C onsider this scenario. At a political fund-raiser, the director of a national child-
wellfare foundation meets the executive vice president of a women’s clothing
manufacturer. The two start talking about their work. The director describes her
organization’s efforts to increase the public’s awareness of the need for early detection of
and intervention in child abuse cases. She tells of her never-ending search for funding and
the foundation’s inability to reach all the people who need to hear its message. The
manufacturing vice president explains that he has been looking for new ways to portray the
company as one that is attuned to the needs and concerns of women. Clearly, the two
realize, each organization has something very valuable to offer the other.

During the next few months, the foundation and the manufacturing company come up with
a plan for a joint campaign against child abuse. The two parties sign a contract stating that
the company will underwrite the production of three TV spots, which will run during a six-
month period. Both organizations will be identified as sponsors. More than 20 million
women are expected to see the spots; half of those women will see them more than once.
The foundation’s director and the company’s CEO are elated. Announcements of the
partnership are sent to local affiliates of the foundation, and the media give the story considerable play. The CEO delivers speeches and holds press conferences to tout the company’s new strategy and laud its new partner. The foundation’s director does the same.

Six weeks into the campaign, the directors of human rights organizations in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka hold a press conference in which they charge the manufacturer with using children in those countries as young as 10 years old to work 12 hours per day making clothes in filthy sweatshops for the equivalent of 20 cents per hour. The directors come to the press conference with videotapes that document the conditions and show the manufacturer’s label being sewn into the garments. At the end of the press conference, one of the human rights workers holds up a child-abuse-awareness poster put out by the foundation and says, “This company has joined up with a child welfare organization to make everyone believe that it really wants to end child abuse. Don’t fall for it.”

Needless to say, the campaign falls apart and the foundation’s director is devastated. But her motives in exploring this kind of relationship with a corporation were strategically sound. At a time when society is depending more and more on the nonprofit sector to provide a social safety net, nonprofit organizations themselves have been facing tough times. Although total private giving to charitable organizations, including corporate giving, rose in 1995, the long-term trend has not been encouraging. Total private giving in constant dollars grew at a snail’s pace from 1990 to 1994. Corporate giving in constant dollars fell dramatically over the same period. And planned welfare reform will reduce government spending for social services. In this uncertain environment, nonprofits must seek new sources of revenue.

The for-profit world is the most obvious and most promising place to look. In fact, I believe that in order to survive, nonprofit organizations must develop explicit ties with for-profit corporations. Instead of hoping to become the lucky beneficiaries of a company’s independent cause-related marketing campaign, such as Benetton’s ads promoting AIDS awareness or Ticketmaster’s programs to combat violence, nonprofits must enter into
cause-related marketing alliances with corporations. Such partnerships, of course, are not risk free. Nonprofits that ally with corporations may find themselves in unproductive short-term relationships and may end up associated with superficial campaigns and overpriced and inferior products and services. And, as the story of the child welfare foundation makes clear, a nonprofit may even find itself linked to a company whose business practices are completely antithetical to the nonprofit’s mission.

To a corporation, cause-related marketing is not philanthropy.

The risks, however, should not deter nonprofits from pursuing cause-related marketing alliances. Many of the risks can be avoided if nonprofits think of themselves not as charities but as true partners in the marketing effort. From the corporation’s standpoint, cause-related marketing is not philanthropy. In fact, funding for cause-related marketing programs usually comes out of a company’s marketing budget, not its corporate giving or community relations budget. Savvy nonprofit managers will approach cause-related marketing alliances with the same bottom-line mentality. They will assess their organizations’ strengths and weaknesses and understand exactly how their organizations can add value to for-profit partners. They will investigate many companies and identify those that stand to gain the most from an alliance. And they will take an active role in shaping a partnership and monitoring its progress at every stage.

How Alliances Work

The tremendous potential of affiliations between nonprofit and for-profit organizations was first recognized by American Express in 1982 when Jerry Welsh, then chief executive officer of worldwide marketing, had an idea for a campaign. The company would donate 5 cents to several arts organizations in San Francisco every time someone used an American Express card in the area and $2 every time someone in the area became a member. The campaign was brief but surprisingly successful. In just three months, American Express contributed
$108,000 to the arts organizations and saw a considerable increase in transactions with the card. The company also found that its relationships with participating merchants improved and that more local merchants decided to accept the card.

American Express deemed the campaign so successful that the company decided to try a similar program on a nationwide basis. In 1983, American Express promised to donate 1 cent for every transaction with the card anywhere in the United States, and $1 for each new card issued during the last quarter of the year, to the foundation overseeing the renovation of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. That program, too, was a great success. Use of the card increased 28% compared with the same period the previous year, and the company was able to donate $1.7 million to the renovation project.

Through a transaction-based promotion in 1983, American Express improved business and donated $1.7 million to the renovation of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

Since American Express’s pioneering ventures, the number of alliances between nonprofit and for-profit organizations has skyrocketed. Avon, American Airlines, Ocean Spray, Polaroid, Ramada International Hotels & Resorts, Arm & Hammer, Wal-Mart Stores, and many other corporations have joined forces with national nonprofit institutions, such as the American Red Cross, the YMCA, the American Heart Association, and the Nature Conservancy, as well as local agencies tackling problems in their communities. It is unusual to go into a supermarket, fast-food restaurant, or drugstore without encountering posters and other promotional materials for a social program cosponsored by one or more private-sector organizations.
When a corporation and a nonprofit organization enter into a cause-related marketing alliance, the corporation agrees to undertake a series of actions that will benefit both the nonprofit and the company. The three principal kinds of alliance are transaction-based promotions, joint issue promotions, and licensing.

Transaction-based promotions are probably the most common form of cause-related marketing alliance. In such an alliance, a corporation donates a specific amount of cash, food, or equipment in direct proportion to sales revenue—often up to some limit—to one or more nonprofits. American Express’s Charge Against Hunger is an excellent example of this type of alliance. The program began in 1993, when the company was looking for ways to motivate cardholders to use their American Express cards and merchants to accept the card. Natalia Cherney Roca, senior director of national marketing, recalls that the employees responsible for developing a new marketing program kept coming back to the successful partnership that American Express had formed with the hunger-relief organization Share Our Strength in 1988. At that time, American Express had agreed to sponsor Taste of the Nation, the largest annual food- and wine-tasting event in the United States, the proceeds of which go to SOS. Hunger relief seemed like the perfect cause for American Express to support because a large proportion of the company’s credit-card business comes from use of the card in restaurants and hotels.

As a result of the success of Taste of the Nation and the increasing strength of the relationship between American Express and SOS, American Express decided to elevate its hunger-relief efforts with the annual Charge Against Hunger program. Every time someone uses an American Express card between November 1 and December 31, the company donates 3 cents to SOS, up to a total of $5 million per year. American Express’s contributions are augmented considerably by other partners that have “joined the charge.” For example, in 1994, Kmart agreed to donate 10 cents every time an American Express card was used in its stores from November 27 through the end of the year, yielding an additional $250,000.
Other promotions during the second year of the program by the Melville Corporation, Madison Square Garden, Restaurants Unlimited, and the National Football League raised more money.

The program has been a great success for both partners. Over the past three years, American Express and other partners have contributed more than $16 million to SOS. American Express has found that as a result of the program, transactions with the card have increased and more merchants now accept the card. Furthermore, cardholders have expressed strong support for the Charge Against Hunger and greater satisfaction with American Express, and thousands of the company’s employees have volunteered their time to fight hunger.

Joint issue promotions are a second form of cause-related marketing alliance. In such a partnership, a corporation and one or more nonprofits agree to tackle a social problem through tactics such as distributing products and promotional materials, and advertising. Money may or may not pass between the corporation and the nonprofit.

A dramatic example of a joint issue promotion is Hand in Hand, an ongoing program to promote breast health that was launched in 1992 by Glamour magazine and Hanes Hosiery, and is cosponsored by the National Cancer Institute, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the American Health Foundation. The program aims to reach women between the ages of 18 and 39 through articles in Glamour, in-store promotions sponsored by Hanes, and the production of a wide range of free educational materials in cooperation with the nonprofit partners, including inserts that eventually will appear in 120 million pairs of hosiery. The sponsors hope that their target audience will not only learn about breast health but also urge their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers—women at much greater risk for breast cancer—to have regular breast exams. A study on four college campuses found that the Hand in Hand materials increased the target population’s understanding of and attention to breast health. The program will undoubtedly help Glamour and Hanes position themselves as organizations closely attuned to the interests of their target audience.
Hand in Hand, a program to promote breast health, will position the corporate sponsors as organizations that care about women.

A third kind of cause-related marketing alliance is the licensing of the names and logos of nonprofits to corporations in return for a fee or percentage of revenues. Licensing predates the emergence of cause-related marketing in the 1980s. Colleges and universities, for example, have licensed their names and logos for years. Other nonprofits are now adopting the tactic. In April 1996, the American Association of Retired Persons announced that it would begin licensing its name to health maintenance organizations across the United States.

Some nonprofit organizations have been criticized for their licensing arrangements. Consider, for example, the Arthritis Foundation, which decided in 1994 to allow McNeil Consumer Products, a division of Johnson & Johnson, to market a line of four pain relievers called Arthritis Foundation Pain Relievers. In return, the foundation would receive a minimum of $1 million per year from McNeil to finance research. Some organizations, including consumers’ groups, have argued that the arrangement compromises the foundation’s ability to give unbiased advice, a charge similar to that made recently against the American Cancer Society, which has a licensing agreement with SmithKline Beecham for its NicoDerm CQ nicotine patch. Roy Scott, the Arthritis Foundation’s group vice president for public relations, acknowledges that the arrangement benefits McNeil Consumer Products, but he says that the pain relievers also help arthritis sufferers by enabling the foundation to communicate to people whom the organization might not otherwise reach.

Critics say the Arthritis Foundation’s licensing deal with McNeil Consumer Products may prevent the foundation from giving impartial advice.
The benefits for McNeil in the highly competitive pain-reliever market are not yet clear, but initial results have shown that many more people are aware of the Arthritis Foundation as a result of the sale and promotion of the pain relievers.

The Risks to Nonprofits

Even if a cause-related marketing alliance yields only minimal returns, what is lost? How bad can the risks be? The answer is that nonprofit organizations may be putting themselves at great risk when they join forces with a corporation, even when the alliance is a great success. Managers of nonprofits must be aware of the risks in order to adopt a strategy for avoiding them.

Wasted resources.

Building a cause-related marketing alliance requires a lot of time and effort. What if the venture fails? A corporation can chalk it up to the cost of doing business. A nonprofit organization, however, which probably has a small staff and limited resources, may find that it has seriously compromised other activities, such as fund-raising, educating people about issues, and building alliances with other corporations and nonprofits.

Reduced donations.

Cause-related ventures can generate new revenues for nonprofits. But does that mean that total revenues will increase? Not if the organization’s traditional donors decide to cut back. People who used to give money to a nonprofit may decide not to if they believe that they have given enough by, for instance, using a credit card issued by a company involved in a transaction-based promotion. Individuals and foundations may reduce their donations if they think that the nonprofit doesn’t need their help anymore or if they are turned off by the nonprofit’s ties to the for-profit world. And corporations that used to support a nonprofit may take their philanthropy elsewhere if they come to believe that the organization and the issue it promotes have been co-opted by the nonprofit’s corporate partner.
But this downside is not inevitable. Studies by American Express suggest that cause-related ventures sometimes can raise the public’s awareness of a nonprofit and actually lead to increased donations.

**Loss of organizational flexibility.**
A corporation that enters into an alliance with a nonprofit organization may impose restrictions on the nonprofit. If the restrictions help ensure the expected payoff to the corporation and prevent the nonprofit from engaging in actions that could harm the corporation, they make perfect sense. Nonprofits that enter into a partnership with American Express, for instance, presumably cannot strike a deal with Visa. But suppose one of American Express’s nonprofit partners wanted Neiman Marcus to donate $10 for every coat sold in February, after the Charge Against Hunger program had ended. What if American Express accepted the arrangement only if the coat were purchased using an American Express card? A responsible corporate partner like American Express is unlikely to make such demands, but if it does, nonprofits must weigh the benefits of the alliance against possible restrictions on their own fund-raising abilities.

**Tainted partners.**
Many corporations enter into relationships with nonprofits because they want to bask in the glow of their esteemed partners. When Philip Morris spent $60 million in 1991 to sponsor an exhibit for the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights put on by a federal agency, the National Archives, the company was obviously trying to fight off its negative image and lay the foundation for its smokers’ rights campaign. The motives behind the donation were transparent, and it is unlikely that the National Archives has suffered by joining forces with a corporation whose marketing strategies many people consider evil.

Many companies hope to bask in the glow of their esteemed partners.
In some cases, however, a partnership with a tainted for-profit corporation may prevent a nonprofit from carrying out its mission. The child welfare organization described at the beginning of this article, which joined forces with a corporation employing child labor, will most likely have great difficulty collecting funds for its programs in the future. The nonprofit probably could have avoided the fiasco by conducting a thorough examination of the clothing manufacturer. But no amount of research enables a nonprofit to foresee every possible disaster.

**Antithetical Marketing.**
A corporate marketer may use tactics that conflict with a nonprofit’s image and strategy. In 1994, for example, the American Heart Association entered into an alliance with the makers of several products, including Quaker Oat Squares and Healthy Choice pasta sauce, to distribute a brochure explaining the Food and Drug Administration’s new food labels. Almost two-thirds of the brochure was devoted to coupons for the sponsoring products, and many saw the venture as a tawdry gimmick.

**Overwhelming Success.**
A failed alliance can certainly damage a nonprofit organization, but even success presents dangers. One is that the nonprofit will have more funds and more requests for the use of those funds than it can handle. That was one of the concerns that American Express had about its relationship with Share Our Strength. The infusion of money from the Charge Against Hunger program more than tripled SOS’s budget. Anticipating that SOS might be overwhelmed as it tried to allocate and monitor the new funds, American Express provided a separate endowment and helped SOS build the necessary administrative systems.

**Structural Atrophy.**
Another potential consequence of a successful cause-related marketing alliance is that the nonprofit will come to rely excessively on corporate funding. What happens if the corporation announces that it will spend its marketing budget in a different way next year and has not helped the nonprofit establish a strong base for fund-raising? In many cases, the
nonprofit will have devoted most of its energy and resources to supporting the alliance instead of exploring other potential corporate partners and increasing traditional donations. It may have let its marketing muscles atrophy instead of learning how to sustain the marketing program without corporate support. Finally, it may have relied on its partner to manage contacts with other corporate partners and may have difficulty keeping them on board if the primary sponsor decides to step out.

**Becoming a Strategist**

Some successful cause-related marketing partnerships are the result of chance encounters at social events. And some fruitful partnerships are developed because a corporate executive or board member has a personal interest in a particular problem or organization. Most alliances that are based on serendipity, however, dissolve before too long.

Nonprofit managers who want partners from the for-profit world must go out and find those partners instead of waiting for corporations to find them. They must develop a strategy that is active rather than reactive. They must become as proficient at marketing their organizations as corporations are at marketing their products and services. In effect, they must become effective strategists.

If nonprofit managers have done their homework, they will understand all the ways in which nonprofits add value to corporate partners, they will have assessed their organizations’ strengths and weaknesses, they will have scoped out corporations who might be a good fit, and they will be able to demonstrate to a potential corporate “customer” how the relationship will complement the corporation’s long-term strategy.

**What kinds of value can a nonprofit add?**

From a corporate marketer’s point of view, a nonprofit organization’s most valuable asset is its image. Many companies seeking cause-related marketing alliances hope that a nonprofit’s image will define, enhance, or even repair their own.
Consider a study carried out in the fall of 1995 by Roper Starch Worldwide for Cone Communications, a marketing and public relations firm in Boston, Massachusetts. According to interviews with 70 executives at companies engaged in cause-related marketing, the companies used the marketing technique primarily to improve their relationships with customers and enhance their reputations. It seems that the corporate marketers were right to believe that consumers respond to the halo effect. In a survey of nearly 2,000 men and women aged 18 and over conducted by Roper Starch for Cone Communications in August 1993, 31% said that when price and quality are equal, a company’s business practices influence their purchases. Fifty-four percent said that they would pay a premium for a product that supports a cause they care about, and 71% said that cause-related marketing is a good way to solve social problems. In particular, companies trying to differentiate themselves in highly competitive markets or attempting to launch a new product or service can gain a great deal from allying themselves with social causes.

A nonprofit can offer a corporation more than its image, however. When a corporation allies itself with a nonprofit, the corporation often saves on advertising and promotional costs because the alliance usually brings free publicity and many public-relations opportunities. The corporation also gains access to the nonprofit’s clientele, staff, trustees, and donors, all of whom are potential customers. Such access makes nonprofits with large memberships especially attractive to many companies.

What are our organization’s strengths and weaknesses?
A nonprofit cannot market itself successfully unless it understands exactly what it can and cannot offer a corporate partner. Managers of nonprofit organizations must ask themselves the following questions:

What is our image?
A nonprofit organization with a spotless reputation will be a valuable partner for a corporation with credibility problems. Nonprofits that have been touched by scandal or controversy will have a difficult time developing partnerships until they get their own
Do we have strong brand recognition?

Corporations that want to be recognized more widely by the public will be most interested in forming partnerships with well-known charities like the Salvation Army and the Muscular Dystrophy Association. A nonprofit that is the darling of the media makes an attractive partner. When television reporters flock to the Special Olympics, for instance, many companies would love their CEOs to be present and their logos prominently displayed.

Is our cause especially attractive to certain companies and industries?

Every local charity can argue that it seeks to make its community a better place to live and work; thus every corporation located there is a potential partner. The best cause-related marketing alliances, however, emerge when partners have complementary goals and interests. For example, the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation wanted more pregnant women to be aware of their need for folic acid, a B vitamin that can help prevent birth defects of the spine and brain. Kellogg wanted to increase sales of Product 19, a breakfast cereal rich in folic acid. The March of Dimes agreed to the use of its name on Product 19 packages in association with a message about folic acid. In return, Kellogg donated $100,000 to the March of Dimes.

Is our target audience particularly appealing to some corporations?

A company is likely to give serious consideration to a partnership with a nonprofit organization whose target audience represents a large group of potential customers. A nonprofit that focuses on childhood diseases, for instance, will find natural allies in toy companies or manufacturers of children’s clothing.

Do we promote a cause that the public considers especially urgent?
Urgent causes generally produce higher payoffs for a corporation than causes on the public’s back burner. In a recent document on cause-related marketing, advisers to the American Cancer Society urged corporations seeking cause-related marketing partnerships to ask, “How many people are touched by the cause for which the charity stands, and how strongly are they affected by it?” Some “hot” causes, however, are too hot. For example, many major corporations have shied away from AIDS-related promotions—despite the issue’s currency—because they fear that customers would be turned off.

**Do we have clout with certain groups of people?**

Some nonprofit organizations can help corporations gain access to people who influence consumers’ purchases. Nonprofit organizations devoted to medical issues, for instance, are highly regarded by health professionals. Such organizations are valuable partners for pharmaceutical companies, who depend on health professionals to prescribe their drugs but often have trouble gaining access to those crucial intermediaries.

**Are we local, national, or international?**

It is extremely valuable for the parties in a cause-related marketing alliance to have similar organizational structures and objectives. Large nonprofits that work on many issues both nationally and locally do best by seeking corporations that can simultaneously conduct national campaigns and work at the local level through divisional offices or franchisees. The National Easter Seal Society, for example, has a national headquarters and many independent local affiliates. The organization has built partnerships with companies that have the same national-local characteristic, such as Safeway, Amway, and Century 21 Real Estate, and thus has been able to raise funds nationally and encourage initiatives by local businesses. Easter Seal raised its level of support from corporations from $3 million in 1980 to $13 million in 1989.
In contrast, strictly local organizations should probably avoid a corporation whose focus is national or international. A local women’s shelter is best paired with a locally owned retailer or service company.

**Do we have a charismatic or well-known leader?**

Such a leader can guarantee instant media coverage of the alliance and its programs. He or she can also inspire the corporation’s employees to participate in the venture. A major asset that Share Our Strength brings to its partnership with American Express is its charismatic leader, Bill Shore, who appears in Charge Against Hunger ads and at events designed to increase support for the program among American Express’s employees.

**Is our organization experienced and stable?**

Corporations seeking long-term alliances will look for a nonprofit that has a long track record, sound finances, a sizable staff, and, preferably, experience as a marketing partner. Nonprofits without those credentials may have to settle for short-term alliances.

**Who are our potential partners?**

Once a nonprofit has assessed its strengths and weaknesses and has determined what it can bring to a cause-related marketing alliance, it should assemble an array of potential partners and begin a systematic investigation of each one. No stone should be left unturned. In addition to reviewing annual reports and speeches by corporate leaders, nonprofit managers must talk to as many people as they can. Board members and community leaders often can recommend possible cause-related marketing partners and provide information about them. Those people might even know a company’s CEO and other senior executives and thus may have insight into a potentially unfriendly corporate culture or a company’s plans to downsize or decrease its support for social programs.

Of course, the most important characteristic to look for in a partner is the extent to which a cause-related marketing program would complement the corporation’s goals and eventually increase its bottom line. Other features to look for include the following:
• The corporation clearly recognizes the potential value of a cause-related marketing campaign, which makes marketing the idea of the partnership to the corporation relatively easy.

• The promotion will be a logical—even essential—component of the company’s long-term marketing strategy. Partnerships that do not fit a company’s strategy and are peripheral to its core interests will ultimately seem superficial to both parties—and perhaps to the public.

• The company does not engage in any business practices that are antithetical to the nonprofit’s mission. Think again of the child welfare foundation that unwittingly associated itself with a company that did not support the welfare of children. Nonprofits must learn as much as they can about a potential partner’s ethical standards, how strictly the company adheres to those standards, and whether the company extends its ethics to suppliers and to business partners.

• The company’s senior executives are enthusiastic about the partnership and will champion it. If the CEO and other senior managers don’t think that the program fits the company’s strategy, the alliance is unlikely to last.

• The company will devote enough funds and people to the alliance.

• The corporation indicates that it is willing to stick with the initial cause-related marketing campaign for a considerable period.

• The corporation indicates a willingness to continue the partnership beyond the initial campaign.

• The corporation appears eager to involve its employees as well as its suppliers, dealers, and franchisees in the cause-related marketing program. The more ways in which the corporation is connected to the program, the more likely the corporation is to benefit from
The corporation appears unlikely to place undue restrictions on the nonprofit’s activities or otherwise interfere with its operations.

Making the Partnership Work

No matter how thoroughly a nonprofit researches potential corporate partners, and no matter how well it markets itself, a cause-related marketing alliance can fail unless both parties start by communicating clearly. In order to negotiate a mutually beneficial alliance, they must be explicit about their goals and expectations. They should spell out—preferably in a contract—the objectives of the project and how they will be measured; whether the corporation will be the nonprofit’s only partner or the only partner from a particular industry; and the resources that each party will commit and the areas for which each will be responsible.

As the project gets under way—perhaps on a test basis in one community or in a one-month trial—the partners should meet routinely to track its progress, and they should look at the program’s results as honestly as possible. Most of the executives interviewed by Roper Starch for Cone Communications in 1995 said that their companies did not measure cause-related programs primarily in terms of direct sales. Instead, the companies tracked improvements in their image and increases in customer loyalty and in the satisfaction of employees and customers. Some effects of cause-related marketing programs, such as the long-term consequences for a company’s image, are difficult to measure. And there is always the danger that either party will want to put a positive spin on soft data. A partnership will have the best chance of enduring if both sides are candid about their measures. Candor builds trust and increases the likelihood that midcourse corrections will be made in a flagging venture.
Both partners must also communicate openly and honestly with the public. Many good programs can be sabotaged if the public believes that a company is using a nonprofit’s positive image to disguise an inferior product, that the nonprofit is being manipulated by the corporation, or that the nonprofit will not actually receive funds from the program. For example, if there is a cap on corporate contributions in a transaction-based promotion, that should be clear from the start. If corporate contributions are unrelated to consumers’ actions, the public must be told.

Partners in a marketing alliance must communicate openly with each other and with the public.

Nonprofit alliances can be difficult to manage. But when they work, they can have great payoffs for both partners—as well as for the public. While a corporation is boosting its image and a nonprofit is securing crucial funds, both parties are also focusing attention on social problems that might otherwise be neglected. Cause-related marketing is about marketing, but it is also about finding new ways to improve people’s lives.

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