

Help Members Give Back and Strengthen Your Association

By Lynn Fergusson

Associations are embracing strategic philanthropy

Have you noticed increased media focus on CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility, or Social Responsibility generally? Or, more specifically, have you seen more organizations supporting charities and “doing good”? In short, it’s becoming an expectation of customers, employees and the general public, that organizations “do good”, and demonstrate that they are giving back. Think of it in your own buying habits, are you trying to buy greener, or products associated with a cause or a “good” company? A 2010 US study by Cone on cause marketing found that 85% of consumers have a more positive image of a product or company when it supports a cause they care about. And 83% of consumers want more of the products, services and retailers they use to benefit causes. But interestingly, despite the popularity of consumer voting campaigns, 61% of consumers would prefer a company make a long term commitment to a focused issue rather than letting consumers choose a short term beneficiary.

So it’s no wonder that more and more, organizations of all sizes are strategically partnering with charitable organizations that fit with their brand and culture. And not just by writing cheques - they’re involving employees, providing opportunities for them to volunteer and be involved in the organization’s giving. It’s no surprise that the Cone study also found that employees who are involved in their company’s cause efforts are much more likely to feel a sense of pride and loyalty toward their employer. This in turn supports employee engagement, retention and recruitment, while enhancing the company’s reputation.

This heightened focus on social responsibility and strategic philanthropy applies equally to associations, and many are recognizing the opportunities and benefits of giving back, strategically. Some, like the two examples that follow, have been at it for some time, but overall, it’s a growing trend that’s gaining momentum and continues to evolve. CIPH, the Canadian Institute of Plumbing and Heating, supports Habitat for Humanity Canada, providing cash and product donations, and volunteering. The International Association of Business Communicators, IABC, gives back using its expertise, through a free workshop known as “The Gift of Communication”, and the association itself has focused on becoming a socially responsible organization. While there’s no one best way to give back, strategic giving aligned with the organization, provides significant benefit to the association, its members, and the communities they are supporting.

CIPH Partners with Habitat for Humanity

The Canadian Institute for Plumbing and Heating has focused its giving narrowly and deeply, supporting a single charity, Habitat for Humanity, an organization leveraging volunteers to build affordable homes for the working poor, to break the cycle of poverty. CIPH had been randomly supporting not-for-profits until 1993 when the Board created a vision of a more focused approach. They felt it was good for the industry to be seen giving back, and Habitat was a great fit, utilizing their members' products. CIPH and Habitat have had a terrific partnership ever since.

CIPH developed a unique certificate program allowing members to pledge product and any of the 72 Habitat affiliates across Canada redeem a certificate for the product at a manufacturer or CIPH wholesaler. CIPH tries to obtain enough member pledges to cover all the homes Habitat affiliates will build over that 2 year period – clearly a great benefit to Habitat.

Beyond product donations, CIPH raises funds. Throughout “Habitat Week” member companies hold fundraisers including bake sales, car washes, and employee/customer breakfasts. This spreads awareness of Habitat for Humanity to CIPH member staff and their communities, while raising funds for Habitat. Ontario members have held a “CIPH Ride for Habitat”, encouraging the many industry motorcycle riders to participate and raise funds. CIPH also holds a gala and silent auction, held every 2 years in conjunction with an industry trade show in Toronto.

CIPH has set a \$1.75 million fundraising goal for Habitat for 2010/11. While this sounds like a big goal, Nancy Barden, Charity Manager with CIPH, says, “the real connection comes when members take their staff out on a Habitat for Humanity build site, and participate in building a Habitat home.” This hands-on experience is often alongside the families whose homes they are building. Habitat families must contribute 500 hours of volunteer time (known at Habitat as “sweat equity”) before they are handed the keys as the new homeowners, and then begin paying their interest-free mortgage. Nancy described her own first Habitat build experience, where she was able to meet the family and see the house take shape, as simply “amazing!”. To do tangible volunteer work – seeing a house take shape, and knowing that you are making a difference, forever changing the lives of that family by breaking the cycle of poverty, truly is an “amazing” experience! Many tears are shed when the keys are handed over to the deserving families, and much pride is felt thereafter, any time a volunteer drives by a Habitat home they had a hand in building. CIPH helps make all of this possible for their members, who can't help but take pride in their contribution and their association

Social Responsibility at IABC

While CIPH supports a single charity that aligns with their organization, the International Association of Business Communicators has created a unique program, the Gift of Communication, annually offering their members' communication expertise to a variety of local charitable organizations. This is a grass roots initiative, started in Atlantic Canada almost 10 years ago, out of members' genuine desire to share their expertise with local not-for-profits, where limited budgets may otherwise keep them from accessing communications expertise.

The IABC's Golden Horseshoe Chapter has been running a Gift of Communication workshop for 5 years, inviting United Way agencies to attend the workshop, meeting with communications students and professionals to discuss their challenges. The agencies leave with a host of ideas, enthusiasm for tackling their challenges, and an expanded network of communications contacts, some of whom will continue to support them long after the workshop. There's no question the agencies benefit and they make that clear to the participants and in their feedback, where they note their appreciation of the "fresh and diverse inputs", and "having help to provide resolutions to real life issues". It's also empowering for members, exposing them to different environments and challenges on the spot, and reinforcing their skills and the application of those skills outside their current role. As one participant said, "I enjoyed the real time planning – the experience is second to none!"

But what about the association, what's in it for IABC? As President Julie Freeman says, "It demonstrates to non-communicators the value of communication professionals. Members want the association to be promoting the profession. We had formed an Advocacy Committee to address this but frankly struggled with self-promotion. We found instead, that being socially responsible was a better way to promote the profession, allowing communicators to demonstrate value by what we do, not what we say about ourselves." With powerful benefits to the participants – both members and charities - and to the association overall, it's no wonder that the Gift of Communication is now being launched by IABC chapters around the globe

This is not the only way IABC "does good", however. A group of socially minded members also pushed the organization itself to be more responsible. A Social Responsibility committee is now raising awareness and providing specific, meaningful practices to demonstrate their social responsibility. As a result, the IABC has been reviewing and reducing its own carbon footprint in member communication and conferences, and shares best practices in this initiative amongst its chapters. These efforts have not gone unnoticed. IABC was asked to be an affiliate partner in developing the International Standard, ISO 26000:2010, which provides guidance to organizations of all types, to encourage implementing best practices in social responsibility worldwide. IABC is proud to have contributed to this effort. With the ISO guidelines just launched last November, it's early days on what it will mean for the organization. However, Julie anticipates it will give the IABC greater credibility and an enhanced reputation, as IABC was the only communication organization to participate, and their involvement has clearly expanded their network and raised awareness of the organization. Ultimately, isn't greater credibility, enhanced reputation, and increased awareness, just the sort of thing members want for their association.

Maybe it's time for your association to give back, strategically

Whether you're looking to increase the awareness and visibility of your association, or want to engage your members and their employees and give them pride in your association, aligning your organization with a cause or charity that fits with your industry and values can be a beautiful thing. Giving, in a way that makes sense for your organization, and "doing good" can become part of your association's culture and value to your members, as it has with IABC and CIPH. As you've seen in the above examples, it's not just about writing a cheque, and it's not about charitably supporting any who

ask...it's a strategic approach, providing a long term commitment that's good for the association, its members, and the community you support. Do your association a favour, and start the conversation now about how you might best leverage your products and/or expertise to give back, and strengthen your association in the process.

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