

What Your Partners Want

Finding out what your partners want – and helping them get it – is the foundation for great relationships

Imagine a meeting with a potential business partner. You do your best to sell them on supporting your program: You explain to them the many needs of the school or college, what their support could do to improve the lives and futures of your students, and how you think they could help in terms of financial support, donations, or volunteers. They nod a lot, thank you for your time...and then you never hear from them again. What happened?

While this strategy is used quite often, it is based on two mistaken assumptions. The first is that yours is the only proposal your prospective partner is reviewing; in reality, they are likely overwhelmed by requests for support. In the same day that you made your pitch, your contact could have also heard from the local orchestra, the Red Cross, a homeless shelter, or any of a hundred different other organizations that rely on support and involvement from local businesses. None of us work in a vacuum; we all face competition in attracting support, especially during times of economic stress.

The second bad assumption is that your prospect is looking at your proposal as charity, as an opportunity to help out of the goodness of their hearts. Certainly, some are, of course; and for those that are, their choice will be made based on what the company and its employees value. Some of these relate to education, of course, such as the many banks dedicated to financial literacy; many others, however, are dedicated to causes outside of the education realm. But for those potential partners without such a strong bent, how are they to choose? In the absence of a public corporate tie to a cause or organization, there must be some other criteria involved.

If you're facing a potential partner, focusing your presentation on just the staff and the students – your needs, and your interests – will produce limited results at best: You'll get some level of support from some of these prospects, but odds are it will be limited. If you want to build strong partnerships, partnerships that last, you need to focus on something else: **What your partner will gain by working with you.**

THE BIRTH OF STRATEGIC PHILANTHROPY

Businesses have been involved in their communities, including in their local schools, for a very long time, but in 1983, something happened to fundamentally change the way in which businesspeople thought about this kind of local giving and support.

In 1983, at the request of President Ronald Reagan, a civic group in New York City launched a campaign to clean up the Statue of Liberty, which had fallen into some disrepair (100 years of tourists and New York weather takes a toll!). They approached several companies for financial support; one of these was American Express, from whom they requested a one million dollar donation. The CEO at the time blanched at the number but made a counteroffer: American Express would promote the campaign to their cardmembers and the public, and would give the Statue of Liberty campaign one cent for every card transaction, and one dollar for every new approved card application, over a three month period.

The public responded to the campaign, and American Express generated close to \$2.5 million for the project. But they also realized some significant benefits for themselves. They found that their business results went through the roof! New card applications and card charges shot up; the company's brand image improved; retailers, hotels, and restaurants that previously refused to accept the card began to take it; and even employee morale improved. In short, American Express found that by supporting a social venture, they were able to achieve business objectives – and the idea of cause marketing, and the broader concept of strategic philanthropy, was born.

Despite the fact that the first instance of strategic philanthropy occurred less than 40 years ago, the concept took hold in the business community and is now widespread, from Fortune 500 companies to locally owned businesses. They realize that their work with schools and other community partners can produce real benefits for them; in other words, they can do well as they do good.

A PARTNERSHIP, NOT A SPONSORSHIP

As noted in the example above, American Express saw great benefits from their support of a social campaign, and the realization that they could meet their own business needs while doing something good completely changed the way they engage with nonprofits. When they work with nonprofits now, they do so enthusiastically, committing significant resources, and not just as a charitable giving expectation: The benefits they get allow them to fully engage.

The same can happen with your partners. The key is to bring them into the loop at the beginning, letting them help set the outcomes (which include student outcomes, business outcomes, and educator outcomes), but also helping to design the partnership collaboratively. That's a true partnership; if instead you set the outcomes and the partnership model, and only come to them for resources, that's simply a sponsorship – another charitable obligation. They may participate, but they won't feel ownership, and the resources they contribute will be limited as a result.

Clearly, if you want a local business to support your work, you need to think about what's in it for them: How can they benefit by helping you? There are actually several established benefits your partners can realize.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT: CUSTOMERS

The first area in which businesses can benefit is in customer relations. To be clear, we're not talking here about helping them sell their products, or putting flyers in students' backpacks: We're talking instead of the many ways that business partners benefit from increased visibility, and the "halo effect" they get when they're seen as doing good in the community. Some specific benefits include:

- **Attracting new customers:** Most Americans will switch from one brand to another, assuming that price and quality are approximately the same, if the other brand is associated with a cause.

And for new and old customers alike, more than half have indicated that corporate citizenship has some level of influence on their purchasing decisions.

- **Premium pricing:** Both consumers and business decision-makers are seven times more likely to pay a premium price for products and services to a company with a strong social reputation versus one with a poor reputation.
- **Brand strength:** Multiple studies show that consumers hold higher regard for the companies and brands that demonstrate a commitment to working on social issues.
- **Positive word of mouth:** Nearly three-quarters of Americans say that a company's commitment to a social issue is a factor when deciding whether to recommend a company to others.
- **Influencing the influencers:** Evidence indicates that a company's commitment to a social issue influences the opinions of experts (including financial analysts, academics, and industry leaders) and reporting by the media.

While you can help recognize your partners through your channels (logos on banners, notices in newsletters, and the like), you should also help your business partners promote your work together through their own channels, such as in-store displays, press releases, and stories on their website. In addition to helping your partner build greater awareness for their work, you will also be building the profile of your program through their channels.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT: HUMAN RESOURCES (HR)

Whenever Career and Technical Education (CTE) educators talk with business people, the conversation quickly turns to workforce development. It's a natural fit and a strong lead topic when discussing how companies benefit by partnering with their programs.

Surprisingly, it's not the only benefit in the area of human resources – and in fact it may not even be the best one. Companies typically think about short-term outcomes, like what they can do in the next few months, and if you're asking them to work with a high school student who has to go through a two- or four-year program in order to be qualified for a job, that company could be looking at a five- to seven-year waiting period (depending when they start working with students) to see a return!

Fortunately, your business partners can start to see HR outcomes the same day they start to work with you, because their current employees benefit substantially by working with students.

Surveys of employers and employees alike find that when a company supports good causes, they see increased employee morale and reduced turnover, and when employees can play an active part by volunteering, those benefits go up even more. Additionally, a company's social reputation is a factor in attracting future employees, making it easier to recruit talented staff and reduce recruiting costs.

So by all means, talk about how your current students are their future workers; just don't overlook their current workers, and all the ways they benefit right now by working with your program.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT: PERSONAL BENEFITS

Businesses need to benefit from their support of your program, but don't overlook the human factor. Employees who get involved in your work can find that working with students is incredibly rewarding. They may enjoy seeing students' individual progress; they may be excited about teaching the next

generation about the work they love; they may feel like they're honoring a parent or spouse who teaches, or that they're "paying it back" for a teacher who changed their lives.

Some of your volunteers will also see professional benefits. Your advisory board members, for example, can network with their peers during meetings; they may be able to build skills by working on a project, like leading a capital campaign or planning a new program. They may also want to add their advisory board work onto their resume. For newer employees or college interns, volunteering may also provide them with the opportunity to develop managerial or leadership skills.

WHAT ELSE DO THEY WANT?

Companies do need to benefit from their involvement in your program. But they also need a few other things, such as:

- They need to know that their needs are heard, and reflected in the design of your partnership. If educators make all the decisions your business partners won't feel a sense of ownership.
- They need to know that you'll do what you say you'll do. If you make promises, keep them; if you set expectations, meet them.
- They need to know you're capable. Show them your track record; show them the resources and expertise you'll invest in your partnership.
- They need to know that you care about outcomes, and that you'll work with them to find ways to measure them. That includes student outcomes, school outcomes, and employer outcomes.
- They need to feel appreciated. Say "thank you" a lot, and make sure to recognize their contribution.
- They need to know what you need from them. Be specific and explicit; let them know their role in the work to be done so they can plan accordingly.
- They need for you to be easy to work with. If you make it inconvenient or difficult to work with your program or students, the relationship won't last very long.

In short, they want a good partner – someone who is a true team member, collaborating on the work and being easy to work with. Be the partner you wish you had.

HOW DO YOU FIND WHAT BUSINESS PARTNERS WANT?

You can read papers all day long on the ways in which businesses might benefit as partners, but the real wisdom lies in asking. Sit down with your potential partner to find out what they want. Ask what's happening in their business now, and what kinds of challenges they're facing. Ask what the future holds for them – are they growing, or are they seeing a wave of older employees planning to retire? Express a sincere interest in who they are and what they want to accomplish; not only will you be uncovering the information you need to build a partnership that works for everyone, you will be making it clear that you care about their return on investment – and that is the single best thing you can do to open the door for a "win-win" relationship with your future partner.

That's not to say you shouldn't do your research; you should be reviewing company websites, press releases, and articles written about them to identify their challenges and priorities. But the printed word should simply serve as context for a live conversation with someone at the organization.

ACTION STEP: TALKING LIKE A PARTNER

If you want to build a partnership, and not a sponsorship, you need to sit down and talk with your partner about your intentions. (Almost every conversation they have with a social organization is about the organization's needs and not the company's needs, so you need to let them know you want this to be different.) Here are some questions you can ask:

- Can you tell me about your business?
- What are you trying to accomplish as a business? What are you trying to achieve in the next one, three, and five years?
- What do you pride yourself on? What is the business known for? How do you want to be seen?
- How are you different from your competitors?
- What challenges does your company have?
- What kinds of things have you done with schools and colleges in the past? Was that worthwhile to you? Why did it end? What could have changed to keep things going?
- There are a lot of different ways that working with schools can benefit a company, such as building your workforce pipeline, giving employees an opportunity to volunteer with students, building community visibility, and lots of other benefits. How would you want our partnership to benefit you?
- How would you measure those benefits? What kind of impact would allow you to stay with a project long-term?
- Do you have any thoughts on desired student outcomes?
- There are lots of different partnership models out there, depending on what schools and business partners can contribute, and we want to create partnerships that work for our partners. What kind of support do you think you would want to provide? Do you have people who can volunteer, mentor, or serve as guest speakers? Can we visit your facilities, or use them for training? Do you have equipment or materials? Anything else?
- Do you have a social investment strategy? What are your current and future priorities?

It's smart to review a company's public materials, including its website, to gather as much information as possible as to their priorities, preferences, and past efforts; that will help you avoid wasting your time and theirs, allowing for deeper conversations on other important subjects.

ADDENDUM 1: CONNECTING WITH COLORADO CTE

<http://coloradostateplan.com/> is the central point for resources, policies, contacts, data, and supports for CTE in Colorado that will be helpful as you plan your employer engagement strategy. Resources on the site related to employer engagement and work-based learning include the following:

- Advisory Committee Handbook
- Data Reports
- Career and Technical Student Organizations
- Work-Based Learning
- Career Guidance

ADDENDUM 2: CONNECTING WITH STATEWIDE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Connections to educational systems and agencies is essential for compliance, but also extremely beneficial to keep up-to-date on new programs and grants.

- Colorado Department of Education (CDE)- Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness cde.state.co.us/postsecondary
- Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) <https://highered.colorado.gov/>
- Colorado Community College System <https://www.cccs.edu/>
- Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC) <https://www.colorado.gov/cwdc>; while CWDC is not an education agency, they have a number of resources aimed at developing business/education partnerships and support networks that bring together stakeholders across business, education and workforce.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed by Colorado CTE, housed at the Colorado Community College System to help Colorado CTE educators build strong and lasting relationships with employers and other stakeholders. For more information on CTE and other resources available to help you, please visit <http://coloradostateplan.com/>.



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