

How To Approach A Corporation For Money And Not Go Away Empty-Handed

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For most corporations, community involvement translates into community investment, and that means supporting non-profit organizations not only to increase the company's public image but also its bottom line.

But with over 300,000 U.S. non-profit, tax-exempt organizations now competing for corporate contributions, American companies have begun to feel the pinch. And corporate charitable giving has tightened up like everything else. So what is the secret to obtaining corporate support? According to Ross Perot, the Texas billionaire who's given away more than \$100 million to charities, non-profits searching for corporate support should deliver results, have effective leadership and use corporate funds on the people or causes that need it rather than wasting it on overhead costs.

Most corporations agree with Perot, and some impose even more stringent guidelines. Key questions most often asked to grant applicants are: 1) what will be the results of the contribution? 2) How will the non-profit evaluate whether or not the outcome has been achieved and 3) How will the non-profit be accountable to the corporation?

Following are some ways non-profit organizations can be better prepared to answer those questions.

STEP ONE: RESEARCH AND TARGET

Targeting the appropriate companies is the first and most critical step for the non-profit organization seeking corporate

support. Begin by conducting preliminary research to determine which companies are most likely to contribute based on their past giving patterns, giving philosophy and past recipients of contributions. It's also helpful to determine what internal department oversees contributions and who within that department is a key decision-maker.

This information enables non-profits to approach the corporations whose policies and philosophy mesh with their own. For example, a health and human services non-profit agency may want to approach the marketing department of an insurance agency, whose corporate goals are to support and increase health maintenance among its policy holders. A bank will most likely be interested in non-profits which address economic education. Likewise, a fast-food chain may wish to build relationships with a growing ethnic group and therefore will be sensitive to concerns such as job training and education.

The non-profit organization must be able to explain how the contribution program will serve the corporation's best interests. In doing so, the non-profit demonstrates to the company that it can help meet corporate goals.

STEP TWO: GATHER INFORMATION

Once your non-profit has targeted a corporation with compatible goals, you will need additional information before preparing a written proposal or request. For example, obtain past copies of the corporation's annual report on charitable con-

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tributions. Find out if the company has contributed to your non-profit organization before and if so, be prepared to explain how the funds were used. Be familiar with the organizations and types of projects the company has contributed to in the past. A phone call to the corporation should yield answers to the following:

- Does the corporation use a specific form for requests? If not, can they provide an example of the information the company needs in order to reach its funding decision?
- What is the fiscal year? When does the corporation prefer to receive requests during the year?
- Is there a contact within the corporation that you (or a board member) know? Is the person at such a level within the organization that it would be appropriate to channel the request through him or her?
- Is there a possibility that your organization would like to invite a member of the corporation's management team to sit on your board of directors?
- How long does it take for the corporation to process a request? How soon would it be convenient for you to follow up by phone?
- How will they let you know whether or not the corporation has decided to contribute?

After you have checked the spelling of the corporation's name, received the address, specific mail stops or numbers and double-checked names and spelling of individuals, be sure to ask when is an appropriate time to reach them and if there's an assistant or coordinator who might take your call. Although this advice seems basic, the non-profits who fail to attend to these simple details may sabotage their funding requests.

After this information is compiled, you are now ready to begin drafting a request proposal.

STEP THREE: THE WRITTEN REQUEST

As the key link between the non-profit organization and the corporation, the writ-

ten request is one of the most crucial elements of the contribution process. Before you begin writing, assemble all information available about your organization. This might consist of, but is not limited to:

- annual report
- brochure on the organization
- names and titles of the board of directors
- budget information for current time frame
- description of request with information on what it will be used for; designate program or general operating budget
- organization's mission
- who will oversee the project
- your organization's audiences
- if available, news clips as further background of the non-profit organization

Remember your audience as you are writing the proposal. Be sure to specify the benefits of contributing to your organization. Explain that the company's involvement can affect the quality of future employees and can contribute to community support and increased visibility. Clearly explain what the corporation can expect to receive from its contribution whether it's publicity, recognition, image enhancement, establishment of a new, mutually rewarding relationship, signage, exposure to new audiences. Be prepared to articulate these positives if you get a follow-up call from the corporation.

STEP FOUR: ESTABLISH A TIMELINE

As you begin drafting the formal proposal, establish a reasonable timeline for the contribution request process. Allow enough time for unanticipated delays during each step of the process. A good time table might be:

Initial research—2 weeks

Information gathering—1 week

Writing the proposal—2 weeks

Processing time—30-45 days

Follow-up phone call—as required

Thank-you letter—1 week following notification.

STEP FIVE: OUTLINE ORGANIZATION'S NEEDS

Take an inventory of the non-profit organization to determine non-monetary needs such as printing, graphic design work, media expertise, professional writers, office equipment (new or used), training for volunteers, space procurement, office management expertise, public relations or advertising assistance or a speakers bureau. Although these in-kind services may not be as desirable as a monetary contribution, they are often easier to negotiate with large corporations who have the services readily available.

Be sure to state in the proposal that your organization would gladly consider in-kind services and list specific needs.

STEP SIX: COORDINATE YOUR REQUEST

If your organization has several levels and/or branches within your immediate area, make sure to coordinate requests for donations. Corporations bombarded with requests from different levels within the same organization will probably view the non-profit as disorganized and deny the request.

If possible, allow the corporation to consider a menu of contribution options spanning a year's period. Most companies prefer to make their contributions yearly rather than to receive a different request each month. Be sure to include information on whom to contact within your organization and how he or she can be reached. Then make sure the person is indeed available.

STEP SEVEN: FOLLOW UP

Always follow up with a thank you letter regardless of whether your organization received a contribution. If you received a rejection, use it as the first step of your request for the following year. Be sure to indicate your intention of contacting the corporation in the future.

If your organization is fortunate enough to receive a contribution, send a thank-you letter immediately and then invite a

company representative to visit and see what their contribution will help to accomplish.

There's no denying that government cutbacks and a weakened economy have hurt non-profits seeking relief in America's boardrooms. But the non-profit which has done its homework is less likely to go away empty-handed.