



The Secret to Continuous Innovation

Source: Blue Avocado is the educational arm of Ani-rrg nonprofit insurance firm which provides coverage exclusively for nonprofits. They have been partners since we assisted Senator Bob Graham when he supported the act of congress that created Ani-rrg.

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Everyone wants to innovate, but very few of us have the time and energy to do so. But what if there was a way to add value despite limited resource?

Let's be honest—you probably don't even have time to read this article, being tempted to skim for the nuggets that matter most to you. But what if there was a way to add value despite limited resources? The answer is simple: **innovate through partnerships.**

That's exactly what we have done at The Luke Clinic, a free prenatal medical clinic for expectant mothers and infants up to 12 months. With one location in Detroit and one in Flint, we have found that our patient care is only as good as our partnerships.

It's tempting for nonprofits to network out of need: budgets are always tight, staff is usually tired, and fundraising often feels like a fight. But reactionary networking will only get us so far. It's strategic networking—the intentional and purposeful pursuit of relationships—that builds healthy, thriving, and well-resourced organizations.

Here's how to make strategic networking work for you:

1. Block Your Calendar

Reserve chunks of time in your calendar that are specifically dedicated to networking, and intentionally seek out opportunities to fill those slots. This holds you accountable to making networking a priority each week.

2. Identify Points of Commonality

If I'm going to pursue a networking relationship, it needs to check one or more of our clinic's focus areas (healthcare, counseling, education, activism, fundraising, programming, and social determinants of health).

Finding these common points can take time, but you can start by searching your areas of interest on LinkedIn as well as looking at other nonprofits' mission statements to identify where your values might align.

3. Inventory Your Potential Connections

Look for relationships on different levels: national, regional, and local. Start by paying attention to who is being recognized and talked about on the ground floor. Connect with professional or interest-based groups.

While networking for the Luke Clinic, I joined the National Association for Free and Charitable clinics as well as a similar regional group, both of which provide free resources for organizations like ours. Although joining these groups may come at a financial cost, you do get access to a contact directory for networking meetings along with other valuable resources at your fingertips.

4. Connect

It can feel time-consuming to reach out for networking meetings, which is why I use a script for the first touch point. For your script, consider including what you can offer your potential partners: your common

points of interest and passion, your vision for meeting the felt needs in the community, and how partnering can get you closer to that vision.

If you're feeling stuck on how to begin this email, you might consider looking at these [4 Email Templates to Make Networking Way Less Awkward](#).

5. Diversify Your Touch Points

The setting for every meeting doesn't need to look the same. Take stock of all of your options—phone, coffee, lunch, or even Zoom—and mix it up. Balance what's best and convenient for potential partners with what you want to get out of the meeting.

Remember, the more common points of interest there are, the more energy you should consider investing. For example, if you want someone in another organization to consider becoming a board member, you might invest more time and energy into the meeting.

6. Be Open

Keep an open mind with the direction of where the conversation can go. To be open, you might look for the following:

1. **Inspiration.** Being around someone with passion and purpose will renew your vision. When you're an executive director, others often look to you to provide inspiration, but this is an opportunity to be poured into before you pour out.
2. **Growth.** Oftentimes these conversations stretch me to consider new ways of doing things, push me to address something I've been avoiding, and challenge me to check my own assumptions. Our organizations grow as much as we allow ourselves to grow, and therein lies the tension—when we're tired and overwhelmed, we need others to come alongside. Partners can give you the shot of energy to innovate.
3. **Complementary win-win.** When both sides gain from a partnership, we can also be vulnerable with each other in our struggles, celebrate the victories of our peers, and collaborate to expand offerings through partnership.

7. Look for Partnership Potential

A networking conversation transitions to a partnership when mutually beneficial opportunities arise. Look for complementary solutions to problems on both sides of the table.

Say, for example, that you are part of a nonprofit that works to promote children's literacy. Of course, you'd probably already have partnered with at least one school and maybe even the local libraries. But what if there was an afterschool program that was also looking to expand?

By suggesting that your nonprofit work with their organization, you both might be able to come up with a solution that will better serve the community, possibly just by increasing the number of children both of your organizations are able to serve.

8. Follow-up

Always circle back to seal the connection. You can do this with a thank-you letter, a memorandum of understanding, a board member recruitment notification, or by sending and receiving referrals.

[Download our memorandum of understanding template](#)

Building Partnerships in Real Life

When the Luke Clinic opened its second location in Flint, I started with one connection—a nurse who worked in the local hospital facilitating a program we partner with in Detroit. She wanted to partner with us again, so she referred me to an administrator in the Labor and Delivery unit of the hospital who was incredibly supportive of our work. Because of their support and connections in the community, our Flint location was able to open in less than one month!

In turn, the Labor and Delivery administrator referred me to several other community leaders. Eventually, the community leaders invited me to join a regional practitioners' meeting where I was able to present the vision and mission of our organization.

This meeting was full of people who worked in the area of early intervention for children at risk—not my typical peer group. But gaining partners in this field proved to be a huge benefit to my patients who struggle to find services and support for their children.

Furthermore, the regional practitioners' meeting provided me with a county-wide resource list and more invitations to speak at other locations to other groups. I ended up with a huge network of incredible people who were so supportive of our work and sought to add value by partnering with us to provide programs, resources, and volunteers.

I was amazed by their commitment, passion, and depth of experience! It gave me so much hope for the city of Flint and started my work there on such a high note.

Networking the Needs of Others First

Nonprofit people like us are the best suited for networking because what we do is inherently focused on others. While return on investment can be financial, it can also look like energy, inspiration, and increased offerings for your organization through partnership.

We shouldn't go into a networking meeting with a transactional mindset because our work is not transactional. As such, we must network in a way that leads to innovative partnerships.

At the end of the day, nonprofit networking requires patience, consistency, and generosity from both sides of the table.

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