

Charity a la Russe

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What makes a company get involved in charity? Many multinationals have been running corporate charitable projects for many years. Charity has become a natural part of a company's operating strategy, an effective tool of internal communication and employee involvement. For example, some companies are dedicated to supporting charitable programs that improve living conditions in places their employees live and work, so that employees can see the impact the programs are making and even participate in some projects.

In other words, while corporate citizenship is in fact a business strategy, charitable giving is a tactical tool for creating and maintaining effective relations with community, employees, NGOs and society in general. Charity is the language companies use to talk to society. We prove by actions that we care about society's most pressing needs and do what we can to participate in problem solving.

Both donors and NGOs, in Russia and other countries, publish numerous articles and essays on how to select a proper partner to implement sustainable contributions. This issue is of specific importance in Russia. At the end of the day, a knowledgeable and experienced NGO contributes tremendously to the overall project result. Charitable programs have to be run in a business-like manner, from planning to execution and reporting of results. NGO partners should be selected through the same due diligence process as your suppliers. Planning is an important part, as you need to anticipate not only the ribbon-cutting ceremony and a photo op, but have a backup plan on what to do should you run into challenges in the midst of a project. Finally, you need to ensure that the project will not only do something good for a selected few for a short period of time, but also have a long-term positive impact on the local

community. If you feel your company is too small or does not have the know-how, a possible answer is to join forces with other companies, or become a sponsor. Likewise, working with an NGO to help it attract other donors is also a great achievement.

While working in this sector, prepare for complications every step of the way from planning to reporting. Russia does not have a substantial history of corporate charity. Twenty years of market economy have contributed to the development of charity in Russia, but this area is still underdeveloped and understructured. The further you go from Moscow, the more challenging it gets. On top of that, charity is not always understood as part of business strategy. At the planning stage, you are most likely to fail to get enough information on the charitable activities of other companies in the target region, since this information is often ignored or kept secret. Business should be business in everything it does, including charity, but this attitude can be rare, and getting paperwork for a potential charitable project may turn into an ordeal. Be firm and uncompromising in selecting partners for charitable projects.

While implementing a project, the recipient may not be pleased with you being constantly engaged in the project. Your commitment may be read as being overcontrolling and mistrustful, and you will need to use all your tact and diplomacy to maintain the recipient's confidence in you and to keep the project under control. Be aware that even signing a special grant agreement does not always mean a lot to your grantee — be ready to steer the project firmly in line with your original budget from beginning to end. At the reporting stage, keep in mind that the recipient may not be able to meet the deadline, or even understand it as a concept.

After the reporting stage, you may face difficulties in communicating your project to society. Recently I received a fancy-looking newsletter by e-mail about charity in Russia. Although it was not a complete waste of time reading it, the paper lacked practical examples of good and effective project models. At the end of the report, the editor asked readers to contact him with charitable projects they might have. I did so... and was immediately forwarded to the advertisement department. Even within the expert community in this country, charity is sometimes seen as something to be sold.

There are many stereotypes about charity in Russia, in particular that companies only do charity that is close to the boss' heart, or that companies only go into charity when it is difficult for them to say "no" to a given charity. However, attitudes are changing. Mohandas Gandhi once said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Companies trying to change perceptions of the corporate-giving culture do exist. What Russia needs now is to improve the structure of corporate charity to make it more effective, and start building a network of professionals involved in the sector.

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