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Using Vendors as Partners

You have the resources use them! In these times when non profits are challenged to increase response rates, donation amounts, focus on Long Term Donor Value and cut through all the mail box clutter non profits need a team. Of budget constraints don't allow an adequate size in house staff....what they need to tap into is the tremendous talents they have in their own vendor partner team.

Building a team of experienced professionals each with their own expertise is essential to the success of most non profit organizations these days. But just as important is how the team is used. While many organizations have selected strong and talented individuals and companies to provide strategic advice, many do this only in a vacuum. With the right vendor partners and ego's set aside, tremendous ideas can be developed by bringing your partners together often to work on creative and strategic initiatives.

Time during planning meetings time should be earmarked for brainstorming..... just free rolling brainstorming. Your list broker may have some great creative ideas, your service bureau may have some great list ideas and your creative services group may have some great ideas about file segmentation. Your vendor partners have their area of expertise and experience which is the reason you hired them. But, many with 15 or more years experience may also have additional experience outside their immediate area and as well have been exposed to many other clients and projects over the years. All of this brings greater dimension to the advice they are capable of providing, but sometimes when the client does not provide this forum the opportunity is missed!

Over the years I have done this often and it is a practice for my larger clients. Four or so times a year a group of individuals from the non profit team and multiple vendor partners are brought together. This practice works best when a true team is built, only the non profit leadership can truly build the team spirit by creating an atmosphere free of competition between team members and a spirit of cooperation. All partners should be invited to weigh in on a variety of areas, the practice of open discussion and comfort level to throw out any thoughts no matter how crazy is what makes this work. When you put 6-10 experienced individuals together to brainstorm, ideas do surface. One idea leads to another and another and at the end of the day typically at least 1 or 2 new and interesting tests ideas may have formed.

In reviewing prior results as a group, again one comment spurs another's thought and strategies are formed. I can think of a number of initiatives that have been put into play

as a result of these sessions and often the idea did not come from the logical vendor partner for that particular area.

For instance for large health agency we were faced with mailing the same individuals within a few month time frame despite suppressing prior orders, because these names may have appeared in a merge 2 or 3 months prior. Little by little strategies developed to handle this and eventually as a result of one comment leading to another we give the individuals second use a new package from the first time and add a reminder message to the copy. This was one of those things that was just bounced around the room and tested and has since worked quite well.

The point is whatever the challenges; most non-profits probably have talent they are not fully leveraging to help them find solutions and better approaches. So when you select vendor partners think about the collective talent of each partner and the way this group of individuals can come together and fit on a team. You should approach this aspect in the same way you may approach hiring an internal member of your staff, when you have the right players the team is a winning team!

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