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Companies, nonprofits must understand each other

Portland Business Journal - by [Andy Nelson](#)

There I was, sipping coffee with the community relations director of a well-known Portland-based company, pretending to understand what she was saying.

It was a gray, drizzling morning at a downtown Starbucks. I was a brand new fundraiser, having punted a career as a journalist to work for a child services organization.

The community relations director was explaining her company's interest in connecting its philanthropy to building brand recognition and customer loyalty. We also need, she explained, to establish measurable outcomes for our philanthropic dollars.

As I sipped my coffee, I nodded and pretended to understand what she was talking about. The truth was, I had no idea. Nor did I have a giving opportunity that would match her interests.

"So," I said, "I guess you wouldn't be interested in sponsoring our golf tournament."

That was a dozen years ago. The corporate relations director has retired, and I've moved on with my career in nonprofit management. But the lessons of that day stay with me.

Corporate philanthropy is changing from an ancillary to a core business practice. Many companies now understand that philanthropy enhances their reputation, improves community and customer relations, and supports business goals. Research shows that corporate philanthropy improves employee recruitment and retention.

Corporations that get it -- and we have many in the greater Portland area -- have enjoyed enhanced bottom lines. Nonprofits that have adapted to the changes -- and we have many, as well -- have likewise been successful in raising corporate dollars.

That's why it's puzzling that more corporations and nonprofits have yet to adapt to what is working. Corporate philanthropy could become a force for building the economy and community life.

In the nonprofit sector, we need to continue to break from the thinking that corporations ought to respond to us, fit our needs and give to us because we are engaged in meaningful work in the community. That's no longer enough to attract significant corporate support.

Nonprofits need to align with businesses with which they share business goals, even brands. That means that nonprofits first ought to understand their business goals and their brands.

Like any business, they ought to differentiate and articulate their market niche.

Oregon Mentors, for example, inspires people to become mentors and offers support to mentoring programs statewide. The organization has clear business goals, a great brand and a solid plan for success. It forges partnerships with corporations that not only provide financial support, but results in employee mentors for the statewide programs.

Nonprofits ought to also continue to develop significant, measurable outcomes for their work. Measuring the changes in a human heart is tough. But nonprofits can find outcomes that, at least, capture in measurable terms an important impact they make on our community.

Businesses ought to give a long look to what they are doing in the community. Doing it because it's the right thing to do is a great place to start. Next, consider how a corporate philanthropy program can accelerate corporate goals. The best corporate philanthropy programs are those that meet community and business needs.

Most of us think of corporate philanthropy as cash contributions. But it also includes in-kind donations and employee volunteering. A mix of all three often provides the ingredients for a most successful effort.

Now, if only I had known enough to suggest this to my corporate friend at the Starbucks that gray morning all these years ago.

Andy Nelson is executive director of Hands On Greater Portland. He can be reached at 503-413-8901.

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