

Building a strong partnership between business, nonprofits

BY JODI TORPEY
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Until a few years ago, most businesses probably didn't consider working with nonprofit organizations as an important part of their strategic plan. Businesses donated money, or provided in-kind goods and services, to be good corporate citizens and to take advantage of tax breaks for charitable donations.

However, the current business environment has caused companies to rethink the benefits of building relationships with nonprofits.

"I think businesses and nonprofits are becoming more strategic in the kinds of relationships they develop with each other, instead of just buying tables at events," said Christine Marquez-Hudson, CEO and executive director of Mi Casa Resource Center in Denver.

The center's mission is to advance economic success for the individuals it serves in careers, education and business. Marquez-Hudson said her organization looks at each business relationship strategically in order to develop beneficial partnerships. Mi Casa has about a dozen corporate partners it works with in a variety of ways.

A recent partnership with PCL Construction finds the senior vice president volunteering on Mi Casa's board of directors and another PCL representative joining the advisory council for green construction and energy programs.

PCL also provides in-kind help, such as renovating portions of the building, to im-



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Christine Marquez-Hudson, CEO and executive director of Mi Casa Resource Center, says businesses and nonprofits are becoming more strategic about partnerships.

prove Mi Casa's facility.

"We've just initiated this relationship, but we'll provide visibility for PCL through our website and our Be Anything Luncheon at the Denver Athletic Club on May 21," she said.

Mi Casa also has developed a relationship with Comcast in its Digital Connectors program for youth 14 to 21 and annual Comcast Cares Day.

Marquez-Hudson said the first step to building cohesive relationships with its business partners is to have a candid conversation about what each entity needs

and wants from the partnership. With Mi Casa, which serves thousands of Latinos in Denver, businesses want access to the Hispanic market, she said.

"We can help with access and visibility, market services and demonstrate to the Hispanic community they are a good corporate citizen," Marquez-Hudson said. "Our interest is twofold: to have financial resources to do our work and to receive in-kind expertise, goods and services."

It's also important to create a clear agreement about what the relationship will entail throughout the year. Mi Casa will go above and beyond that, but it's important to establish concrete expectations and a way to measure results, she said.

Marquez-Hudson said partnerships are mutually beneficial, especially for smaller companies with fewer marketing and advertising dollars. Aligning with a nonprofit can help them reach their markets without a big financial investment.

Three sectors working together

When businesses and nonprofits form partnerships, it brings together two important entities. But there's a third sector to consider in the relationship — local government.

When business, nonprofits and government entities work together, they can effect significant change, according to Roxane White, chief of staff for Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper.

White said because the three sectors have different strengths, they create synergy when collaborating.

"Businesses are nimble, flexible and they bring financial resources to the table," she said. "Nonprofits have passion for creating social change, and they can stretch a dollar further. Government has the resources to create rules and take on large projects and social issues."

One example of a successful partnership between the three sectors is Denver's Road Home, a 10-year plan to end homelessness in the city. White said working together, they helped increase funding for services and housing.

Other partnerships include the Youth Mentoring Collaborative and the Neighborhood Energy Action Partnership.

When the three sectors work together, they can leverage resources to get the biggest bang for the buck, White said.

A critical component of building cohesive relationships among the sectors is deciding together what should be the measurable results of the partnership.

For example, one goal for Denver's Road Home is that by the fifth year, there will be a 75 percent reduction in chronic homelessness in Denver. A goal for the Youth Mentoring Collaborative is that 80 percent of youth requesting a mentor will have immediate access to one.

"Collaboration is a waste of time if not driving to outcomes or results," White said. "Goals, objectives and a written memorandum of understanding need to be in place. There also has to be strong leadership."

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