

Untapped Potential: Working with our Corporate and Development Colleagues

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At a recent professional network meeting, my colleagues and I had the privilege of hearing from a panel comprised of some of our for-profit counterparts, the volunteer program management professionals who advocate for volunteerism from within a corporate structure. The message was both familiar and fresh, and as I sat with my colleagues, listening to some of the different ways for-profit companies invite and encourage their associates to get involved in the community, I felt a persistent question hammer in my head amidst the discussion—are we, as professionals on the nonprofit side of the relationship, incorporating different and more effective strategies to tap the corporate vein for volunteer prospects?

I fear that sometimes we tend to interpret and apply too simplistically the results from Independent Sector surveys about volunteerism that state the main reason people volunteer is because they are asked. If we e-mail a large corporate distribution list, collect signatures at a corporate volunteer interest fair, and distribute our brochures, we've "made the ask," and will certainly be happy with whatever we get back. Recruitment is a competitive playing field at times, and while we understand that no nonprofit can be a "one size fits all" volunteer opportunity oasis, we still tend to employ recruitment methods that resemble a cattle drive round-up, instead of

the carefully planned, targeted invitation to participate in a mission that has direct impact on the communities we serve.

Consider this a call to strategic action, informed by our corporate colleagues who are immersed in an environment that sees volunteerism through different eyes.

It should come as no surprise that businesses are as bottom-line conscious as they've ever been, and perhaps more so, as economic realities change both rapidly and frequently. Part of this attention to solvency manifests itself in corporate volunteer programs that strive to make the best use of an employee's time, as well as create viable opportunities for name-brand recognition. Influenced by issues of time and money, corporations select social concerns to which they can devote their own limited resources and with which they can align their most fundamental values. Cause-focused corporate community involvement is nothing new. But how are we to communicate with it? To what degree do we allow cause-focused corporate volunteerism to creatively and effectively impact the ways in which we structure our volunteer programs? It certainly includes the element of recruitment, but, done well, also soars beyond it.

If you want to raise my professional hackles, tell me that volunteer management and administration is really just HR for volunteer staff. Of course, we do have much in com-

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mon with this field, but it's not an exact mirror image of our work, distinguished only by a difference in pay categories for the human resources we engage. As a profession, we are collectively long overdue to consider forging collaborative bonds with another profession, with whom we have more in common than we realize—our colleagues in development and fundraising. From a resource development perspective, this is clearly a goldmine of shareable disciplines, common ground among our work, and the shining prospect of approaching the for-profit sector with an invitation to maximize their involvement and their impact on our respective organizations' missions. Equated simply, Money + People = Organizational Success. Again, not a new concept.

As volunteer program management professionals, we stand poised on the brink of new relationship possibilities with our colleagues in development. These are the individuals who interface regularly with various corporations' values, and the expression of these values through different support mechanisms: foundations, employee volunteer programs, and sponsorships of nonprofit events and programs. These are the people who know which companies have financially supported our mission, but may not have been invited to make their support more comprehensive through volunteer involvement. At the very least, even a periodic conversation with the colleague "down the hall" would yield a rich harvest of information to enhance a recruitment campaign, let alone result in creative new options for engaging those businesses not yet on board with our agency's work. Which of our agency's donors is also a volunteer? If we don't have the advantage (and of course, the challenge) of sharing a database to track this, how will we know? And how will we attempt to find out? Isn't this a discussion worth initiating?! We care about the same basic principles here: recruitment, retention, recordkeeping, recognition. Imagine what regular conversations would do for our respective areas of influence in the community.

We also stand poised on the brink of new relationship possibilities with corporate vol-

unteer program managers. We each bring different perspectives on volunteer trends and best practices, and different "snapshots" of how the community chooses to engage in volunteer efforts. The vice president of community resource development in a corporation may not know how many of her associates give of their time regularly to our organization, and would find this information an asset to helping the company tell its story to its stakeholders. We may have a volunteer position that would lend itself beautifully to a corporate leadership development/skill-building program, but lack the relationship with a company or business through which to offer it.

At the panel presentation I attended, I was thrilled to hear that one company regularly surveyed its employees to find out what causes they'd like to support, and how they preferred to give of their time (episodic? inclusive of family members? short-term?). Needless to say, the company was and continues to be responsive to its associates, and a wise volunteer program manager would pay close attention to these survey results. Through a stronger, more collaborative relationship with our development colleagues, we can gain a firmer grasp of corporate philanthropy, and put the elements of good volunteer administration into a broader context.

It is also essential for us as professionals to see beyond the mirage of numbers that prospective corporate volunteers bring to our short-term recruitment campaigns. It's one thing (and certainly, a helpful thing) to know the number of prospective employees that may respond to our invitation, as well as the company's requirements for employee volunteer recruitment (30 days' notice, review by an in-house community service committee, etc.). It's another matter entirely to craft the volunteer staffing component of an agency program to meet the professional development goals and objectives of a corporate leadership training program. Another panel member discussed at length her company's diversified employee volunteer program, and described the skill development component as one of the most successful examples of a healthy and productive nonprofit/corporate

relationship. The message here is clear—corporations are looking for far more developed and sophisticated volunteer programs for their associates than the fundraising, event-staffing opportunities currently pitched to them. Are we prepared to meet this need with our current volunteer program structure? If not, with whom do we need to collaborate to grow in this direction?

Occasionally, I hear echoes of time poverty (a phrase and phenomenon accurately introduced to our profession by Nora Silver of The Volunteerism Project) among my colleagues that I find disheartening at best, and whiny at worst. Developing volunteer programs that are more sophisticated and responsive to the community's desire to volunteer takes time... I've already got too much on my plate... I'm always expected to do more with less... I don't have time to read about the latest trend or research relevant to my field. Enough of this! A short-term investment of time for a long-term payoff is a wise strategy to employ, especially in our volunteer programs. Relationship-building takes time, and is well worth it. Creative partnerships with community business associations and the businesses themselves require more from us than a volunteer opportunity brochure on a recruitment fair table. We need to think differently—more critically—when it comes to developing community resources.

So ... where to begin? Consider these possibilities:

- Initiate a meeting with the person in your organization who is responsible for development and fundraising. Discuss strategies for sharing information about who volunteers and who donates. Look for overlap in these areas, and be sure to touch on both individual and corporate support.
- Research and learn about each supporting company's volunteer program. Start with their web sites, looking for statements that describe the company's philosophy on volunteerism and community involvement.
- Initiate a meeting/conversation with the person in charge of the company's community resource development department (or its equivalent) to discuss ways to more

effectively involve the company's employees. Ask about corporate leadership and skill development programs that include a volunteer component.

- Audit your current recruitment plans, campaigns and strategies, focusing on those that include corporate volunteer programs. How can you target those businesses with values that are in alignment with your organization's own? How effective are those corporate volunteer recruitment fairs you attend? Are there better ways of putting your organization's volunteer opportunities in front of employees there?
- Examine different methods of corporate volunteer recognition. Look for and create opportunities to present volunteer awards at the company instead of simply including them in the invitation list for your organization's next volunteer recognition event. Does your awards program have a "community partner" award that highlights the contributions of both time and money from this "partner" to your organization?
- Adapt your current reporting methods to include the data about corporate volunteer involvement in your programs. Report this information in a way that emphasizes the link between giving and volunteering; show overlap where relevant.

We have colleagues and other resources within reach who can assist us in growing our volunteer programs in this direction. We won't know what's possible until we ask ourselves what we can do differently.