Meeting in the middle

As charities and corporates are taking a more collaborative approach, both sides need to be clear in what they want from the relationship if it is to be successful. Peter Davy looks at potential pitfalls in failing to establish this clarity, and explores how the corporate partnership model is changing.

uncertain. The Forster Company suggested charities were failing to use existing objective standards and benchmarks in determining who they partner with. Instead they were shown to often rely on more subjective evaluations, and whilst most have a written policy on partnerships this is rarely open to the public. According to Amanda Powell-Smith, a director at the company, such lack of clarity could provoke public cynicism of such tie ups, and exposes charities to more risk than necessary.

“Basically comes down to needing to have confidence in who you are and what you stand for,” explains Powell-Smith.

Failure to do so, she suggests, meant the Institute of Cancer Research was made to look hypochritical earlier this year when it turned down a £30,000 donation raised by a sponsored pheasant shoot despite supporting testing on animals. The British Heart Foundation on the other hand was able to face down criticisms of its partnership with Gala Casinos by convincingly denying any conflict of interest in receiving money from a gambling firm.

Similarity, clarity about the objectives and scope of any relationship can free voluntary groups to make risky but rewarding alliances: witness Greenpeace’s partnership with npower, a subsidiary of energy (and nuclear power) company RWE. By being clear in what it wanted from the relationship, and that it would retain its independence to lobby against the company in other areas, Greenpeace was able to play an important part in setting up the UK’s largest offshore wind farm and helping to demonstrate the viability of renewable energy.

What people really want to know is that the standards of the charity aren’t going to be compromised,” Powell-Smith points out. “That’s what they worry about.”

Unfortunately, according to Seltandir, few charities are transparent enough in their partnerships to provide that reassurance. For her research, Seltandir carried out in depth interviews with 75 people working in UK business and NGOs. According to her, many of the charities she interviewed identified a desire to change the business as motive of their partnerships, yet most must exert pressure on companies solely for their own personal gain. WWF was the only example Seltandir came across to use both private collaboration and, where necessary, public confrontation in its dealings with their corporate partner. It is also one of few whose partnership policy is freely available.

Furthermore, many of the charities were also unable to explain when questioned how the aim of influencing company policy was implemented or provide evidence of its effects.

One reason might be semantics, as Seltandir explains: “There’s a lot of rhetoric. Charities call it a partnership because it’s a fashionable term, but it’s just playing with words.” She argues that many relationships that are termed partnerships, such as charity of the year ties, are simply fundraising or sponsorship arrangements in which by far the most important thing is financial gain.

Even when the relationship is more complex, however, Seltandir says charities generally lack the capacity to have a significant influence on large corporations, so while volunteering opportunities might touch a large number of employees, company policies and culture are essential remain unaltered. What’s exacerbated by charities reluctance to work together with other groups, such as confrontational NGOs, to change the business, and companies’ tendency to choose charity partners with whom they are already ideologically close, thus minimising the partnership’s influence.

This danger with all of this is that the public are led to expect more from the relationship than it can possibly deliver. “Charities need to be able to demonstrate what the partnership achieved so that society doesn’t become cynical about these relationships,” says Seltandir. “When people see a partnership you don’t want them to think it’s just a greenwash; you want them to see that it’s important and it really is delivering change.”

More than money

One thing that might help is businesses’ increasing preference for partnerships that seem to make the business a business. According to BID’s Doherty, many are now questioning the short term relationships that selecting a charity of the year, for example, allows, and are increasingly looking for longer term partnerships that are more integrated with their business.

Software giant Microsoft is a good example. In the last three years, the company has largely abandoned its ad hoc approach to partnerships and has moved towards a global programme aligned with the company’s business: a digital inclusion scheme that sees charity partners help it provide IT training to under represented parts of the population.

Similarly, Prudential Property Investment Managers, 2005 winners of this magazine’s UK Charity Award for Corporate Community Involvement, has two main partnerships – both of which relate to its core business. Prudential Grass Roots with BTCV and Prudential for Youth with Crime concern help improve the environment and reduce crime, respectively, in areas where the company owns commercial property. This not only benefits the local population but also safeguards the value of the company’s investment. “The reason we have these is that they are directly linked to our business need and therefore our business strategy,” explains Paul Cornes, director of corporate responsibility. “That’s also why they work, because it has to be symbolic.”

That, of course, remains the key to a successful relationship – mutual benefit. As Martin Blake, head of social responsibility at Royal Mail group explains, it’s about both sides looking after their own interests. White charities should be absolutely clear about their aims, businesses should be equally robust in outlining what they want out of the relationship. Then both can see what the other is seeking. “Because if it ends up that it’s all give and one side just takes, then it’s not going to last,” says Blake. “Both have to benefit, because it’s got to be sustainable.” Few charities would disagree. After all, that’s what they’ve been telling business for years.