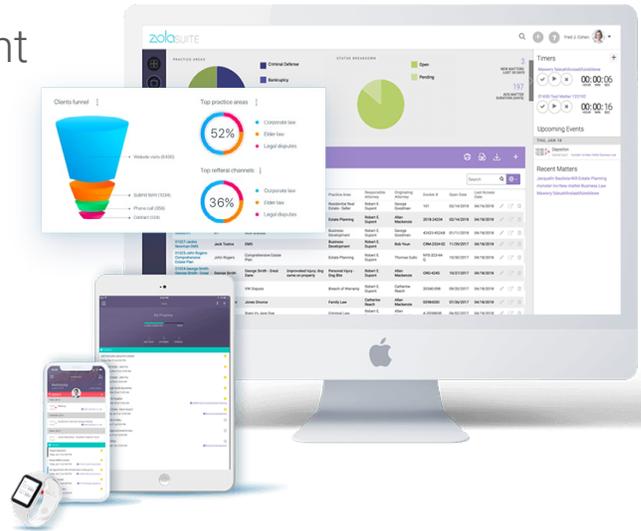


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The Top 5 Tips for Sponsorships and Charitable Contributions

Spending other people's money can make people quite generous. Frivolous, even. And unless a firm has a detailed policy for how its donations are to be evaluated and approved, oversight is exceedingly difficult.

“

Drastically reduce the number of charities and select a small handful where they can really make a difference.”

This means that the partners can easily say “yes” to almost anyone or anything. Every favored client or hot prospect’s random pet project. Print ads in their kids’ school and religious-institution programs. It’s reactive, not strategic or calculated to accomplish any particular goal. All that hard-earned money just gradually dissipates.

I get this “charitable contributions” question a lot from law firm clients. What I suggest is that they start winnowing the legitimate commitments from requests from those where people simply want to donate to their favorite causes using someone else’s (i.e. the firm’s) money.

Yes, I know that sometimes big clients squeeze you to support their favorite causes. Some of that is inevitable but, candidly, that’s client-relationship management, not charity. And don’t buy into a warm prospect’s hint that they just might consider hiring you very soon if you donate to their cause — you don’t need to buy your friends.

LAW FIRMS SHOULD DECIDE HOW TO INVEST CHARITABLE DONATIONS

Rule 1: The lawyers should have skin in the game.

That is, the firm will only commit to spend 50 percent of the requested payment, i.e., we’ll match a lawyer’s personal out-of-pocket contribution. If a lawyer is not committed enough to spend their money, then don’t spend firm resources. I’ve seen where this immediately cut the number of causes supported by 50 percent, and the wasted dollars by 75 percent.

Rule 2: They must hold a leadership position.

Giving away money is just too easy, we want to get more people actively volunteering.

Rule 3: Support fewer causes, bigger.

I have worked with firms that donate more than \$100,000 per year but do so on literally hundreds of charities. Drastically reduce the number of charities and select a small handful where they can really make a difference. That is, rather than giving \$500 each to 200 different charities, I'd rather they donate \$100,000 to one truly worthy group, or \$50,000 each to two. Create some actual impact.

Rule 4: Support smaller organizations. Get the banner on the building.

This way, you can do some real good while also supporting your marketing. Get your name prominently displayed in association with the charity. It's not unethical to seek a return on these dollars. The biggest companies unabashedly measure the ROI on their donations.

Reconsider your contributions to large, well-funded organizations like the Red Cross or the United Way where your donation will be a small drop in a massive bucket. Less well-known organizations tend to need the money more, and you can see directly where your money is going and the tangible results they achieve.

For example, Boston litigation firm DeMoura Smith helps fight childhood poverty locally by supporting Cradles to Crayons' "Gear Up for Winter" initiative, buying 102 winter coats for these children. DeMoura Smith's Managing Partner Ken DeMoura said he "prefer[s] supporting groups like Cradles to Crayons where a small firm like ours can make a bigger mark than we can with the larger nonprofits. With local charities we are more engaged, we can volunteer our time as well as our money, we can be creative in stretching the giving, and generally help in both direct and indirect ways."

Rule 5: Choose organizations that support your brand.

Some years ago, we rebranded Goldberg Simpson, one of Louisville's most dynamic full-service law firms. The tagline we'd designed for these aggressive, entrepreneurial lawyers was "A Law Firm That Really Moves." The firm had to find local organizations or events whose missions supported this brand message and enlist the participation of its personnel to help identify relevant causes. They had to find some worthy charities that also in some way really moved.

Instead of sprinkling their charitable dollars across a vast array of charities, they eventually settled on two where they could make an impact: 1) the local triathlon and 2) the Moscow Ballet, which was bringing the *Great Russian Nutcracker* to town. They could be a principal sponsor of both, generating valuable free advertising and city-wide visibility and goodwill. Thousands of Louisville triathletes ran through the streets wearing Goldberg Simpson T-shirts. And the firm got sizable free publicity alongside the *Nutcracker*, including print ads, radio spots and hundreds of free tickets to the ballet.

The firm donated most of the *Nutcracker* tickets to the local children's hospital, enabling sick kids and their grateful families to see the show. It garnered free publicity for that too, and still had enough tickets left over to send the firm and its clients to the ballet, hosting a pre-show party.

Without spending a single dollar more than a ballet-themed print ad and a logo, the firm saw a dramatic public relations boost. Plus, firm morale soared, because their people could see that the firm had been integral to the success of real events that meaningfully helped their community.

An additional benefit of this strategy is that it helps your lawyers graciously decline future requests. No one likes to look cheap or uncharitable, but visibly supporting something enables them to say, "Well, I'd truly like to help but, as you know, our firm spends our charitable dollars supporting X Charity." It sounds entirely reasonable and gets the lawyers gently off the hook. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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