

Business Rx: Does DC Diaper Bank need a change (in emphasis)?

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The entrepreneurs

When Corinne Cannon had her first child in October 2009, she quickly realized the stresses and expenses that come with a baby. She counted herself lucky that she and her family were financially secure, but started thinking about many low-income families who often aren't as fortunate.

Cannon wanted to help these families and started investigating programs in which she could get involved. She was shocked to learn that federally funded programs do not include assistance to pay for diapers, an expense that can easily total more than \$100 each month. Another shock: The Washington region had no diaper bank to consistently serve families in need (the closest one was in Pennsylvania). Cannon enlisted the help of her brother, John Cannon, a recent MBA graduate, and in October 2010 they launched a nonprofit, the DC Diaper Bank.

The pitch

Corinne Cannon

“A lot of families are using one disposable diaper for an entire day, but infants need 10 to 12 per day. That leads to a series of health problems – diaper rash, infection — and could lead to abuse. We launched DC Diaper Bank to help families in need. We have a Web site, a Facebook page and Twitter accounts to help spread the word about our mission.

“Already, we’ve forged a partnership with the Capital Area Food Bank, the area’s largest food pantry distribution network that serves communities throughout the region. We signed an agreement with them in February and they will be doing the storage and distribution of the diapers we collect to the smaller food banks and community-based organizations in their network.

“We want to ensure when we start providing diapers to an organization, we can provide them on a consistent basis. Initially through our partnership with Capital Area Food Bank, we’ll be supplying diapers to eight organizations — three in D.C., three in Maryland and two in Virginia. We’re hoping to get the distribution system up and running by July, but before that we’ll be providing each organization with 1,200 diapers to track how many they give out and where they are going to create a base line of their needs.”

John Cannon

“One of our major challenges is creating a reliable stream of revenue, both monetary and diaper donations. Some of our other issues are developing a communications strategy to community partners, corporations, donors and other stakeholders. We also need to think about how we track and measure our results, and then

communicate them.”

The feedback

Melissa Carrier, executive director, Center for Social Value Creation

“Think back to the crux of the problem: Why do these families not have adequate access to diapers? This is a policy issue — the safety nets we have for society don’t allow diapers to qualify. Instead of only addressing an immediate need, how can you get to the root cause of the problem and what role could your organization play in advocacy? I know that’s not the way you designed DC Diaper Bank, but my suggestion to nonprofits is to always think about what you’re really trying to accomplish. I firmly believe that a nonprofit’s goal should be to eliminate the fundamental problem its trying to address, not go into perpetuity like a corporation.

“As you think about your model, look for partners to help on the advocacy side. You’re perfectly situated in Washington, D.C., to serve as a convener to bring diaper banks around the country together to try to make changes in policy to fix the problem.

“In terms of revenue, tap into the region’s very active ‘mommy’ groups, such as DC Urban Moms and Dads. You’ve got the right ingredients to get these groups involved, perhaps to the degree that we think to include a diaper drive component to support DC Diaper Bank at baby showers and naming celebrations. You might also forge partnerships with local hospital maternity wards to spread your message to new parents. Think about whom you can partner with that not only has a natural affinity to your mission but also can provide a more consistent donation pool.”

Reaction

Corinne

“There is something called the Baby Caucus being led by a congresswoman from Connecticut, and I have her chief of staff’s e-mail and I’ve been meaning to make that connection. We’ve also reached out the congressional women staffers to see about holding a diaper drive. I hear exactly what you’re saying and long term I do see us looking toward that advocacy role. But I think we need to build our foundation before we can get there. Long term, we want to be ‘out of business.’ I want this to no longer be an issue for poor families.”

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