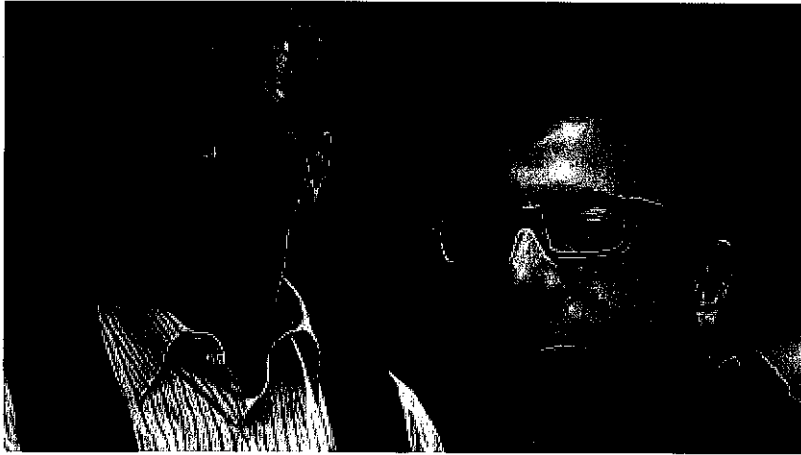


Donating talent, time to help nonprofits



By Ann Meyer December 21, 2009

When Barry Benson started as executive director at Literacy Chicago in 2008, the adult-literacy-training organization was strapped for cash.

Benson, who had a background in fundraising, knew he would need the help of volunteers because he couldn't afford more staff. He slashed \$180,000 from the nonprofit's roughly \$600,000 annual budget by moving to a smaller office, then turned to EPIC (short for Engaging Philanthropy, Inspiring Creatives), a nonprofit that pairs teams of creative professionals with nonprofits that need help. Even as small businesses cut expenses and ride out the tough economy, many are willing to take on pro bono projects for charities, said Erin Huizenga, president of EPIC. Meanwhile, many nonprofits need more help, as funding is down while demand for services is up.

After the eight-week project with EPIC, Literacy Chicago received new marketing materials and a refreshed brand image, Benson said.

"The new pieces communicate that it's a new day here, and we have a bright sunny future," he said.

The professionals involved got a chance to give back to the community while working with other midlevel creatives.

For Tim Lapetino, principal at brand design firm Hexanine, the Literacy Chicago project was personally rewarding.

"You can see the direct change (for Literacy Chicago) and know that we're enabling them to continue to do the great work that they do," Lapetino said. The project also provided an opportunity to learn alongside colleagues he hadn't met before. "Some of us have become really good friends," he said.

Huizenga, a designer with nonprofit experience, started EPIC a year ago after she saw a need for a more organized approach to pro bono marketing work. She tapped creative professionals to form the board, and it came up with the concept of creative rallies, where a group of professionals would take on a charity's most-pressing marketing project over an eight-week period.

Connecting businesses with charities that need their help isn't a new idea.

The Arts & Business Council of Chicago has been encouraging businesses to share talent and resources with arts organizations for years, said Marilyn Hoyt, a nonprofit consultant in Riverside.

Businesses often encourage employees to join a nonprofit board to gain management experience, she said. In addition, charity work helps a company's image.

In fact, reputation is the top driver of corporate citizenship, according to Boston College's Center for Corporate Citizenship, which surveyed 756 small, medium and large businesses this past summer.

About 38 percent of companies surveyed had cut back on philanthropy and corporate giving due partly to the recession. Small companies in particular reported a decreased emphasis on philanthropy, with 61 percent agreeing that corporate citizenship needs to be a priority, down from 69 percent in 2007, the report said.

"Some businesses can't give money, but they can give other support," said Gail Kalver, board member at the Arts & Business Council of Chicago, which has placed more than 1,250 business volunteers with nonprofit projects since 1985. "The volunteers are as active as ever."

The relationship between businesses and nonprofits is mutually beneficial, said Kalver, a nonprofit management consultant who is interim executive director of River North Chicago Dance Co.

For corporations, "it enriches their own report card for what they're giving back to the community." And sponsors often barter for free tickets to an arts event, which they can then use to entertain clients, she said.

Companies often support nonprofits where they have an existing relationship.

For Tom Zintl, president of Project Control, a Chicago construction-management firm, that meant joining a scholarship fundraising committee at client Elmhurst College this year.

"It's an effort to show appreciation to a college that liked what we've done and kept us in mind," he said.

The Arts & Business Council's On Board program trains and places business professionals for board service, while another provides opportunities for businesses to connect with arts organizations, Kalver said. The council's Business Volunteers for the Arts program matches nonprofits with business volunteers on specific projects.

But pro bono projects don't always go as planned, said Lisa DiBenedetto, an independent marketing communications consultant. A nonprofit client learned the hard way why it's a good idea to have a signed contract stipulating who has control of the work created, she said.

The charity accepted an ad agency's offer for pro bono creative work, but it was all done on a handshake. The agency created an edgy campaign that was not in keeping with the charity's image, DiBenedetto said.

The agency refused to make changes the charity requested, and it submitted and won awards for the work, she said.

"The agency used it for their own business needs" without regard to impact, DiBenedetto said, and it could have been avoided with a contract upfront. "You have to put protections in place. Contracts need to be signed."

Hoyt said a learning curve often exists for both parties. "It's really important to have in writing an agreement" that spells out each party's involvement, as well as who will own rights to whatever intellectual property is produced, Hoyt said. "Chances are it will be a better experience" as a result.

Misunderstandings can go both ways, Hoyt said. For example, a professional may advocate a new system and become frustrated when the nonprofit isn't willing to invest the cash to implement it.

"The business people feel their advice is not being valued," Hoyt said, but the nonprofit might simply be short on funds.