

PARTNERING WITH A TREE PLANTING NONPROFIT

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Introduction

There is a strong tension between 1) the tree planting nonprofits that wants to secure you as a tree planting sponsor and 2) the business or organization that wants the maximum benefit for the least amount of financial and time cost. In this paper, how to investigate, select and partner with a tree planting nonprofit is presented. There will also be a list of red flags, questions to ask and what not to do. In this way, you maximize your chances of having a terrific tree planting promotion with no problems.

PRE-PARTNERSHIP

1. You need to know some basics facts about the tree planting nonprofit industry.
 2. You need to decide if you want to sponsor (pay for) trees to be planted in the US, abroad or both.
 3. You need to decide if you are going to sponsor the planting of seedlings (baby trees) in rural locations, large trees in cities or both.
 4. If what you contribute is not tied into sales or services, then you must determine how much you are willing to contribute.
 5. You need to have a strong sense of what you are trying to accomplish with the partnership.
 6. Go to PANRO.ORG and select the three tree planting nonprofits that may best meet your needs.
 7. Study the websites of each of the three nonprofits you have selected. Take notes. Answer some specific questions from the website. Take note of the red flags.
 8. Contact each of the nonprofits *in the proper way*.
 9. Follow-up with any remaining questions and begin the partnership process.
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1. Basic/necessary information regarding the tree planting nonprofit industry:
 - Tree planting nonprofits are not interchangeable! Those that only plant trees may only plant baby trees (seedlings) in forests, large size trees in rural areas or some combination of both. They may plant only in the US, only in one, several or many countries abroad; or both US and abroad. Then there are those tree planting nonprofits that focus on planting trees as their primary activity but which also engage in such things as eco tourism, advocacy, education, fuel efficient cook stoves, selling products and providing power and sanitation to needy communities. Lastly, there are environmental organizations that engage in many environmental activities of which tree planting is only one. Those tree planting nonprofits that appear to do similar

things in practice do it differently and are very different in terms of what they offer in the partnership!

- A few tree planting nonprofits are created by cities or federal agencies. Their loyalty is strictly to the city or federal agency. They offer significantly less customer service, can be difficult to reach and usually provide zero customization. Companies and organizations are always better off working with an independent nonprofit that is experienced, ethical and a 'good fit'.
- The geographical scope as to where a nonprofit plants trees varies considerably. It may be local, regional, nation-wide, only in one-to-many countries abroad or both within the US and many countries abroad. Each location offers different environmental benefits and 'talking points'. The business or organization needs to carefully consider the pros and cons of different locations.
- Some tree planting nonprofits only plant locally, regionally or nationally within the US. Other nonprofits only plant in one-to-many non-US countries. A very few plant in both the US and abroad. Of those, it tends to be strongly one taking predominance over the other in most cases, although the tree planting nonprofit will often pretend otherwise.
- Most tree planting nonprofits tie a set contribution amount towards the planting of a tree. It can range anywhere from US \$0.10 per seedling to several dollars or even more. Generally, equatorial and near-equatorial latitudes cost the least per tree and Northern latitudes (US, Canada, Europe, etc.) cost US \$1.00 or more per seedling. There are a few exceptions though. There are several tree planting nonprofits that do not tie-in a set contribution amount per tree.
- The cost-per-tree can vary. The hard cost of purchasing and planting a seedling (often one-to-two years old) of species X will be less than that of a sapling (two-four years old) of species X, which costs less than that of a pole (older than a sapling). Fruit trees may cost more than non-fruit trees and hardwoods tend to cost more than softwoods. Some locations incur costs due to maintenance in the greenhouse, trans-planting costs (labor) and post planting watering and deer protection.
- It's a dirty secret in the industry that in most cases when seedlings are planted, they go into locations where they will later be logged. So, you need to know if the planting project you are funding is towards a no-logging location, a potential logging location or a likely logging location. Not all logging is bad or is done in the same way so that is not a deal-breaker but it is good to know the details.
- Tree planting nonprofits vary tremendously in size, how they operate, where they plant trees and most importantly, what types of tree planting projects they engage in. Some focus strictly on how many trees are planted whereas other tree planting nonprofits are significantly more focused on the environmental quality of the project rather than numbers. Unfortunately, the numbers-based ones tend to pretend that they are quality focused so as to not reduce contributions.

- When you pay the tree planting nonprofit often determines when the trees go into the ground. Most geographical locations have a certain window each year when they get planted. Except for those very few locations where trees get planted year round, assume that the tree planting nonprofit will need the funds at least several months before planting takes place. It may often be longer. In some cases, the trees are bought or seeds planted long before they get transplanted into their final location.
- When sponsoring a city tree planting event, the sponsor may need to sign a contract with the city determining when the funds are needed along with various other details. The farther out you plan an event – the better it is likely to be.
- Getting quality photo and video is difficult-to-impossible for Northern latitude seedling planting in most cases. For city tree planting events, it is usually possible to get digital picture files and HD video but it may require additional cost. For near equatorial and equatorial seedling planting, the sponsor is sometimes able to get some digital picture files, but rarely video. This reduces collateral quality. The reasons may sometimes be a lack of professionalism by the tree planting nonprofit but almost always it is due to factors beyond their control such as rampant theft, no power, bad weather for electronics (monsoons, etc.) and so forth.
- Some tree planting nonprofits have an additional charge for use of their name and/or logo.
- Some tree planting nonprofits require contracts to partner with them and others are much more casual and customizable.

2. You need to decide if you want to sponsor (pay for) trees to be planted in the US, abroad or both. Why? Of the many tree planting nonprofits out there, this greatly narrows the field as to which ones you will investigate for partnership. Only a few tree planting nonprofits plant both in the US and abroad. Generally, there are more talking points for abroad locations (particularly in equatorial and near equatorial latitudes) but some US tree planting projects have high quality talking points as well.

3. You need to decide if you are going to sponsor the planting of seedlings in rural locations, large trees in cities or both. These two types of tree planting projects each vary from each other in terms of benefits and costs. City tree planting projects – done well – can bring in tremendous positive publicity and good will. This assumes a high profile project with lots of the best local volunteers, maybe some politicians, good HD video and local press on the scene. Factors that reduce the benefits include: rescheduling the event due to bad weather, poor volunteer turnout, a low profile event, poor photo and video documentation; the press not showing up due to it being a busy news day, and so forth. You can pay less than \$8,000 per event but that is often something like planting trees at a school – very low profile in most cases.

Rural, seedling, tree planting offers benefits ranging from 'ho-hum' to amazing depending upon whom is doing the planting and where it is taking place. For example, in the US and Canada, simply replanting a forest denuded by logging is 'ho-hum' but you can also direct trees in some cases to replenish areas devastated by fire, flood or beetle infestation. As you move into near equatorial and equatorial regions, tree planting projects may do one or more of the following: dramatically improve the nutrition of malnourished children, reduce poverty, improve cyclical flooding and drought; provide fresh water for thirsty people, provide increased crop production for starving people, reduce people-killing, recurrent landslides, help save an endangered species, stop desertification, provide a source of wood for people through coppicing, increase employment, increase tourism and so forth. Some agro-forestry projects in Europe can also do good things such as increase food supply for the region, provide fresh water and so forth.

4. You must determine how much you are willing to contribute. If the funding is not tied into sales or services but is simply one or more lump sum contributions, your amount along with when it is available determines what projects you can afford. Figure US \$7,000-to-US \$21,000 per each city tree planting event; ten cents-to-one dollar twenty five cents per seedling for equatorial and near equatorial reforestation projects and one-to-many dollars for seedlings and saplings planted in both Northern latitudes or a mixture of Northern latitudes, near-equatorial and equatorial latitudes. Costs vary by location. There are of course exceptions to the above so if a tree planting nonprofit is pushing an exception, you need to scrutinize such very carefully and ask hard questions.

Some tree planting nonprofits will snow you by saying that they can coordinate a terrific city tree planting event for less than \$7,000. This is usually BS to get your money. Likewise, there are few city tree planting events that are worth over \$21,000 if you are the sole sponsor. The cost-benefit ratio tends to rapidly drop at this price point. \$12,000 per city tree planting event before the cost of advertising it is often a terrific price point (at the time of this writing: end of 2015). Remember, 92% of proposed exceptions to the above are snow and 8% are legitimate.

5. You need to have a strong sense of what you are trying to accomplish with the partnership. Here are the most common goals:

1. To help the environment.
2. To help human communities by reducing human poverty, thirst, malnutrition, saving lives, introducing modern sanitation, improving climate and providing power through the planting of trees and additional services.
3. To assist endangered animals.
4. To thank customers by tying-in the planting of trees to sales or services.
5. To thank distributors.
6. To create 'good will' in a community – say by the corporate headquarters or in the countries that one does business in.
7. To create as much positive publicity as possible.
8. To differentiate your business or organization from the competition.

9. To create or enhance your green image.
10. To target a specific demographic (ex. U.S. Latinos)
11. To reduce global warming / climate change.
12. To sponsor a high profile, city tree planting project.
13. To get the employees physically involved in a company sponsored green project.

Why is this important? Having a strong sense of what you are trying to accomplish not only specifically defines which tree planting nonprofits to consider partnering with but also reduces the likelihood that they will meet your needs rather than you meeting theirs. In addition, your predefined goals determine your strategy and costs. For example, if you place heavy emphasis on maximizing positive publicity and your budget is \$12,000 then you may direct \$1,000 towards spreading your press release through BusinessWire along with a predetermined social media campaign. The ability to receive updates, photo and video becomes more important. Now, you need to read several things before the process of finding and contacting tree planting nonprofits. Why? This will allow you to ask intelligent questions that will maximize your cost-benefit ratio. It will also alert you to when the tree planting nonprofit is trying to snow you.

Read:

http://plantit2020.org/about_industry_issues_and_concerns.html?article=industry-scams

and

http://plantit2020.org/about_industry_issues_and_concerns.html?article=code-of-ethtics

6. Go to PANRO.ORG and select the three tree planting nonprofits that may best meet your needs.

7. Study the websites of each of the three nonprofits you have selected. Take notes. Answer some specific questions from the website. Take note of the red flags found in reading

http://plantit2020.org/about_industry_issues_and_concerns.html?article=industry-scams

8. Contacting the tree planting nonprofits.

Your first contact with the tree planting nonprofit is like a first date. Both parties are sizing the other up. The nonprofit ideally wants a 'big name' client that is easy to work with and that will strongly promote the partnership. The corporate or organizational sponsor wants a highly professional nonprofit that is able to excellently meet their objectives at an excellent cost-benefit ratio.

Before Contact

To maximize the cost-benefit ratio in your favor, you need to have a number of questions answered. Below, is a sample list of questions that may need to be modified based upon 1) your goal for the partnership, 2) what the website presents and 3) what, where and how the tree planting nonprofit get's the trees planted.

1. What is the name of the person in charge of corporate partnerships? How is this person contacted?
2. Where do they plant the trees? What are the benefits to the environment, animals, people, etc.?
3. What are the costs? Do they charge extra for the use of their name or logo? Are there minimum amounts?
4. Do they have a posted or printed 'Code of Ethics'?
5. What else do they do besides plant trees?
6. Are there any employees or activities that could be embarrassing or cause a negative backlash?
7. Are they a completely independent organization or do they have ties to a city, state, government or any other agency?
8. Do they do any type of advocacy? If so, what?
9. Are they on the charitynavigator.org or similar charity checker websites? If not, why?
10. How do sponsors know that the trees have been planted?
11. Have they been audited?
12. What ways do they publicize the partnership?
13. When do the trees get planted?
14. Can we get photos and/or video? Does it cost extra?
15. Is there a volume discount?
16. Is the website up-to-date? If not, what needs revising?
17. Are the programs as represented on the website fully accurate or are there any changes I need to know about such as one location changing?
18. What is coming up in terms of programs that is not mentioned on the website?
19. Among all of the tree planting nonprofits, who stands out as your strongest competitor?
20. What are your competitive advantages compared to the other tree planting nonprofits? Why would someone pick you as opposed to another?
21. What is the process for a company or organization to become a sponsor or partner? Do you have a set contract?
22. What is the turnover like in your organization?
23. Can we visit the tree planting location?
24. Are there any competitors that you admire?

Comments Regarding the Above Questions

#2 relates to your goals

#4 is not a 'deal-breaker.' Almost none do.

#5 helps determine their focus

- #6 - #8 partly determine potential negative backlash
- #9 helps with due diligence. Private foundations are not allowed on charity check websites so that should not count against them.
- #10. No decent answer. You don't. They will lie and say otherwise.
- #11. Audits can be superficial or exhaustive. Simply saying you have been audited thus is meaningless.
- #12. Unless you are a mega-donor and huge name, consider the typical publicity by a tree planting nonprofit to be fundamentally worthless. All will deny this but it is true. Budget for a BusinessWire press release and a social media campaign.
- #13 This varies by location and when they receive the funds. Assume within one year of paying.
- #14. In many places, assume no photo or video. There are cost, labor, safety, theft, electricity, lawsuit, insurance and monsoon issues in various locations. Of those locations that do provide such, assume that the quality may range from great to beyond abysmal in quality. Sometimes, you can get a custom sign. As about costs and availability for photo, video and signage.
- #16-#18 Very important questions
- #20 Critical question
- #21 Important question

Now, you want to know specifically how much you have to contribute, when the money will be available, what your goals are for the partnership, a good sense of what the tree planting nonprofit does and what questions you have unanswered.

So, who makes the first contact? The best person is the decision-maker in charge of the promotion. Why? When we talk to that person, we know that it is a serious inquiry and we will treat him or her like visiting royalty. They know what they want, what they will spend, when the money is available and what questions to ask. The worst decision for both parties is when the business or organization finds a low-level person and 'gifts' them the assignment to 'Contact a bunch of tree planting nonprofits and come up with a bunch of written proposals from each one.' This is a guaranteed disaster. When we or any tree planting nonprofit receives the call from someone who has no idea how much their group wants to spend, when the money is available, what the objectives of the group are and simply wants us to create proposals at different price points, we know that this is a waste of everybody's time because the potential partnership is not being taken seriously. It also wastes more time than otherwise time as the lackey has to go back and forth, asking questions to his or her boss, asking the tree planting nonprofit silly questions and getting clarifications, etc. So, the takeaway is that if a business or organization wants to maximize the cost-benefit ratio of a partnership with a tree planting nonprofit, the decision-maker should be the contact person. Less time wasted and greater success in the end.

First Contact By Phone/Email

While contact by telephone is recommended, some prefer to initiate contact by email. Let's look at what elements an excellent first contact call or email contains and why.

1. Full contact information: name, title, company, physical mailing address, website address; telephone and email.
2. What the company does.
3. Partnership goals
4. How much they want to contribute and when the funds would be forthcoming
5. Where their clients are geographically
6. Target demographics

Here is an example of an excellent first contact email of which would also be part of an initial conversation:

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Dear World Trees,

My name is Mr. Dan Smith and I am the Vice President of Marketing for Wisdom Foods; an international distributor of certain foods from parts of Africa (predominantly South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya) the Middle East (predominantly Syria, Iran, Israel) and India. We would like to partner with a tree planting nonprofit where we provide funds to plant trees in Africa, the Middle East, India and the U.S. Our estimated contribution amount would be \$20,000 per year distributed quarterly, but this may increase over time depending upon company growth. Our goal for the partnership is to generate positive publicity towards our customers and employees (African American, Middle Eastern and Indian customers along with our employees in upstate New York). Who is the person at World Trees I can discuss partnership possibilities and how would I contact him or her?

Sincerely,

Dan Smith
V.P. Marketing
Wisdom Foods
149 Monolith Rd., Ste. 13
Dave, New York 00257
(101) 555-1212
Dans@WF.com
WisdomFoods.com

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Now contrast the above with calls we periodically receive:

Dear World Trees,

I work for a very large and prestigious company that wants to give a heck-of-a-lot of money to a tree planting nonprofit to plant trees. Can you please write up proposals at three different price points and fax it to: 101-skr-wyou?

Thanks!

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Red flags from the tree planting nonprofit's perspective:

1. You will not give us your company name
2. You will not provide us with the amount you want to contribute
3. The contact person knows next-to-nothing about what your goals are, how much you want to spend, the tree planting industry but asks that we spend time writing proposals at different price points
4. You want special privileges
5. You only care about price
6. You confuse us with other tree planting nonprofits
7. You clearly have not looked at our website

9. Questions to Ask and the Partnership Process

There are a number of questions that you should ask every tree planting nonprofit. Some additional questions should be asked if there is important information missing or incomplete from their website. Other additional questions make come up based upon how they respond to your initial questions. So, any list of questions provided in this paper is incomplete based upon circumstance.

Once you reach the individual in charge of corporate and organizational relations (or however they are titled), here is a list of recommended questions to ask. After that will be comments as to why certain questions are important and what to expect.

1. Is your website completely up-to-date and if not, what needs to be changed?
2. What are the basic costs for planting the trees?
3. Are there additional costs such as the use of your name, using your logo, creating custom signage or getting photos and video of the tree planting?
4. Is custom signage and getting photos and video available? When would such be available to us?
5. Whom have you partnered with from our industry?
6. We want to be unique in our industry for this type of promotion. Do you have any current clients from our industry or are you in discussion with any

- possible clients from our industry? How do you handle multiple clients from the same industry?
7. After we send a check, what types and frequency of communication can we expect? Do you give updates? If so, how frequently?
 8. How do we formally create the partnership? Do you have a standard contract or is there another process?
 9. What tree planting nonprofit is your biggest competitor?
 10. How do we know that the trees get planted?
 11. In what specific ways do you publicize the partnership?
 12. If you are out sick, on vacation or leave the nonprofit, who would I talk to?

Comments

#1 is important as websites in this industry are often not up-to-date as they could be. You need the most up-to-date information about present and future tree planting projects.

#2 and #3 are obviously important; you want to know your costs. Additional costs are often not on the website so you need to ask.

#4 is a difficult issue. There are many legitimate reasons why certain parts of the world do not allow for photo and video regarding seedling planting. Assume that the US and Canada is a no-go for these and the rest of the world ranges from maybe to yes. There may be exceptions but they are rare. Custom signage can happen in some places but again, this is not something that can be relied upon. Just assume that in general, photo and video collateral will be absent or when present, may be of poor quality.

#5 & #6 is important. If you are trying to distinguish yourself from the competition and you are the second company in your industry to be currently doing this, you are old news. So ask.

#9 is a good question to ask as the response tells you how open the nonprofit is about the industry. Openness is a good quality. If they only trash competitors, they will hide their own flaws. If they have positive things to say about certain competitors then they are likely to be more honest with you.

#10 has no good answer. The correct and explicitly honest answer is that 'you don't'. It is to be asked to see how the question is answered. For example, one group may say that people regularly go down and visit our greenhouse and planting locations (this tells you that they are planting trees and have nothing to hide during a visit) for those locations that allow for such, that they have been audited, that they have an excellent reputation, etc. These types of answers build trust.

#11 is tough. Tree planting nonprofits are not marketing, advertising or PR firms. Quite honestly, they tend to deeply suck in these areas, although they will strongly protest otherwise. Budget for BusinessWire or PRWire. Mention on their website is insignificant. Galas are insignificant. Create a social media campaign.

CONCLUSION

To maximize your cost-ratio benefit, first determine your budget, availability and goals. Second, go to PANRO.org and pick three tree planting nonprofits that may be a match. Study their websites. Third, contact each tree planting nonprofit in the proper way mentioned above. Ask the questions on the template but modify them based upon website content and how recently the website has been updated. Your goal is to determine how well each nonprofit will meet your goals for such a partnership while resisting the nonprofit's goal of getting you to support what they do.

Remember the following:

1. No single tree planting nonprofit is the best fit for each company or organization
2. Each tree planting nonprofit has its own strengths and weaknesses
3. All of them will suck when it comes to providing photos and video for seedlings
4. They run the gamut from running casually to 'super-corporate'. There is no correlation between that and quality.
5. Most tree planting nonprofits personnel are underpaid and understaffed. We also have to deal with government agencies that are underpaid and understaffed or people out in rural areas of other countries that may be in touch every several weeks or so. As a result, things run a little slower than much of corporate America. Be patient.
6. Parts of this article might be contested by other tree planting nonprofits. That's fine. Plant-It 2020 has the long and strong reputation for telling consumers the 'hidden truths' about the industry. It's your choice whom to believe. Just remember that Plant-It 2020 is pushing to be skeptical, not get scammed and to ask the hard questions. Do the math.
7. There is a lot more advise and if you want to get into greater detail into maximizing your cost-benefit ratio without a sales pitch or advertising strategies for tree planting partnerships (they vary) then please contact Michael Thau at Plant-It 2020 at (303) 221-0077 or at plantit@mac.com