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Tapping the Small Business Community for Volunteers

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Political leaders and nonprofit executives alike have expended much effort in recent years to promote corporate social responsibility and employee volunteer programs. Yet almost all of the attention has been given to the activities of major national corporations, while the community involvement of small businesses has been largely overlooked. There are many ways that creative volunteer programs can reach out to tap the resources offered by small business. The term small business can be misleading. This category can include businesses employing up to 500 people and grossing many millions of dollars. Such businesses comprise the vast majority of companies in the United States. If you form a collaboration with a small business council, you may actually gain access to companies with greater resources than their label implies.

Most small businesses have a true vested interest in the community in which they are based, since they usually have only one location. As a volunteer recruiter, you can expect the company representative to understand local needs and join you in concerns about specific problems confronting your geographic area.

If the company's customers are also local, you can persuasively link their volunteer participation with positive visibility in their market base.

Recruiting small businesses

As with the recruitment of individual volunteers, understanding your target audience is a critical element in the recruitment of small business support. Know the answers to the following questions:

- What type of help do you need? Are you hoping to use the company as an access point to individual employees, or do you want to recruit employees as a group? Is your need for specific expertise something this company is likely to possess?
- How flexible are you about how your needs are met? For example, does the volunteer activity have to be accomplished at a set time or can the company work with you to develop the work plan best suited to its schedule?
- What resources above and beyond people are you hoping to obtain? For example, if the company mobilizes 10 employees to paint your recreation hall, are you expecting a donation of the paint as well? (It's better to be up-front, while also being willing to negotiate for at least a part of your wish list.)
- Have you focused on geographic proximity? Start by contacting those companies physically closest to your agency - or to the location of the volunteer work to be done. Point out that employees can volunteer on their way home from the office or even at lunch.
- What are you prepared to offer in exchange for the company's help?

This last question is important for several reasons. Individuals should benefit from their volunteer work by gaining skills, making social and professional contacts. A similar exchange is legitimate for a business as well. And the smaller the business, the more likely you are to have some unexpected benefit to offer. Consider:

- How can you give public recognition for the volunteer involvement of the company's employees? Annual reports, front lobby displays, and press releases are only a few ideas.
- Are there services your agency can provide as a form of barter? For example, could you give a series of lunchtime seminars on subjects of interest to employees?

Focusing on the smallest

Within the broader category of small business exist several types of companies with special potential for volunteer projects. These include businesses of less than 25 employees and sole proprietorships, often marketing services valuable to volunteer projects: accounting, computer skills, graphic arts, desktop publishing, management consulting.

The smaller the company, the more flexibility its principals have in setting their schedules. You might be more successful recruiting an architect or a consultant as a volunteer during your agency's work hours than getting "release time" for an employee of a large corporation. And you will always be talking with the small business's top decision makers who can say "yes" or "no" to your request without having to go through a bureaucratic maze of approval sign-offs.

If you analyze the resources of your agency, you may discover that you have many things a very small business person would consider an excellent exchange for volunteer services. In addition to public recognition for its contributions, you might offer:

- access to your office equipment or even to occasional secretarial help
- meeting or storage space
- support staff training
- exhibit space
- parking.

Perhaps one of the best reasons to consider recruiting small business support is lack of competition. While everyone else is trying to entice the telephone company or the insurance company or some other multinational business to help their agency, you will discover that local businesses are rarely approached for their volunteer talent. The old adage that people only volunteer when they are asked applies to small companies, too.

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