



The Three Factors Behind Great Business Partnerships

Most successful partnerships take three factors into account.

Have you addressed them?

Some partnership initiatives just seem to “make sense,” like the mall that offers vacant retail space to host an alternative school. These types of natural partnerships take into account three issues that influence the strength, effectiveness, and longevity of the program in question. These factors are outlined below; by considering them up front, you have a much better chance of building partnerships that last.

Market Environment

The first factor involves having an understanding of the market in which you’re working, which puts you in a position to build an initiative that speaks to the needs and interests of your constituents.

There are two primary market areas to consider:

School environment

Current happenings in a school or district play an important role in determining the characteristics of a partnership program. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the current school/district funding situation? Your focus may be different in a school facing year-over-year budget cuts compared with a school facing flat, or even growing, revenues.
- Changes in the population—What’s happening with the student population in terms of free/reduced lunch rates, English language proficiency, population size, preparedness, etc.? What about the teaching population?
- Legislative/policy changes—Think how the standards movement (1990) and No Child Left Behind (2002) have changed public education. Consider what’s next: Is the state legislature or Board of Regents talking about mandating new subjects, like financial literacy? Are they changing graduation requirements?

Community environment

Being aware of changes in your community is just as important as identifying changes in your school or district environment. A few considerations:

- Makeup of the community—Is it an affluent community with lots of stay-at-home parents? Blue collar market with both parents working? Is unemployment high or low? Is there a strong sense of civic pride, cohesion, and participation? What kind of community support can you expect?
- Workforce needs—What are the primary industries in your market, and what is the makeup of their workforce? What needs are they projecting going forward?

Understanding your school and community environments will help decide on priorities and available resources, important factors in any partnership initiative.

Community Partner's Interests

Having a sense of your community and school environments is important, but it is the interests of your partners - community and school partners alike - that will drive your partnership development efforts. While individual business partners will each have their own unique set of interests, there are some general categories to consider exploring, such as:

- Marketing—Some educators are concerned that businesses will take advantage of the relationship to market themselves, and that must be guarded against. But particularly for small businesses, community involvement is a good way to build awareness and goodwill; as long as it doesn't cross over into overt marketing (like sending coupons home to parents), there shouldn't be any problems.
- Workforce Preparedness—This is a consideration of both individual businesses and business coalitions (chambers, etc.). Businesses need to ensure that the local population includes capable and interested workers, and they'll invest a great deal of resources to make that happen. Educators, of course, should make sure that programs provide a pathway to family-sustaining careers, not low-wage, low-skilled jobs.
- Human Resources—In addition to preparing the future workforce, many businesses see the advantages of community involvement as a benefit to their employees. Staff members who volunteer on behalf of their employers have higher morale and stay with their companies longer; it's a terrific benefit at minimal cost.
- Government Regulation—Businesses in some regulated industries answer to regulators and need to show their commitment to local markets; involvement with schools is a great solution.

Education Partner's Interests

For a partnership to work, it must meet the needs of schools just as it speaks to the needs of community partners. Partnerships that fail to address schools' or districts' needs and interests have great difficulty generating support from teachers and administrators.

There are two general areas to explore when talking with teachers and administrators. The first involves those items they are specifically judged on, such as test scores, attendance, and graduation rates.

The second area relates to outcomes that are not officially reported, but that community members expect them to focus on. These may include community service opportunities, extracurricular opportunities (sports, music, clubs, etc.), career and college awareness and preparedness, or other items. A discussion with your education partners will help you to uncover what community members are expecting from their schools - and what schools are therefore striving to provide.

Of course, there are other factors that go into creating strong and sustainable partnership programs, such as an understanding of available resources, data on effective partnership models, a strong measurement/evaluation plan, and the like. But you must start with an understanding of your market environment and the needs of all partners at the table if you want to build programs that uniquely fit local circumstances.

This article was written by Brett Pawlowski and Hans Meeder of the National Center for College and Career Transitions. It is one in a series of articles and resources developed for the CTE Employer/Education Engagement Project, sponsored by the CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York.