

Case Study: Lions Club International Foundation

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Published: Jul 05, 2007

It should be no surprise that an organisation funded by business people for business people is highly rated in a poll of business partners. Lions Club International Foundation ranks at the top.

One explanation for its popularity and influence is history. Ever since 1917, Lions clubs have been expanding across the US and around the world, bringing together business men and women committed to change in their communities through fundraising programmes and volunteering.

Another factor is the organisation's sheer size. Lions clubs claim 1.3m members in 200 countries - outranking Rotary, Kiwanis and other similar associations. That has allowed them to generate \$56m in income a year.

"The fact that we have been able to stay around for a long time and continue to progress and raise millions of dollars is testament to what we do," says Lisa Hellman, development manager for North America and Europe.

She also stresses the importance the organisation gives to regular communication with its members, through magazines and its website, "to showcase where the money has gone".

Lions Club's predominant programme focus - the fight against preventable blindness - dates to 1925, when Helen Keller, the early campaigner for the deaf and blind, addressed its convention in Ohio, challenging the Lions to become "knights of the blind in this crusade against darkness".

In 1968, the year of her death, the Lions formally created the International Foundation, with a remit to help tackle global causes and more local challenges too big for individual clubs to take on alone.

The foundation's first grant was \$5,000 to address the consequences of flooding in 1972, and to date, it has given out \$583m, becoming a significant international humanitarian organisation. It is active in work with the elderly, homeless and children in crisis; youth development; disabilities; and disaster relief.

But blindness prevention remains the foundation's principal focus, boosted by the launch of its SightFirst programme in 1990, which has spent \$202m for 841 projects in 90 countries.

The money has provided 7.1m cataract operations, 80.5m treatments for river blindness, upgraded 325 eye centres and trained 305,000 ophthalmologists.

Much has been done in cooperation with corporate partners, including a 15-year link to Merck, the pharmaceutical company which donates its drug Mectizan for river blindness. Other important long-term links have been established with Johnson & Johnson, Eli Lilly and Allergan.

A more recent logistics partnership, the creation of Lions Clubs Lens Finishing Labs, allows Essilor to supply lenses and equipment at cost, train Lions Clubs members to make new glasses, and find customers to purchase recycled glasses.

Now it is in the process of raising \$150m for SightFirst II, a new programme designed to help reduce the risk of preventable blindness rising from 37m to 74m people worldwide by 2020.

But Ms Hellman stresses that there is still room for improvement in its partnerships with companies. They have traditionally come to the foundation, which she wants to see taking a more active effort in establishing and fostering long-term links.

"Very often the benefits to our partners have been haphazard," she says. "Now we are thinking more about branding and PR. We are looking at recognition events at our annual international convention, and trying to be a better steward and just a little bit more professional."

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