



ALLIANCES

Sue Froggatt gives advice about forming alliances to help your business grow.

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Are you asked to provide new member benefits but are short of people or expertise?

The benefits of developing alliances help you to develop new services faster and they give you access to experts and specialists with skills or knowledge that you do not have, for example in IT, manufacturing or technology. Also new partners may be prepared to carry the financial risk of a new project or bring you instant credibility in an area where you do not yet have any presence or credibility.

I have worked with several associations in the UK that have formed alliances to publish their member magazine, organise exhibitions, run award schemes, organise events and training. Other areas where associations have been successful include raising sponsorship, undertaking research projects, setting up international operations, marketing, PR, developing on-line bookstores and setting up electronic ordering.

However, before you look for partners you need to consider:

- ❏ Which types of organisations will make good partners?
- ❏ What are the critical aspects of the relationship? For example, reciprocation is one of the five key elements for the arrangement to be a 'win-win' scenario, so what do you have to offer the partnership?
- ❏ How should you structure the arrangement?
- ❏ What guidelines do you need to draw up?
- ❏ Is an internal marketing or communications plan required first? Will anyone in the association need to be convinced that this is a smart way forward?
- ❏ What are the important stages in the process of building a successful alliance?
- ❏ What is the best way to manage and maintain the relationship?
- ❏ What are the key pitfalls to watch out for? Which associations have formed successful alliances? What happened and what can you learn from their experiences?

Here are seven tips:

1. No matter how beneficial the alliance looks in theory and on paper, unless it sits well in people's minds and is warmly received by the press and public, then you will be heading for trouble. So what will be the 'perception' of this arrangement by the members and also the public? A valuable exercise to work through is worst case headline scenarios if things go wrong.
2. The ability of the partners to work together is probably one of the biggest unknowns, so it might be useful to test the relationship and commitment first by working on a smaller project.
3. Trust is the most accurate predictor of success and must come voluntarily and cannot be forced. This takes time, so this is another reason to phase in the relationship while you get to know each other and better assess the quality of your communication, the chemistry, the personalities involved and their values, the existence of mutual respect and to find out the true culture of the organisation.
4. Clarify the details. What does 'urgent' mean?
5. Set out an exit clause that allows partners to walk away with a clean break if the partnership does not work out.
6. Provide for contingencies. If emergencies arise how will they be handled? This will help you ease the fears of board members that you have thought through the full implications of the arrangement.
7. Develop a checklist of criteria to help you decide if an alliance is worth pursuing. This is because occasionally you will be approached to form an alliance and this helps you save time to decide if it is a worthwhile venture.

We are grateful to Sue Froggatt's permission to use this article. She is an independent consultant and trainer specialising in membership development. For more information visit www.suefroggatt.com

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