

Sports Sponsorships versus Community Partnerships

In a winter issue of the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, Ken Butler, COO of Aaron's Inc, wrote about the positive ROI his company has enjoyed from sports sponsorships including NASCAR, the Atlanta Dream, the annual Aaron's International Soccer Challenge, most major league sports, and several top college teams. The company is "not a sponsor just to be good guys, but because it [helps us] rise above the competition in the battle for the attention and loyalty of customers."

For the last 20 years, I have worked with companies, like Aaron's, to develop and implement social responsibility strategies and programs. Like athletic for-profit sponsorships, non-profit investments generate ROI and employee and customer excitement. However, there are additional benefits to community partnerships.

- Sponsoring like-level nonprofits costs significantly less financially.
- Reaching civically engaged audiences, who tend to be major influencers
- Working in partnership with other business leaders on issues of common interest allows professionals to build relationships and showcase their talents.
- Selecting nonprofit partners which align with your company's business strategy, available resources, employee interests, and target markets allows you to feel as local or as global as you wish.
- Developing in-kind donation programs features company products, facilitates pro bono work, and leverages existing assets (ex. office space, capital equipment, manufacturing overruns, marked-down merchandise, etc.)
- Building partnerships with customers and vendors improves the business rapport and motivates in them a greater commitment to community work.
- Connecting employees with opportunities to give and to serve shows them that their company shares their priorities and values their professional development. Besides, "feet-on-the-ground" is an ideal trust-building tool.
- Volunteering in cross-functional cross-level teams, with vendors, with customers, and with other businesspeople breeds connection and creativity.
- Even simple recycling and energy saving programs can bring a workplace together in an effort to make a difference, this, at a very low cost.

Not every company can (or should) have the depth and breadth of social responsibility programs like UPS and Coca-Cola. The key is to develop a strategy that suits your business's industry, culture, product, service, customers, markets, employees, resources, needs, and goals. If athletic sponsorships appeal to you, please look into sports events which raise money for important nonprofit causes – walk-a-thons, road races, bike tours, golf tournaments, bowling, dancing,, there is something for everyone.