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GFC Prompts Innovation in Communication for Corporate Community Partnerships

By Clare Collins

Attracting and managing corporate investment through partnerships has become a specialised, competitive business stream for not-for-profits (NFPs).

However, according to the findings of numerous surveys both here and overseas, the flow-on effect of the global financial crisis (GFC) to the NFP sector has seen severe financial cut backs from corporate philanthropy, events and social responsibility programs (CSR). While many NFPs are hurting, a fundamental fact of CSR is that if business is unable to sustain itself, employees and other stakeholders, it is also unable to sustain the community.

Most experts agree we can expect to see corporate financial contributions continue to fall for at least another 12 months. There is no magic formula that will turn the impact of the GFC around, however within this period there exists an opportunity for corporate and NFPs to support one another to create dynamic corporate community partnerships which provide significant benefit to both parties involved.

In the search for long-term solutions there is strong evidence to suggest that both groups are firmly focused on the value of public relations as a critical tool in managing these relationships, improving brand awareness and achieving sustainable growth into the future.

Attitudes and objectives are changing and being redefined. Complacency is being replaced with entrepreneurial, strategic thinking employed to help us work smarter and discover more effective ways of doing things to ensure sustainability across both sectors. In the process, corporates must ensure their investment in partnerships delivers measurable outcomes for communities while NFPs must be mindful that their brand is a valuable commodity not to be exploited. Both must be discerning about with whom they partner and align themselves ensuring the terms of the partnership are of equal value to all parties and formally documented.

At Insight Communications we are seeing both groups review current communication policies, practices and deliverables with many concentrating on the benefits of strategic brand and communication management to maintain and maximise benefits from partnerships. Through improved public relations practice, both groups are aiming to ensure relationships provide an ethical win-win to satisfy the needs of NFPs and address a new generation of corporate partnership expectations.

In maintaining corporate partnerships, the most important element a NFP can bring to the table is the opportunity for strategic brand awareness. It always has and always will be an unequalled principle objective for many corporates looking to partner with community groups.

There are multiple case studies to substantiate this view including a recent campaign (May 09) for a national NFP which clearly demonstrated the importance of strategic communication in sustaining partnerships. The media driven campaign had multiple priorities including achieving a high level of awareness for our client to underpin fundraising initiatives. Additionally, through yielding substantial awareness of partner brands we aimed to consolidate relationships to develop greater participation by franchisees to deliver long-term fiscal benefits to our client.

The primary method was to ensure widespread media coverage of both our client and their corporate partners. Using strategic public relations, Insight increased brand awareness by more than 400% with 99% of media coverage mentioning the campaign key messages and one third of those mentioning key partners. Overall, the campaign generated more than 17 million opportunities to be seen or heard across television, radio and press nationally. Even at the height of the GFC, strategic public relations management was able to achieve unprecedented results for both our client and their corporate partners to create a win-win for all parties.

In these uncertain times as both sectors aim to stay atop the wave of the GFC, one thing is certain, the corporate and community sector must continue to support each other, working together to create opportunities for mutual gain so when the tide does turn, the corporate funds to support community initiatives will once again flow to the benefit of all.

Clare Collins, Executive Director of Insight Communications Pty Ltd is a member of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), the PRIA Registered Consultancy Group (RCG), Fundraising Institute Australia (FIA), Models of Success and Sustainability (MOSS) and the Australian Society of Authors (ASA).

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