



What's In It for Your Partner Organizations?

Attracting partners by showing them a return on their investment

It's a common scenario: you meet with a prospective business partner and do your best to sell them on your program. You explain to them the many needs of the school, what their support could do to improve the lives and futures of your students, and how you think they could help. They nod a lot, thank you for your time...and then you never hear from them again. What happened?

While this approach is common, it is based on two mistaken assumptions. The first is that yours is the only proposal that business partner is reviewing; in reality, they are likely besieged by requests for support. The other mistake is to assume they understand what's in it for them. In most cases, spelling out the return on investment (ROI) for your partner will make the difference between success and failure.

So what is in it for them? Actually, there are tremendous benefits for partners, depending on how a partnership is set up. Here are the primary areas to consider.

ROI: Customers

No one wants a partner to come blasting marketing materials to your parents and others, and in fact that approach is usually counterproductive anyway. But businesses that support community programs, CTE and otherwise, benefit greatly from awareness and goodwill, in ways like the following:

Market awareness/Attracting new customers

Premium pricing

Brand strength

Positive word of mouth

Influencing the influencers (Boosting their image in the opinions of experts - financial analysts, academics, and industry leaders - and reporting by the media)

ROI: Human Resources

Business and education leaders understand the value of a company's involvement in career and college preparedness initiatives as they relate to hiring from that targeted talent pool. But there are significant

HR benefits that apply to a company's existing workforce, beyond the students involved in such programs.

Surveys of employers and employees alike find that a company's work in the community increases employee morale, strengthens loyalty and reduces employee turnover, and that campaigns that actually provide employees an opportunity to play an active role (such as volunteering) have a greater impact on those issues. Additionally, a company's social reputation is a factor in attracting future employees, making it easier to recruit talented staff and reducing associated recruiting costs.

Increasingly, some companies are looking at their partnerships with nonprofits as an opportunity to develop skills and leadership qualities among staff members. Deloitte Consulting, for example, has even lent staff members on a full-time basis to select partner organizations in order to give Deloitte employees an opportunity to develop their personal and professional skills while benefiting their partners, and education organizations such as the National Academy Foundation have benefited in the past from corporate talent on loan to them. Surveys of corporate managers confirm that these types of arrangements have helped employees to build skills and advance professionally.

ROI: Operations

While customers and employees are important stakeholders, there are others, including investors, vendors, unions, and regulators. Research has shown the relevance of a company's social commitment in these relations as well. As an example, investors benefit from a company's social commitments, with the majority of studies conducted in the 1990s showing a positive relationship between social and financial performance. And in terms of a company's "license to operate," the Conference Board has found clear evidence showing that poor corporate citizenship tends to invite regulatory or legal sanctions that lead to negative consequences for shareholders.

ROI: Market Environment

Companies can also use their community outreach programs to improve the environment of the markets in which they operate. The career and college preparedness efforts mentioned previously fall into this category, as they are building a future pool of qualified and capable employees, but there are other ways in which companies can improve their operating environments.

Some companies have provided products and services through their public outreach efforts in order to develop markets for them. For years, the work of the Jason Foundation served as a showcase for the technical capabilities of EDS, and cable companies have provided cable television and Internet services in order to expand awareness and application of their services.

Incorporating ROI into Project Planning

Clearly there are a number of benefits that can be realized by your business partners. Partnership leaders who highlight the potential for these kinds of returns to their partners, and more importantly

are willing to structure programs to encourage these returns, will have a tremendous advantage when soliciting support.

The key is to make ROI a central component of your discussions with prospective partners. Certainly you should continue to tell the story of the good your partners can do by working with students and schools; but by also talking about the good these corporate partners can do for themselves by working with you, you'll stand apart from all the others they hear from, and you'll provide a very attractive basis for moving forward on partnership discussions.

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.