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'Tis the season for giving...

by Carolyn West Price

...or so the many national and area non-profits want us to think with walks, balls, runs, fests, thons, and product sales--from wrapping paper to cookies and everything in between. With that in mind, here are some "marketing" tips for those requesting donations (the non-profits), as well as tips for those who are requested to donate (the donors).

Let's start with the cold, hard fact that non-profits are, indeed, in business. By this I mean, there should be no difference in a non-profit organization's approach to developing and implementing a marketing plan than the approach for a for-profit entity. Specifically, you'll want to create a situation analysis, set objectives, identify target markets to whom you need to communicate (not necessarily just those from whom you can get money), develop a strategy-position statement, and identify and implement tactics that create and maintain visibility and credibility.

A second key point of similarity that many non-profits don't acknowledge is competition. Yes, non-profits compete just like the rest of us. And, they compete on multiple levels--for donations, volunteers, and often for clients to whom they can provide services in order to justify their existence and continuation of grants or government funding in some cases.

Third, just like a business, a non-profit must never lose sight of the fact that it is imperative to inform the potential donors--your prospects--of the "benefits" of donating to you versus the next non-profit asking for time or money. So, how do you make your organization the one of choice for the business owners' charity dollars?

Think about what a business wants? Sure, tax deductions are nice,

but free publicity for being a sponsor or donor is always good, as it dovetails with a company's own public relations plan to give back to the community for purposes of creating goodwill.

Easy ways to acknowledge such donors at special events can be given by including donors on banners, in programs, in ads, in public announcements, and in press releases. Even a "donor" list including the companies' names may be sufficient, so not to overshadow the event's sponsors who justifiably deserve greater perks and visibility for their greater donation. There are also the usual visuals--t-shirts and jackets, for instance--that work as "gifts" of appreciation and also give the wearers a chance to let others know of their good deed.

One recent fundraiser in Howard County neglected to mention the volunteers' company names as the individuals representing those companies on their own free time were introduced, with the comment that "it would make the program too long." And, they didn't even bother to include company names in the printed program. To make matters worse, they committed the grand cardinal sin--they never even thanked the volunteers, not in person or in writing. Seems like a public relations faux pas to me.

You can't help but wonder how the volunteers feel about helping these same folks again. Now, don't get me wrong--doing good for the sake of doing good without the "what's in it for me" is fine. But, the reality of it is that a perceived win-win is even better, such as a little recognition and appreciation.

So, given this, let's turn the table: what must a business consid-



er before saying "yes" to solicitations since time and charitable budgets are limited? You must evaluate the cause and/or event on several levels: is it something I personally believe in enough to make the commitment? Is it compatible with the company's image or mission? Are there public relations benefits to this donation that will be visible to those in my target market?

Another consideration is this: where do I draw the line and say, "no" before I have no time to do anything but volunteer work or no money to run my business? Here's a tip from a long-lost friend, which I'll share for what it's worth. This entrepreneur simply advised every non-profit solicitor of the fact that he works with three charities a year and will make selection of those once a year. If the organization wanted to be considered for his donation, it would have to make the request by a certain deadline. In this way, he was in control, and the better of the non-profit marketers who clearly articulated their cause, their request, and their "visibility package" probably won his attention. Looks like a lesson for the givers and the givens alike. Happy Thanksgiving.

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