

Nonprofits Are Investing Time and Money With Recruiters to Find the Best Trustees

By Holly Hall

A growing number of nonprofits are hiring headhunters or taking other steps to recruit strong trustees.

The Los Angeles Regional Food Bank put a spin on that approach by hiring a local public-relations executive to help connect the group with influential people who can serve on its board and provide other support when the charity needs a hand.

In the past 13 years, the group has attracted 20 new board members, paying \$1,500 a month for up to six months at a time, which pays for the services of the consultant, Carl Terzian, who moderates events for people with an interest in fighting poverty and hunger.

Mr. Terzian, who has spent four decades placing executives on charity boards as part of his company's public-relations work, taps his contact list of 15,000 names to figure out who might be a good fit for the charity.

He then picks 15 to 25 executives to gather for a meal and asks each guest to bring along enough business cards for everyone.

One by one, the executives introduce themselves by talking about what Mr. Terzian calls "the front and back of the business card."

The front of the card describes their professional lives, he explains, and as each person also describes his or her personal interests and pursuits, guests use the back of that person's business card to make notes.

After each guest has talked, Michael Flood, the food bank's chief executive, describes the charity's work and the type of board members and other resources it needs.

Mr. Flood and his colleagues then follow up with everyone, although he says a few people stand out at every meeting as the most likely new trustees.

Dennis Winston, a lawyer, joined the food bank board after attending one of its breakfasts and eventually became chairman. He now serves on an advisory committee.

"Meeting people at the food bank sparked my interest in helping," he says. "I got what they were trying to do."

Networking Events

Mr. Terzian, who says his approach could be adopted in other cities, places about 500 people on charity boards every year and has organized networking events for about 2,500 nonprofit clients and an equal number of corporate clients in his career.

For the past seven years, the Union Rescue Mission, in Los Angeles, has paid Mr. Terzian \$1,800 per month, plus another \$800 to \$1,000 for food, to organize monthly networking lunches for about 10 local business leaders.

“We measure every year to make sure it is a worthwhile investment, and it has been,” says the Rev. Andy Bales, the rescue mission’s chief executive. The arrangement, he adds, has benefits beyond recruiting trustees.

When the rescue mission confronted stiff opposition from residents who didn’t want its new transitional housing facility in their neighborhood, Mr. Bales says, the charity prevailed because influential business leaders who had attended the lunches wrote 1,500 letters supporting it.

The events have also attracted several new donors, he says, including a family foundation that made a million-dollar grant and a woman who designed and donated a \$50,000 rooftop playground for the charity’s family facility.

The networking events, Mr. Bales says, “create a buzz of support in the business community.”