

It's easy to see why companies, large or small, want to partner with a nonprofit. Working with a cause partner is a great way to give back to the community at large, it projects a positive, caring brand image, and it's also good for business. According to a recent Cone Communications Social Impact Study, 93 percent of Americans say they're more likely to trust a company that backs charitable causes, and 90 percent say they'd be more loyal to that company.

Successfully working with a cause partner, however, involves more than simply selecting a worthy charity. It requires some research, lots of communications, and a real commitment to make the partnership mutually beneficial. Here are five key steps to follow to help ensure success.

1. Make It a Good Fit

Do a little research to find out what causes resonate with your customers and your employees. Shared values is a good place to start, but then dig deeper to determine if the cause partner fits the demographics and psychographics of your customers. Is there a connection with sports or athletic activities? Does the charity impact the lives of children and families? Are there educational tie-ins that can help increase awareness?

There are many worthy cause partners that would jump at the opportunity to connect with your business. Before you make a connection, make sure it will be a good fit.

2. Structure the Relationship and the Game Plan

Now that you've done your homework on the charity, consider the possibilities for your relationship. This could involve direct donations by your company, your employees and/or your consumers. It could also include "in-kind" donations that can be just as powerful. Answer this question: What does your company do, what products or services do you offer that can help support the nonprofit's cause? A good example of an in-kind donation is The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's (LLS) work with Olive Garden, which supplies pasta and beverages to students in support of The LLS Student Series program.

Work with the cause partner to brainstorm ways to get employees as well as customers involved. Educate your employees about the cause so they in turn can educate your customers. Sometimes it's preferable to ask them to volunteer their time rather than simply asking for a donation. Business departments can build teams to take part in the charity's drives or local events. This not only makes your relationship with the cause partner more meaningful, but it also builds company morale and teamwork.

3. Go National, Regional and/or Local

Depending on the size of your company and its reach, dealer arrangement or field staff, customize your communications and activations at each level to leverage your partnership. Work with the cause partner to strategize opportunities from national to local. You can even test an activation in one locale before deploying it to a wider audience.

Also keep in mind that you don't have to have a large, national company to benefit from this relationship. Grassroots activities and events are very powerful, and again, build morale and increase brand perception.

For larger companies, a partner with multiple chapters in different parts of the country can help ensure a successful roll-out. For example, LLS's 56 local chapters have been working with Subaru of America for the past two years. Building off the company's "Love Promise" campaign and working with Subaru's 600+ dealers, this successful partnership includes delivering notes of encouragement and over 30,000 blankets to patients undergoing cancer treatment in local hospitals.

4. Spread the Word and Build Involvement

Get creative! Work together to find multiple ways to announce and promote the partnership. Consider both internal and external communications, including blogs, social media, in-store displays and even, if appropriate, in-store visits. Get your company's PR and marketing teams involved in the early stages so they can prepare media kits and promotions.

Consider co-op messages in different types of media. Depending on your company's structure, you should also consider some type of incentive for your dealers, local stores or other partners to get involved. In other words, give every participant a reason to get onboard.

Don't forget the possibility of an employee or associate who is impacted by the cause. Testimonials or internal communications around that individual will help build relevance and overall involvement by your team.

5. Follow Up

Once a successful activation or campaign with your cause partner is complete, there's more that you can do to optimize its success. Gather post-campaign data, including sales results and customer comments, and share it with your partner. Schedule a follow-up meeting for a frank discussion about how the campaign worked and how it can be improved. Build on this discussion for the next campaign.

Equally as important is the need to trumpet the partnership's successes after the campaign ends. Again, get your PR and marketing teams involved to get the word out to a broad audience. All of this will not only increase awareness and your positive brand perception, but it will also set the foundation for your next campaign.

The LLS Difference

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS) can offer this advice because of our many successes partnerships with companies throughout the years. Our long-term partners include The United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Burlington, Olive Garden and Walgreens. The breadth of our activities and events, from Team In Training (TNT) athletic and endurance events to Light The Night family-oriented walks to a wide range of other events presented by our 56 local chapters means LLS has something to offer a wide range of company partners.

Perhaps all of this is best summed up by them, instead of us.

"Our collaboration with LLS has truly embodied the spirit of Subaru's Love Promise – supporting causes near and dear to the hearts of Subaru and our owners," notes Thomas J. Doll, president and chief operating officer, Subaru of America, Inc.

"We are proud to be a long-time partner of LLS in the fight against blood cancers. Thanks to the kindness of our thousands of associates and millions of customers, we have been able to raise more than \$25 million to fund research that helps to save lives," says Tom Kingsbury, chairman and CEO, Burlington Stores. Follow the five steps presented here, and get involved with a cause partner. It's good for your business, and it's the right thing to do.