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TAKING CARE OF business

True Volunteer Foundation sees massive opportunity in the corporate sector. MICHAEL PADMANATHAN, founder of the charity which is funded nearly entirely through corporate donors and operates using only volunteers and pro bono help, discusses the charity's approach to corporate partners

True Volunteer Foundation (TVF) is an international non-governmental organisation that has achieved rapid growth and has attracted nearly all its funding from the corporate sector.

At first glance TVF does nothing new; like thousands of other charities its mission is related to eradicating extreme poverty, suffering and environmental damage by empowering people through education.

The difference comes with the TVF operating model. Relying on volunteers and pro bono, TVF approaches corporates with a unique proposition: let us do the good work you want to see done.

Project-based funding

We realised that with just 3 per cent of all charitable donations in the UK coming from the corporate sector, there is a sleeping opportunity for corporate support that we could exploit.

TVF, founded in 2004, now has

more than 60 corporate donors involved in giving to the charity in one of two ways. The first is related to project-based funding to implement charitable projects.

TVF proposes to prospective clients in the corporate sector that it will use all the funding they provide on specific projects that align with the companies' business objectives. TVF essentially proposes bespoke charity projects within our fields of work, allowing sponsors to input into the projects in a way that aligns with the company's own goals and priorities. This can involve the company naming a school, feeding into the design of the school's crest and the like. Moreover, its own employees can get involved, using and developing the skills they deploy in their own line of work.

TVF has secured a number of corporate clients and supporters

in this way, particularly within the financial sector including BNP Paribas.

When we first researched the area it became apparent that many companies had a chequebook approach to charitable giving. Charity feedback from projects was poor, projects were not tied into donor business plans and subsequently funding levels were inconsistent and employees were not involved in the process. Companies would need a dedicated employee to manage the partnership – and this just couldn't be justified in most cases.

Here came the opportunity for TVF. We provided a financial model, based on volunteers, where we could tell corporate clients that every single penny flows through to the beneficiaries. Nothing is spent on wages or rent. And, critically, for all partnerships our volunteers provide first-class evaluation reports and rich media, which can be used in the company's marketing communications.

The corporate sector was extremely wary at first. They want to sit in front of professional people and have a project delivered, within time and budget, with excellent reporting and supporting media. We convinced them we would do this and do it for 'zero cost'. It was positioned as a commercial transaction; a highly beneficial one for both parties.

Pro bono products and services

The second form of funding we went after was via pro bono products and services.

The TVF corporate partner team determines which products and services we need to do our work and identifies companies which can potentially provide those. Each company is presented with TVF's vision and mission and invited to join

Pictured left:
Fenner Austin.
Pictured right:
John Mager, TVF
head of corporate
partnerships,
talking with
supporters.



a select group to help realise TVF's social objectives. Companies with excess capacity were contacted first, as working with us would have only a minimal incremental cost for them.

The main organisations targeted were landlords, technology companies and specialist consultancy firms. TVF is made up of over 100 volunteers. Some work from TVF's Soho office, which is provided on a pro bono basis by Henderson Global Investors, while others volunteer from home using an extranet that connects TVF's stakeholders and was purpose-built over 18 months by technologists, Digital Prodigy.

Policies, processes and an impact-reporting structure are strategic imperatives. Fenner Austin (pictured), a management consultant from Cranfield Trust working pro bono for TVF, works on coordinating the disparate efforts of TVF volunteers to ensure we meet targets. The Cranfield Trust is one example of many 'enabling' charities that provide pro bono services to support smaller

charities. TVF's human resources policies and procedures are also provided on a pro bono basis by consultancy Emperor HR, allowing the recruitment, induction and retention of our volunteers to be undertaken by True Volunteers.

Many charities are simply unaware of such pro bono opportunities.

In order to take advantage of such opportunities, however, it is critical to be able to effectively market the vision to the corporate sector.

Perception is everything. Principles alone are not enough. Companies want to feel the energy in what we do and be able to touch our brand. Now when we meet a bank, for example, we have professional materials and business cards that make an impact. It communicates our financial limitations as our biggest strength.

Expanding the model

TVF is expanding during the recession. The most exciting development is an offering targeted at high net worth individuals. The



proposition will focus on TVF white-labelling our charitable capabilities, allowing an individual to set up their own charitable brand. The underlying registrations, project implementation and marketing will be undertaken by True Volunteers. ■

Volunteer Gesmay Paynter went to Guatemala to help implement TVF projects. Two trips in 2010 cost her over £2,000.