Members of the Target Markets Program Administrators Association (TMPAA) have consistently identified new program development as a top challenge in their annual State of the Program Business Study. It is also assumed that it continues to be an area of opportunity given the growth trends over the prior three years.

When it comes to creating or expanding a program with a new partner, there are several things to consider. Stephen Kelley, President of Blue River Underwriters, looks beyond the short-term potential contributions of a new program to the P&L, to what is mutually beneficial to the individual and the organizational cultural fit over the long haul.

1. **Don't be fooled by shiny objects.** Some companies display their wealth, others share it. Take the time to discuss milestones and what the achievements will net you and your team. Equally, the company that is investing resources is going to expect a return as they also have options on how to spend their capital and time. Having clarity on all sides is necessary. Don't overpromise either—everyone wants a win-win, so be open to negotiation and listen to their perspective, as it comes with experience too.

2. **Relationships get real, fast.** A great program is built on relationships. If you can't see yourself having candid discussions with your potential partner when the inevitable road bump occurs, you may want to move along. It's a two-way collaboration. Having support when things go well is easy—those are called cheerleaders. When you need to dig in, you want a diverse and experienced team working side-by-side with you. Ask for examples of a challenging situation and who and how they attacked it.

3. **What matters ... matters.** It's important to know what values are important to your partner and how they align to yours. Do their people seem happy? Is the energy good? Communication flowing? Opportunities plentiful? Leadership strong? Charitable minded? Talk to as many folks as you can. The pulse of the organization is its people. What's on paper is well and good, but being a part of a collaborative culture that is focused (and fun!) makes the hard work and success all the more worthwhile.

4. **What fuels their growth?** The key to program success is, in large part, distribution. You'd probably not be looking for a partner if you could achieve maximum market penetration solely on your own. What kinds of relationships does the partner deliver? How do they evaluate and mitigate potential channel conflicts to avoid unnecessary hurdles in growth? How can you meaningfully access these outlets? Does leadership get involved to help connect and build relationships? What technology and marketing resources are available to help you there? Do they invest in these to keep up with the times?

5. **Nimble is paramount.** Programs need to adapt or they become outdated quickly. Taking risks in a risk-averse industry is the ultimate dichotomy, but look for those who seem to embrace and thrive on change. Having a vested partner that understands what can move the needle and then will help inform and get things done quickly is key. Understand too, that your partner may have good reason to ‘hold’ on some things but should be willing to share why (see #2).