

CONTRIBUTIONS

Giving What It Takes

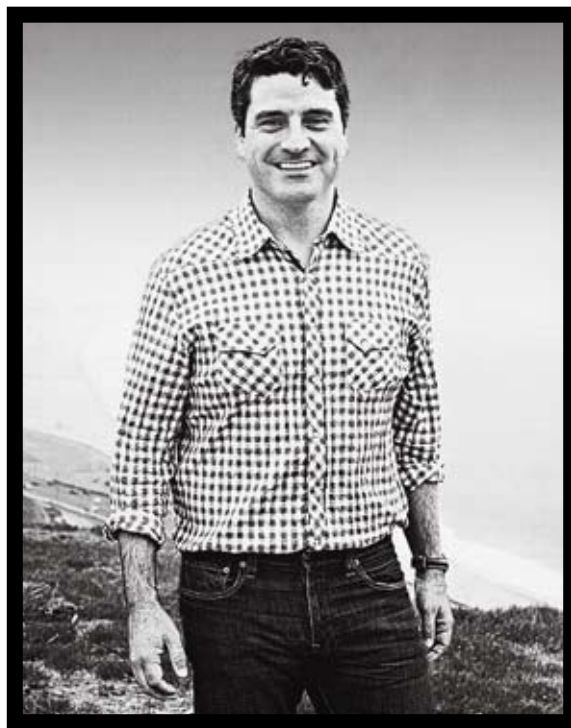
Philanthropy is no longer just checkbooks and charity balls. Celebrities and CEOs looking to make a real impact hire strategist Trevor Neilson and his partners at the Global Philanthropy Group.

Benefactors of an earlier age would not have seen the need for the services of Trevor Neilson. Hiring someone to implement a complex philanthropic program, tapping connections in the business, political and cultural spheres, was unheard of until very recently. In fact, Neilson's firm, Global Philanthropy Group—which he founded in 2007 with partners Ann Kelly and Maggie Neilson, his wife—basically invented the idea. After working in the Clinton White House, Neilson, a rock star manager—handsome 39-year-old, took a job with the Gates Foundation. In 2002, he introduced his then-employer Bill Gates to Bono, initiating a high-profile philanthropic partnership that became a model for many that followed. Ten years later, Neilson discusses the ways in which giving back has evolved.

The philanthropic advisor seems like a relatively new phenomenon. Yes, and it relates to the increasing sophistication of philanthropists. In the past, it was fairly simple: A wealthy person would donate money to a needy charity and that was that. Now the most sophisticated philanthropists are designing complex strategies that require a blend of business and government expertise, and even celebrity involvement. They want a team of people that has all the relationships they could possibly need, that's speaking

to the White House and the United Nations every day, that has access to the entertainment industry, if that's helpful.

Why are they finding a need for more complex strategies? Smart philanthropists realize that simply writing a check isn't enough to create meaningful change, that complicated problems require complex solutions. It's become much more of a hands-on field, and few people are willing to let others determine how their money should be spent. They want the best possible strategy and a team to oversee its implementation.



Trevor Neilson, cofounder and partner in the Global Philanthropy Group

It sounds like they're taking a more businesslike approach? A lot of our clients have built their wealth in the business world, and they want a clear return on their investment—not a profit, but a social return. They want to see a “multiple”—that one dollar invested has more than one dollar of impact. We have a lot of MBAs here, and the first thing we do for a client is create a 40- to 50-page business plan.

Where does the entertainment connection come in? When I worked with Bono, I saw how a respected celebrity could draw unprecedented levels of attention

to an issue. So if a celebrity and a high-net-worth individual have the same interest, they can often make a great partnership. Bill Gates and Bono on African issues, for example. Or Howard Buffett [Warren's son] and Shakira. We've worked with them on school feeding in the developing world and on building schools in Colombia.

Is philanthropy almost a requirement for celebrities now? It doesn't have to be a celebrity; it could be a CEO who's on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* all the time. If a person of wealth and influence doesn't have a philanthropic side, that's seen as out of step, and I do think people notice.

What about the idea of philanthropy as a business? The only reason we think about the for-profit versus the nonprofit world is because of the tax code, and that dichotomy is beginning to fall apart. There are now businesses like Tom's Shoes [which donates a pair of shoes to children in need with every purchase] that are set up specifically with a philanthropic commitment. The CEO of Tom's Shoes is a friend of mine, and we've talked about how eventually every company will have to have a philanthropic focus in order to win customers. Because customers are going to expect it. ■

For more information, go to globalphilanthropygroup.com.

QUOTE! “Charity” isn't a word I use. It's old-fashioned and indicates a certain paternalism. That's the wrong way to think about it.” —T.N.