

The Sage Partners

Barbara Beck and Sharon Gallagher 23 January 2013

Describe your first meeting and your first impression of the person who you have ended up partnering with.

Barbara: I was just leaving the University of Pennsylvania, where I was director of news and public affairs, to work at Pew as a public affairs officer. Sharon called to welcome me and invite me to a meeting. I was used to working in places where you were lucky if someone acknowledged you at the water cooler or that awkward meeting at the ladies' room. So this call took me by surprise. Who is this nice woman? I was skeptical, but impressed.

Sharon: Our first meeting was at Pew. She was very assertive and opinionated but clearly very smart and would shake it up at the very reserved Pew. She also tried to one-up me, which started our highly competitive relationship. It was good for the foundation because we always competed to be "the best." It was a tie.

Why did you end up partnering with this person the first time?

Barbara: She is 10 years younger than I am. She fills up any room she enters. She is so strategic that she even devises a plan for a regular old shopping trip. And finally, I

never met anyone who cares as much about the work of nonprofits and issues that matter to those who have little power. Now who's the smartest partner?

Sharon: We partnered because we are night and day. Frick and Frack. Abbott and Costello. Oscar and Felix. We had a very different set of skills and knew the combination of our dissimilar personalities and skills would be a big plus for the organizations we would represent. Sure enough, that "unique value proposition" has been a home run for Sage.

What subsequent partnerships have you undertaken?

Barbara: Seriously, most times, one is enough. But part of our model is to partner with other organizations, firms and individuals with different skill sets whose work will only enhance ours, and we will continue to do that to give our clients the best possible advice and counsel.

Sharon: We have a strategic alliance with Fairmount Ventures, a firm that specializes in development, fundraising, strategic plans, organizational growth and board building. We also partner with a social media firm, ChatterBlast, and several web and design firms. Since we want to offer our clients a full menu of services that should be integrated into the communications strategies, partnering with other niche firms makes great sense for us.

Why this person as opposed to your other professional colleagues?

Barbara: Who doesn't want to hang out with someone who is smart and thinks that I am (on occasion) funny? I knew I could learn a lot from Sharon, so I decided to take the chance. John D. Rockefeller once said that "a friendship founded on business is a good deal better than a business founded on friendship." I decided to prove him wrong. Impasses in the business can open up a chasm between the partners that will put an overwhelming strain on the friendship. But we have both hung in there with each other because, in the end, it is those people we work with who make the business work for both of us.

Sharon: Again, back to the very different skills sets.

Barbara is a journalist at her core and knows many media professionals. I knew that was a huge asset to our firm—in fact, it's the cornerstone. She's also a great writer and editor because of that background. She did not want to handle a lot of the "business aspect" and I did. I had those skills from years at ad/PR agencies. I knew how to handle clients and market. I think most of the clients we've worked with over the last 10 years would tell you that's what makes Sage valuable. The yin and yang. While we sometimes drive each other nuts because of our huge differences, we also recognize that it makes Sage tick.

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Barbara: The marriage analogy is never far away in discussions about relationships between business partners. Like in a marriage, there are ups and downs in a business partnership. But the bottom line is that Sage is successful because we share the same values and view of the world. There are always going to be temperamental quirks, and those are often manageable with the right sense of humor. She lets me be who I want to be and I'm allowed to make mistakes. (Well, not too many.) And most important, we have complementary skills. We look at the same project in two different ways; our clients like that because it's not the same old template stuff that you get from similar companies.

Sharon: We worked our butts off. We both maintain an incredible work ethic. Simply put, we bust our tails (and for not enough money because of the sector). So many people we know tell us we work too hard but, to make this partnership and business work in a challenging economy, you have to be willing to pound out the work while being creative and strategic. This partnership is "the package."

What need does this partnership fulfill for you?

Barbara: We run a successful business that is helping others make an impact in people's lives. How many of us can say that? As a young newspaper reporter, I believed I

was doing very important work that mattered. As a co-founding partner of Sage, I still do.

Sharon: Wow. That's a loaded question. Beck is my spouse. And, sometimes, she tries to be my mom. It annoys me in a big way—and I let her know. But seriously, she fulfills the need of friendship and fun.

What impact has your partnership had on Philadelphia?

Barbara: Look at the list of those we've worked with over the last 10 years. That will tell you all that you need to know about impact. www.sage-communications.com

Sharon: As the only firm in Philadelphia that truly specializes in communications about issues, causes, social justice, philanthropy, ideas and solutions that have made Philadelphia a more vibrant, safer and a cleaner place to live and work, we believe we have had a significant impact over the last ten years.

What advice would you give leaders about spotting and sustaining productive partnerships like this?

Barbara: Form partnerships that make sense. Avoid partnerships just for the sake of joining together. It doesn't always work. Make sure you have a strategy and always maintain a unified front. Don't be afraid to

compromise on the little stuff. See, it's just like being married.

Sharon: Respect and care a lot about the person with whom you will spend a large percentage of your time/life. Being a small business owner is really hard—it's not for sissies or slackers. Make sure you don't go into business with a slacker or you'll be exhausted and frustrated. And most important—be sure you find that "spouse" who runs at a similar pace AND is strong enough to carry you when you're too tired or sick to run.