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MINDING YOUR BUSINESS

Minding Your Business: Rivals become collaborators to help clients, save money

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By Ann Meyer | Special to the Tribune
April 20, 2009

Nancy Block and two partners hope to do for the egg donor market what the Multiple Listing Service has done for real estate: combine listings from different agencies on a single Web site to offer a one-stop shop for clients looking for the best match.

Block, who owns Center for Egg Options in [Northbrook](#), teamed up with Chicago competitors Robin von Halle of Alternative Reproductive Resources and Nazca Fontes of ConceiveAbilities to launch Donor Network Alliance in March. The new for-profit company is built around a Web site, [donornetworkalliance.com](#), that makes it easy for would-be parents to find information on egg donors recruited by agencies throughout the nation.

"We're trying to help out our clients by working together to share donors," Block said.

The alliance ultimately should bolster marketing efforts and best practices, and clients won't have to peruse multiple Web sites for the latest donor information.

"We heard this call, 'Help us streamline this process,'" Fontes said. "We found there was a great deal to be learned by having an open line of communication with each other instead of being fierce competitors."

While the egg donor agencies are for-profits, more non-profit organizations also are combining forces to improve their cost-effectiveness. The trend began before the recession, but with the economy pounding endowments, corporate contributions and individual donations, charities have more reason than ever to consider alliances and other cooperative arrangements.

"That's forcing non-profits to merge," said Jean Butzen, president of Mission Plus Strategy Consulting in [Evanston](#).

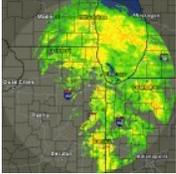
About 30 agencies are part of the 5-year-old Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County, which works to prevent homelessness and serves the homeless through shelters and other supportive housing.

"We can do that better together than separately," said Jennifer Hill, executive director of the alliance, based in Westchester.

Besides doing more advocacy, the alliance can attract more funds than any single agency is likely to get on its own, Hill said. This year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development provided \$8.5 million for supportive housing in Cook County, with the alliance administering the process for local agencies.

"The new funding is dependent on our meeting HUD's expectations," Hill said. That

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includes tracking results with a homelessness management information system, which HUD began requiring in 2004. The system is too expensive for many local homeless shelters to buy individually, Hill said.

In addition, the alliance recently received \$150,000 from The Chicago Community Trust's Unity Challenge, a two-to-one donation match intended to provide funds for charities that have seen demand rise and contributions decline due to the recession.

For efficiency's sake, major funders often prefer to give a larger sum to a collective than lots of little grants to smaller charities.

"We use far less of our own resources by giving it to a few agencies that we trust than to try to manage those 20 to 30 agencies ourselves," said Jim Lewis, senior program officer at The Chicago Community Trust. Working with an alliance also expedites the funding process, he said.

"In an emergency situation, we're trying to get the money out as quickly as we could," he said.

Joining forces to better serve the neediest members of society might seem like a no-brainer, but collaboration can be challenging, Butzen said.

"It's a cowboyish culture" for some non-profits, she said. "We go out there and create these organizations and feel like it's us against the world."

Over time, however, social entrepreneurs must learn to partner with others to be successful, she said.

Eight established human services organizations have formed the Back Office Collaborative, which provides joint purchasing of utilities, telecommunications and business supplies and services and ultimately strives to consolidate human resources and accounting services to save about 10 percent, or \$5 million a year, in shared purchasing and administration, said David McConnell, co-chairman of the group's operations and finance committees and executive vice president of Kids Hope United, one of the charities in the collaborative. Other participants are the YMCA, YWCA, Metropolitan Family Services, Casa Central, Chicago Commons, ChildServ and Youth Guidance.

Still, it has taken longer than expected to realize savings. "It has proved to be elusive, but there's still a faith that the savings are attainable," McConnell said.

In the for-profit world, some agencies need time to get used to the concept of a collaborative business, said Block, of Donor Network Alliance. Some egg donor agencies have asked Block, "How can you work together? How can you be friends with each other if you're competitors?" she said.

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Block and her partners believe there's plenty of business to go around. Their Web site ultimately should attract new clients to their individual agencies by becoming the go-to resource to find egg donors.

Before organizations combine, they should explore the following, Butzen said:

- Are their missions aligned?
- Do they have similar cultures? For example, is their decision-making hierarchical or process-oriented?
- Do they share a vision that excites them enough to justify the effort required in joining forces?
- Is the sum of what you are creating together greater than what either entity could create on its own?
- What can each party bring to the partnership that will enhance the alliance?
- Who will lead the combined entity?

Any one of those questions can be a deal-breaker if groups can't agree on how to merge practices and philosophies, Butzen said. To successfully collaborate, it helps if you keep your eye on the big picture or the goal you are trying to accomplish.

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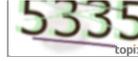
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