yes. Wearing your very best salesperson hat, please remember that while your goal is immediate, it should also be long-term. Think of the corporation as your account. You, your staff and volunteers must provide ongoing and quality service to the account.

Corporations are composed of people who have feelings like everyone else. You can help corporations enjoy the sense of satisfaction which comes from being able to serve their fellow citizens because, as we all know, helping people feels good. But, business people do not like to be taken advantage of, taken for granted, or taken for a ride. A little respect, consideration and tender loving care will go a long way in cultivating meaningful, mutually-beneficial relationships with corporations.

ENJOY THE RELATIONSHIP

There are thousands of corporations out there waiting to be "cracked." As you take on your new roles and apply the skills discussed here, I am confident you will find responsiveness from those corporate towers. Remember, those towers are filled with human beings, potential volunteers, waiting to be given the opportunity to make a contribution to their communities. Your persistence and patience will enable them to feel good about themselves while you and your organizations better serve your clients. And that is the secret of the twelfth and golden rule: everyone must win.