

Professional Services Firms Need to be Choosy about its Charities

By Mark Gilman

Giving back in the community is the hallmark of good corporate citizenship. But giving for the sake of giving and not giving at all can be equally horrific strategies for professional services firms of any size.

We've counseled many firms over the years regarding their charitable giving and in almost every case we've found issues with how it had been done in the past. I won't spend the limited space I have in this article explaining how important it is to give back and how important it is for a law firm's image to be seen as a community partner. I'm assuming most firms and its marketing staffs are well aware that this is a big part of "doing business." However, there are a lot of mistakes firms make in how they handle, plan and target their charitable gifts.

Planning Your "Give" and Board Participation

There are plenty of firms who write checks throughout the year based on an aggressive "ask" or a strong-armed leveraging of clients without giving thought to how the firm is perceived by the gift or if it in any way aligns with the firm business plan. In other words; how does giving to the charity help the perceived image of the firm and its business goals?

First, for those of you who serve as board members on non-profits assuming that you'll get some business out of the non-profit, forget it. Board members write checks and board members give in-kind services, but rarely if ever do board members get business from the non-profit. Some charities even have policies against giving a board member any business because of a perceived conflict of interest. If you think it's a good idea because it give you access to some other board members who might get you business in the future, or become strategic alliance partners, then by all means do that but don't pretend you've got an inside track to the charity.

So How do You Choose?

Over the years we have shared parameters with law firms to abide by BEFORE ever writing a check or sponsoring a non-profit event. Remember the alliances you make with a non-profit can greatly benefit or hurt your corporate image. So consider the following when choosing a charity to align with:

1. Does the organization have a political spin or does your involvement with them allow the perception that you are taking a political stand in the community? If so, it would be best to stay away.
2. Is there a definitive need? Does the charity really need your help?
3. Is this a cause the entire firm can feel a part of?
4. Is the charity one that your competitors are aligned with? If so, you need to find your own niche.
5. Talk to your top clients, prospects and alliance partners and find out which charities are important to their organizations or leadership.
6. Is there an opportunity for public relations? Will the charity publicize your involvement? Is the event unique enough that the media might be interested?
7. Is the charity an organization looked at favorably in the community and one that uses its resources properly? Do a Google news search and also check out www.charitynavigator.com to see how the organization is rated.
8. Will your involvement catch the attention of the charity's leadership?
9. Will a volunteer event with the charity make your employees feel that what they've done is meaningful personally and professionally?

There's a lot to talk about regarding this topic, but this guide should give you a helpful primer. And oh yeah, the attorney or accountant that wants you to write a \$250 check for their daughter's swim team? Tell him/her you completely support their writing a check out of their personal account.

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