

# Building Partnerships with Corporations

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*In the Summer 1983 (I,4) issue of THE JOURNAL, Gayle Jasso's article "In Search of Volunteers: How to Crack a Major Corporation" gave the corporate point of view of recruitment efforts by volunteer programs. The following article affirms and expands Ms. Jasso's ideas, and gives another perspective.*

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Involvement of corporations in the community has become increasingly important as organizations and agencies recognize the need for new sources of support.

The Voluntary Action Center of Fairfax County Area, Inc. (VAC) has long been aware of vast untapped volunteer resources among employees of large businesses and corporations throughout the area. At the special urging of professional Volunteer Coordinators, VAC, in conjunction with The MITRE Corporation, sponsored a one-day symposium in February 1981 for volunteer managers of human service agencies and organizations in the Washington Metropolitan Area. The subject of this symposium (held at the MITRE facility at Westgate in McLean, Virginia) was "Volunteer Managers Symposium; Building Partnerships with Corporations." In attendance were 75 Volunteer Coordinators from throughout the Metropolitan area.

The conference resulted in the establishment of a "Coalition for Corporate Community Involvement" composed of representatives from 28 state and local human service agencies and private nonprofit organizations located in Fairfax County, in conjunction with VAC. The membership of the Coalition included approximately 10% of the constituency of the Voluntary Action Center. The members decided to work together in approaching corporations in order to share resources, represent a broad range of volunteer opportunities for employees, and avoid making repetitive contacts with corporations. Because it is a non-profit corporation which provides a central clearinghouse for the development, organization, coordination, and recognition of volunteer activities, VAC was chosen by the Coalition as the proper central representative for the direction of corporations to appropriate agencies or organizations in need of the particular interests, talents, and skills of each corporation. Since the clearinghouse is normally a function of VAC between agencies and individuals, the information necessary to fulfill this purpose was already on file.

The Coalition was formed to serve both the members of the Fairfax County Volunteer Coordinators' Roundtable and corporations in the Fairfax County Area. The Coalition

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would serve members of the Roundtable by:

1. providing up to date information on corporations for agencies; and
2. informing corporations of the needs of agencies.

The Coalition would serve corporations by:

1. providing information on volunteer opportunities in the community;
2. focusing attention on acute community needs, i.e., areas in which corporate community relations support could be most effectively applied; and
3. serving as the central point of contact for providing assistance to corporations in the areas of:
  - a) informal seminars;
  - b) new employee community orientations;
  - c) pre-retirement seminars or segments of these;
  - d) public recognition;
  - e) guidance and counseling in establishing a corporate employee volunteer program; and
  - f) articles in newsletters.

## INITIAL SURVEY

The first project undertaken by the Coalition in July 1981 was a survey of the 78 largest corporations in Fairfax County. There were approximately 30 returns from the initial mailings and follow-up phone calls. In January 1982, the survey and accompanying letter were revised, and the corporations that had not responded were contacted.

Of the 78 corporations surveyed, 46 ultimately responded, larger corporations more often than smaller. Survey results indicated that the corporations' main areas of community service were: education, with performing arts a close second, followed by recreation, fine arts, health and mental health. Criminal justice was given a low priority. It was also reported that company employees are frequently recognized for achievement in volunteer community affairs

by articles in newsletters or by financial and/or in-kind service support to the agency or organization with which the employee-volunteer is associated.

The results of the survey were not unexpected or especially revealing, but this survey did fulfill its secondary purpose of serving as an introduction of the Coalition. This resulted in several corporations working with the Voluntary Action Center to create an awareness among employees and their families of the volunteer opportunities in the community. Corporate involvement has taken many different forms, depending on the needs of each corporation.

## SAMPLE PROJECTS

Programs offered by the Voluntary Action Center of Fairfax County to area corporations have included Volunteer Fairs sponsored by AT&T Long Lines, Honeywell, and MITRE Corporation and held on site at the corporations between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. These Fairs provided employees with the opportunity to find the best place in the community for their time and talents. The categories of available assignments included education, arts, recreation, health, mental health, public relations, research, counseling, administration, environmental concerns, and group activities. The Fairs were widely publicized by means of posters, flyers, and articles in the corporate newsletters.

VAC also offered a Townhall Presentation sponsored by the BDM Corporation. Employees gathered for lunch and a program on volunteerism featuring the Directors of the Voluntary Action Centers in Fairfax and Prince William Counties.

Employees of corporations have been kept informed of volunteer opportunities through articles written by the VAC and published in employee newsletters or volunteer opportunity articles posted on bulletin boards. Pre-retirement seminars have included a segment on volunteerism.

Groups of employees have sponsored parties for residents at the Northern Virginia Training Center for the Mentally Retarded, participated in the Northern Virginia Special Olympics, sponsored fundraising events for many organizations and contributed to a worthy area project instead of exchanging Christmas cards.

For eight consecutive years, Woodward and Lothrop and Germaine Monteil Cosmetique Corporation co-sponsored the Volunter Activist Awards Program of the Metropolitan Area which recognizes the contributions of outstanding volunteers in the community. In 1983, four additional corporations contributed to support this program.

In 1983 the MITRE Corporation initiated a project of crop sharing for the gardening season. Employees deposit their surplus garden products in bushel baskets located in the corporation's lobbies. The Voluntary Action Center identifies shelters and organizations in need of the food, and, when necessary, assists in the distribution. This project has since been expanded to include three corporations in the Crop Sharing Project. Continued expansion of this program is anticipated.

The Xerox Corporation hosted a memorable Christmas party for three and four year olds from the Headstart Program of the Fairfax County Public Schools.

Corporations have donated in-kind services such as typing, printing of flyers, and used office furniture and equipment; and many have made financial contributions to organizations in recognition of employee involvement in the community.

## EXPANDING CORPORATE INVOLVEMENT

While working with corporations, the Coalition discovered that effective corporate involvement required more extensive participation by individuals. This is due in part to the time it takes to develop a program

tailored to the corporation's needs. THE VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER FEELS THAT FULFILLING EACH CORPORATION'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS PRODUCES THE BEST RESULTS.

A larger umbrella organization was deemed essential by the Coalition, so the Voluntary Action Center, the Volunteer Coordinators' Roundtable, and the Department of Extension and Continuing Education, with assistance from the Center for Volunteer Development at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, united to form the "Fairfax Community and Corporate Link." The mission of the Link group was to encourage increased corporate volunteerism in order to improve the quality of life in Fairfax County through the establishment of a corporate volunteer council. Monthly meetings were held during which members of the Link group reviewed VAC's corporate survey statistics, shared ideas on the needs of the community and the most effective ways of establishing a council, and conducted a telephone survey and study of existing corporate volunteer councils.

From the council study and survey, it was learned that:

1. The majority of the Corporate Volunteer Councils were planned and organized by the joint efforts of Corporate Community Relations Directors and Directors of Voluntary Action Centers.
3. No council has been in existence longer than five years and all are finding it difficult to attract smaller companies.
4. The councils are continuing to expand their services (i.e., newsletters, volunteer awards, corporate retirement volunteer program, etc.)<sup>1</sup>

Based on the findings of the council study, which substantiated VAC's experiences in working with the corporate sector, a planning meeting has been scheduled for September 1983 to establish a corporate volunteer council in Fairfax County.

## APPROACHING CORPORATIONS

Throughout this process, VAC has continued to work with area corporations to establish trustful relationships with members of the corporate community who share an interest in volunteerism. Through research, practical experience, successes and failures, guidelines for contacting corporations with a view toward establishing effective partnerships have been developed.

As previously stated, the Voluntary Action Center feels that fulfilling each corporation's needs produces the best results. This requires an understanding of corporations in general, as well as corporations as individuals.

In general, a successful corporation is well-organized, well-managed and efficient, makes the best use of its facilities and resources (financial or human), and has carefully thought out flexible plans for the present, the near future, and the long range. As a result, it is able to improve business, increase profits, and survive in a highly competitive society.

Corporations are aware of their responsibilities to the communities in which they and their employees are located. There may be several reasons for their involvement in these communities, including their awareness of the significant cutbacks in Federal funds. Corporations--especially consulting firms and those whose existence depend wholly or partly upon the government or who are affected by government regulations and legislation--realize the meaning of this since it may be affecting them directly and/or indirectly. They are concerned with tax situations both for themselves and their employees and are concerned about recent funding cutbacks as a cause for tax increases or abandonment of worthwhile programs.

Opinion leaders across the nation, including business executives, firmly believe that the corporation must meet certain social responsibilities in addition to being an economic insti-

tution. The majority also believe that business has at least a fair amount of responsibility for assuming various social, cultural, and educational programs formerly provided by the Federal government. A 1982 study asked this question in relation to both donations and special program development.

Management desires a quality environment for employees. With the involvement of their corporations, new resources, skills and experience may be tapped to improve health care while reducing costs; the quality of education; the cost, efficiency, and safety of transportation systems; the quality and availability of suitable housing; or to assist in lowering the crime rate.

Corporations are concerned with employee morale. Corporate involvement has often been requested by employees or members of their families since it provides them with a sense of belonging to a community. For those who move about the country, volunteering may mean the difference between feeling comfortable and at home rather than feeling like a transient and outsider living in an unfriendly atmosphere. Attempts at creating a family within the workplace testify to existing loneliness. Statements supporting this reason for volunteering have been reiterated by prospective volunteers at our corporate volunteer fairs.

Both employees and corporations are concerned with the company's image. It does not hurt to be known as a "corporation with a heart," as one visitor to MITRE commented upon seeing the bushel basket for their crop sharing project.

The end result is to be emphasized. It means good business. Productive communities mean customers with purchasing power and the potential for attracting and keeping competent employees.

Keeping the reasons for corporate involvement in mind, the next logical step is how to deal with the business world.

## KNOW THE CORPORATION

What is the Company's financial situation at present? According to the Dun and Bradstreet Corporation, more businesses failed during the last week of August, 1982, than in any week since the Depression.<sup>3</sup> Forty-three banks failed in 1982. Times have been difficult for many corporations, and requesting funds or assistance may best be postponed until business improves. However, there may be a situation where this is not the case. In time of layoffs, it may be possible for a company to pay workers to work in the community (for example, to renovate city buildings) until business picks up. This saves a business the expense of firing and hiring over a relatively short period of time.<sup>4</sup>

What are the procedures for applying for funds? In some companies, there is a specific time of the year when all requests are considered and acted upon while others may act upon submissions at regular intervals. Most corporations receive thousands of requests over the period of a year. They are not interested in "boondoggles" and do not look kindly upon non-specific, poorly written, or lengthy requests. When dealing with businesses, professionalism is essential. For requesting financial support, a few clear and concise sentences stating a brief description of the agency, the amount desired, and the specific use to which the funds will be put is generally acceptable. Including percentages for the breakdown of expenditures as well as actual dollar amounts may improve results.

Decisions in major corporations are often made by one or two persons. A recently retired "decision maker" for the Gulf Oil Corporation felt that the best entrance to a corporation is through the president. In many instances, he makes the decision and is well aware of situations and causes. The majority of the heads of large corporations are from modest backgrounds and have

climbed the ladder by a great deal of hard work. Assuming that they don't understand or aren't doing anything is a mistake.

## HOW CAN YOU FIND POTENTIAL DONORS?

The Washington Business Journal is a good source of information about corporations in the Washington area. Similar publications exist in other major cities, as well as business magazines and local newspapers that report information about recently awarded contracts, and the state of area businesses, i.e. which corporations are expanding or moving, which are in bankruptcy, and the involvement of the corporations and their management in volunteer community projects.

Sources for researching the priority areas of interest of various companies are their annual reports, the business section of the library, newspapers, business journals and magazines, as well as employees at all levels of the corporation. If you know one person you have a connection. Approaching a corporation which has no interest in mental health and asking them to contribute to a new wing for the mental health facility is a waste of time. Instead, appeal to their obvious interests--at least for the initial contact.

Role reversal, or putting yourself behind the desk of the corporate executive who must keep the interests of the corporation as a priority, and thinking in terms of justifying and matching community needs may be effective. The corporation that donates millions each year to education expects to benefit from a well-educated citizenry. In this way both self-interest and the common good are satisfied. Acknowledge the company's need for efficiency and profitability while helping the corporation to understand the community's social needs and its possible role in meeting them. Develop a positive attitude to show that the agency has something to offer the corporation.

Replace the idea of charity with that of investment, particularly investment in a better community to live, work and do business.

Corporations generally prefer professional, efficient, cost-effective programs, programs from which they or their employees will benefit, and bootstrap-type programs. They believe in the adage: "If you give a person a fish, you feed him for today. If you teach him to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." Education, in the broadest sense, is a top priority for most large corporations.

### KNOW WHAT YOU WANT

Before approaching a corporation, know specifically what you want from it. Most of the time, agencies are responding to crises. While this situation cannot be completely altered, it can be improved upon by crisis prevention which understandably requires a great deal of time and planning. Learn from the successful corporation and develop a plan for the future as well as for the present. Consider anticipated needs of the agency two years or five years from now. Set goals.

Develop a plan with priorities and dreams. If a corporation were to donate \$5,000 how could it be spent most effectively? (Though this amount may appear unrealistic, it serves to stimulate the planning process and encourage the setting of goals). If a full-time staff person were to join the organization, how would this person be used most effectively?

When dealing with corporations, time is money. The person you are speaking with may be in the midst of a "fire drill" or a \$4 or \$5 million dollar project. Being specific and concise will save valuable time. The June 14, 1982 Washington Business Journal published an article on an effective written business plan which is also suitable for agencies and organizations. The plan should include:

- a description of the agency which includes an organizational chart;

- a description of the services and programs offered;
- a complete history, which includes a financial history and an outline of the growth record;
- planned detailed financial projections for 1, 3, and 5 years;
- an independent auditors review.

Companies seek an outside objective review of business plans, because outsiders can more readily identify the weaknesses in the plan. Budgeting (determining how money should be allocated) is often secondary to financing (obtaining money), because a company cannot decide how to spend money until it has the money to spend. On the other hand, investors rarely lend their money unless a company can show how the money will be budgeted.

The most important aspect of internal business planning is understanding and clearly defining the market in which a company will sell its product or service. The ability to sell is what drives everything else. For the corporation, planning involves studying its different businesses, determining which have the most competitive strength or potential, and then redistributing corporate outlay accordingly. All of this may be translated into the non-profit organization's world and will be effective and impressive to any corporation. Corporations expect service agencies to be run in an efficient, cost effective way.

When organizations begin thinking of approaching corporations, their first thought is of the business world's money; however, their most valuable resource may well be human: their employees.

Social welfare organizations are facing the severest budget cuts, especially those organizations that fund job programs, day-care centers, and other projects which are piggybacked on Federal funds. These charities frequently do not appeal to corporate donors, yet employee volunteer projects such as the examples offered by the VAC of Fairfax County may at-

tract the attention of the corporation.

When an employee of a corporation is a volunteer, satisfyingly involved in serving an organization, it is quite probable that other employees may be convinced to volunteer, too. In addition, it is not uncommon for corporations to give special consideration to those organizations with which their employees are associated when it comes to financial donations or other resources. Such personal relationships are the most effective in winning support, therefore patience and integrity in the development of personal relations cannot be over-emphasized. It may take a year to establish credibility, develop respect, and earn the confidence of a corporation. Having the top management involved and interested is a tremendous asset. This can be accomplished initially by a phone call to the secretary of the president. It is important to develop a good relationship with this person who is a wealth of information and can make contacts easy or difficult. The secretary knows the corporation, staff, departments, branches, policies, and can steer one in the right direction. The secretary will not be the ultimate "decision-maker" but can help or prevent one from making the proper contacts. Polite persistence is important here.

With success in dealing with a corporation, follow-ups and recognition are appropriate. A few sentences of appreciation of the services of an employee-volunteer may lead to further support. It is not always necessary in this circumstance to mention names; instead, include the type of service performed. Written expressions of thanks for funds received will have a positive effect, especially if a cost-effective use of the funds is mentioned. In one Fairfax County case, a note from a senior citizens group stated that the money received was used to transport seniors to volunteer activities, an ex-

ample of cost-effectiveness appreciated by business.

In summation, the most important points in building partnerships with corporations are:

1. Personal relationships are the most effective.
2. Professionalism is essential.
3. To measure a corporation for giving, put the tape measure around their leaders' heads, not their hearts.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Brooke Bright, *Research Project Report: "Feasibility of Establishing a Corporate Volunteer Council in Fairfax County, Virginia," February 25, 1983.*

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Swartz, "Corporate Social Responsibility--What Opinion Leaders Think," *LTV: LOOKING AHEAD*, November 15, 1982.

<sup>3</sup>*New York Times*, September 2, 1982.

<sup>4</sup>*Private Sector Initiatives: Alternatives for Action (NAM).*

<sup>5</sup>*Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 1982.