Market-Based Strategies Serving Low-Income Populations

A Framework for Action
The Author

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Preface

This article was developed as the conceptual framework for Changemakers’ global collaborative competition on Innovative Market-Based Strategies Serving Low-Income Populations. This online competition organized by Ashoka’s Full Economic Citizenship™ initiative and Changemakers took place in the fall of 2005. It attracted 128 participants from over 35 countries whose applications can be viewed on www.changemakers.net. Changemakers Innovation Awards are based on a unique open source format where participants compete by entering the best solutions to pressing social issues, while collaborating to advance current initiatives. Ashoka launched the Full Economic Citizenship™ initiative (FEC™) to foster large-scale solutions for the two-thirds of the world living in poverty. FEC™’s vision is for every individual to have the choice to play an active role in the economy as consumer, producer, or wealth creator.
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Market-Based Strategies Serving Low-Income Populations

To a large extent, poverty results from the marginalization of two-thirds of the world’s population from the formal economy. Because they are typically ignored by the markets, low-income communities are at the mercy of inefficient suppliers or are deprived of critical goods and services - such as electricity, housing and healthcare - that could improve their lives and strengthen their own businesses.

It is not always acknowledged that low-income families tend to pay more than the rest of us for the goods and services they need in order to survive. In spite of this, most businesses still consider them unviable customers who are too risky to serve. However, this situation is starting to change as authors like Prahalad¹ and Hart² demonstrate to business audiences that learning to serve the “Base of the Pyramid” (BoP) may indeed be the next frontier of globalization and growth.

Over the past 20 years, nothing has contributed more to change the perception of low-income people as viable clients than the “Micro-Credit Revolution.” Hundreds of organizations around the world have found a way to sustainably deliver small loans to more than 50 million micro-entrepreneurs. When this global phenomenon started in the early 80s, there were detractors on all sides. Commercial bankers thought micro-lending was too risky and that it would never reach scale. Citizen sector leaders voiced the concern that charging positive interest rates (instead of subsidies) would divert these organizations from serving the poor.

Multi-lateral development banks and governments hesitated to invest in an approach that was spreading at unprecedented speed, yet unproven to them as an effective development tool. It took governments more than a decade to start designing regulatory environments to foster micro-credit, and many countries are still working on it. But the 50 million micro-entrepreneurs who are now “bankable” and working their way out of poverty speak for themselves. Today, all these actors recognize that they have unique roles to play and that together they have an historical responsibility to take this new industry to hundreds of millions of low-income people who still lack access to credit and other financial services despite the fact that most of them could pay for these services.

As discussed below, the dynamics of low-income market segments defy the traditional business logic that is applied to mid- and high-income segments: pricing strategies must aim at the lowest possible price; the delivery infrastructure must be capable of handling a significant number of small – by most standards tiny – transactions; promotion strategies require a considerable amount of consumer education; and even the needs and values of consumers are, in many senses, structurally different. Learning to serve the poor through market-based approaches involves an acute learning curve for most companies, particularly large multinationals, as well as for many citizen sector organizations (CSOs). Succeeding at the BoP requires inventing a new form of doing business and an unprecedented level of business-social congruence.

The last three decades have seen the emergence of millions of CSOs around the world. With an estimated $1.1 billion in resources and 19 million jobs at the global level excluding religious congregations, the non-profit sector is already equivalent

² “Capitalism at the Crossroads”, Stuart L. Hart (2005)
to the eighth-largest economy in the world. Many of these CSOs have more experience than businesses - especially large businesses - in delivering products and services to low-income consumers and small producers. In the process of creating positive social change, these organizations - and the social entrepreneurs that established them - have become leading developers of innovations that serve low-income citizens. Micro-credit is only one example of an increasing number of market-based social innovations, and one approach that can even be profitable in many cases.

The wealth of social innovations serving low-income markets has sparked an extensive array of diverse social networks - many being invisible to the uneducated eye - that specialize in delivering valuable product and services to the poor. These social networks constitute the early stages of an infrastructure that could also be leveraged by socially conscious businesses as they enter these new markets.

At Ashoka, we believe that in order to fully serve the poor we must decisively advance towards the congruence of the business and social sectors. By this, we mean long-term strategic commercial collaborations that are centered on leveraging the core competencies of both sectors and designed to transform the economies and living conditions of low-income communities. We refer to this new type of social/business model as “Hybrid Value Chains” (HVC).

Through multiple applications of HVC, businesses, particularly those whose products and services address basic human needs, can enter low-income market segments more effectively and with deeper social impact through partnerships with highly innovative CSOs. At the same time, CSOs can scale their impact significantly by learning to leverage the infrastructure and experience of businesses while advancing their social missions. Communities will be better served if an increasing number of new actors compete and collaborate to deploy solutions that maximize the value to the poor.

A. Overall Framework and the Mosaic of Solutions

Because we believe that the most powerful solutions serving low-income consumers and small producers are those that are not constrained by the for-profit versus non-profit distinction, Changemakers and Ashoka’s Full Economic CitizenshipTM initiative designed a framework for a collaborative competition to identify and spread market-based models that achieve both social impact and profits. From this collaborative competition, nine solutions were selected and are presented here to illustrate emerging principles from both the business and citizen sectors. In fact, several of them include more than one type of actor and involve cross-sector partnerships.

This framework, called the Mosaic of Solutions, operates in two dimensions. First, it articulates, across columns, three of the main factors that make low-income market segments fundamentally different than traditional markets. Behind each factor are barriers to entry - real or perceived - that are used by many

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4 Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies - Dimensions of the Non-Profit Sector, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1999.
professionals to explain their skepticism about the profit-making potential of low-income markets.

The framework then highlights three key principles for succeeding in this BoP space. These principles represent new standards emerging from practical applications that are meant to inspire and guide the innovation process going forward. At the core of these principles are multiple innovations that are illustrated in the Mosaic of Solutions. These nine solutions were developed and refined over the years by creative businesses or social entrepreneurs who are determined to demonstrate that it is possible to reach scale, deliver positive social impact, and generate profits at the same time.

But before navigating through the factors and the multiple strategic choices that they suggest, let’s take a look at the three principles emerging from these solutions:

1. **Design products and services that tap into the wealth of the poor**: transform the apparent scarcity of means into multiple opportunities, by capitalizing on the resources already available to low-income communities.

2. **Change radically the logic behind your business model**: succeeding in reaching scale does not only require an affordable product but also rethinking each step along the value chain from production and distribution to pricing, promotion and delivery to end-consumers.

3. **Leverage the power of communities as both consumers and producers**: enable interventions that contribute to increasing the income of small producers and micro-entrepreneur. This has also the synergistic effect of increasing the demand for goods and services of low-income families.

All the solutions discussed below have the potential to become a new generation of best practices, redefining the strategies of both business and CSOs. Because innovations usually emerge simultaneously in more than one location and context, the reader may think of other initiatives around the world using “How To’s” similar to those mentioned here.

Note also that, although the selected solutions probably speak to more than one principle or one barrier, their position in the mosaic has been chosen to emphasize one specific innovative aspect. Additionally, in the process of highlighting a particular aspect of an innovative solution, we may have oversimplified what may be a carefully synchronized systems-changing solution. Readers are therefore encouraged to learn directly from these business and social entrepreneurs about the multiple dimensions of their solutions.
FIGURE 1. Mosaic of market-based strategies benefiting low-income populations. Examples from citizen-sector organizations and businesses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors/Principles</th>
<th>Limited purchasing power of individual clients</th>
<th>High volume business based on small (even tiny) individual transactions</th>
<th>Poor understanding of the human and social capitals of low income communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design products and services that tap into the wealth of poor</td>
<td>“World Class Quality at Affordable Price” David Green Health (Global)</td>
<td>“Combining Retail and Financing” Casas Bahia (Brazil) Consumer Goods</td>
<td>“Acquiring Technology through Micro-Leasing” Fabio Rosa Energy (Brazil)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change radically the logic behind your business model</td>
<td>“Multi-Tiered Pricing Model” Rebeca Villalobos Health (Costa Rica)</td>
<td>“Group Micro-Lending and Demand Aggregation” Prof.Muhammad Yunus Financial Services (Global)</td>
<td>“Save and Build Assets Now” CEMEX/Patrimonio Hoy Housing (Mexico)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leverage the power of communities as both consumers and producers</td>
<td>“Shared Purchasing” Grameen Telecom ICT (Bangladesh)</td>
<td>“Transforming economies of Small Producers” Dr. Verghese Kurien Dairy (India)</td>
<td>“Leveraging Social Networks” ICICI and CSOs’ Financial Services (India)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Main Factors and Emerging Solutions

For the most part, there are three factors, perceived or real, that affect negatively the ability of private companies and citizen-sector organizations to serve low-income markets. As shown in the mosaic diagram, these are: (i) the limited purchasing power of individual clients; (ii) high volume businesses based on small (even tiny) transactions; and, (iii) a poor understanding of the human and social capital that low-income communities possess. Below is an overview of each factor and the strategic choices made by the business and social entrepreneurs who managed to successfully overcome these constraints.

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5 The solutions contained in this mosaic have been chosen to illustrate concrete and powerful market-based strategies targeting low-income communities. Their inclusion does not constitute an endorsement from Ashoka about their social impact.

6 Factors refer to the characteristics that distinguish low-income markets from traditional ones. Principles represent new standards emerging from practical applications that are meant to inspire and guide the innovation process going forward. Note that although the best solutions probably reflect more than one principle, we have chosen to emphasize one specific innovative aspect. If you would like to learn about the multiple innovations behind each solution, please click on each name for a fuller description of each case.
1. Limited individual purchasing power:

When talking about the business opportunities targeting low-income markets, most businesses and CSOs are quick to point out that low incomes limit individual purchasing power and therefore market demand. For businesses, this assumption leads them to regard most of the world's population as unattractive customers, while for CSOs and governments it is usually the justification for delivery systems that rely – too comfortably or unnecessarily – on subsidies, and consequently do not achieve scale or sustainability.

Few players in these markets take on the challenge of developing product offerings that consumers can pay for. The resulting paradox is that low-income consumers, usually served by small companies and the informal sector, tend to pay higher prices for the same products and services than consumers with higher income levels.

The purchasing power of individual low-income consumers may indeed be low but in aggregate, these consumers can represent a significant market opportunity, provided that price does not become a barrier for the consumer. For instance, Rebeca Villalobos (Ashoka Fellow) - a social entrepreneur in Costa Rica - has developed a multi-million dollar operation that delivers integrated vision care services to hundreds of thousands of consumers, irrespective of their income levels. By using a “multi-tiered” pricing system that allows each consumer to pay according to his or her means, Rebeca avoids discriminating against consumers on the basis of price. For more information visit www.asembiscr.com

David Green (Ashoka Fellow), another social entrepreneur, takes this concept even further, arguing that what we need is “compassionate capitalism.” David demonstrates that by focusing on lowering the cost of health products, it is possible to profitably serve millions of people. Through Project Impact, David makes quality medical technology and healthcare accessible and affordable to millions of low-income citizens. The intraocular lenses and hearing aids, manufactured in India, are priced up to 20 times lower than similar brands in the market. David is in the process of taking this concept globally through a combination of business and social partnerships.7 For more information visit www.project-impact.net

When neither cross-subsidization nor a low-cost model is appropriate, some businesses think about their potential consumers as clusters of demand, and design “shared purchasing” arrangements. Grameen Telecom (www.grameentelecom.net), a cell phone company in Bangladesh and one of the most successful examples of shared purchasing, works in partnership with the Grameen Bank - one of the largest banks in the world that specializes in serving rural areas - to create more than 110,000 micro-businesses that sell cell phone airtime to villagers throughout the country. This system is so effective that Bangladesh may be able to skip completely the need to invest in a fixed phone line infrastructure for rural areas.

All these cases underscore the fact that, in most instances, focusing on the limited purchasing power of individual low-income consumers is simply a reflection of our inability to imagine and develop a product offering and a viable business model for this market segment.

7 Profits, With a Conscience, From the April 11, 2005 Red Herring
2. High-volume business based on small (even tiny) individual transactions:

In a market based on small (even tiny) transactions, the challenge for both business and CSOs is to find ways to achieve scale. Both sectors must answer key strategic questions like those we include below before they can commit to scaling-up the size of their enterprises.

If a business can make the same amount of money with 100 low-income customers than with one wealthy one, why would it bother to serve these additional clients if this implies increasing complexity and the perceived risk? If a CSO wants to maximize its impact but at the same time is concerned about ensuring the sustainability of the organization, how can it strike the appropriate balance between charging for services and reaching the largest number of people? In each industry, the answer will probably differ, but what does not change is that increasing competition make growth and scaling-up a necessity for both businesses and CSOs.

Few large companies take into account the social impact that they could directly generate through their products and services when evaluating new business opportunities - particularly when these new opportunities involve significantly more clients, increased operational complexity, and a smaller profit per transaction. However, one business entrepreneur who became a legend by tackling this challenge was Henry Ford.

Ford’s vision consisted in transforming the automobile from a boutique product for the rich to a product for the masses. To make this vision a reality, Ford not only had to make a series of radical innovations applied to the four-cylinder engine, but also invented the concept of assembly line, transforming the principles behind large manufacturing operations. Ford introduced and widely distributed the “Model T” that only cost a fraction of his closest competitor’s price with a unit price of US$260. In the first 5 years of production, 1.5 million “Model T” cars were sold - more than the total number of cars produced in history.

By changing the automobile industry, Ford improved the lives of millions of people. In this historical context, Ford was as much a social entrepreneur than a business entrepreneur.

Just like Ford, when Professor Muhammad Yunus, founder and manager of the Grameen Bank (www.grameen-info.org), invented “group micro-lending” in Bangladesh in the early 80s and started the “Micro-credit Revolution,” he was not constrained by the fact that he would need to invent a system that could handle hundreds of millions of tiny transactions of less than one dollar each annually (all of this happening in rural areas and without electricity or computers). In classical entrepreneurial fashion, Yunus decided upfront that what was needed was to simultaneously create an affordable financial product and an infrastructure capable of serving millions of consumers. “Group micro-lending” is demonstrating that serving the poor can be good business, with the right savoir-faire.

Micro-credit is not the only financial service innovation for the poor. Retail and financing companies like Casas Bahia (www.casasbahia.com.br) in Brazil and Grupo Elektra in Mexico (www.grupoelektra.com.mx) are becoming leaders in their

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industry by aggressively expanding their offerings of consumer and electronic goods to low-income households. Is this a sign that lending to the poor is becoming mainstream? Could significant numbers of businesses and CSOs be able to develop the core competencies needed to profitably handle a high volume of small transactions? Subsequently, could increased competition result in better financial terms for low-income clients?

Some are concerned that mainstreaming this combination of retail sales and financing of consumer goods may, in many cases, further impoverish the poor. Others argue that it should be left to each individual consumer to decide, and that as long as these type of offerings are combined with significant income-generating opportunities, they will benefit the poor. What nobody can argue however is that for-profit operations like Casas Bahia and Grupo Elektra will continue expanding and are evidences of the gigantic business opportunity in low-income markets.

When it comes to stimulating employment and income-generating opportunities, Amul Dairy (www.amul.com) is a remarkable example of the benefits of daring to think at large scale. Amul is a holding entity for more than 10,000 milk cooperatives and processing facilities in India. The entire system is a profitable operation whose “shareholders” are 8 million dairy farmers who own just one or two cows that they raise in their backyards.

Today Amul is also close to being a billion-dollar “corporation” and is one of the leading brands that supplies India with fresh milk and dairy products. Amul was primarily the vision of Dr. Verghese Kurien, who in the 50s gave himself permission to re-invent the milk industry. At the core of Amul’s vision is the power of seeing millions of decentralized milk-producing operations as one gigantic corporation that serves the same class of small producers. Over the years, Dr. Kurien and his team developed multiple interventions along the value chain and established several institutions, including a university that specializes in serving the needs of its milk producers and their communities. By systematically identifying and tapping into a range of business opportunities, Amul has become one of the most successful holdings of cooperatives and business-social partnerships in the world.

3. Poor understanding of the human and social capital of low-income communities:

Often living in very challenging conditions, low-income communities have developed multiple skills and alternative resources in order to survive. Among the most powerful of these is a web of trust-based relations and self-help groups that constitute the cornerstone of social capital for grassroots communities. As illustrated below, social entrepreneurs are demonstrating that the manifestations of this social capital can become an invaluable resource to empower consumers and small producers to change their living conditions.

Some consumer products can be massively marketed without requiring an in-depth understanding low-income market dynamics. Examples of these include global brands of soft drinks, alcoholic beverages or batteries. But when it comes to addressing basic needs like electricity, housing, health or even business services, it is essential that those engaged in designing new offers identify ways of leveraging the human and social capital available in the communities that they intend to serve. While international development programs have been doing this
for years, sometimes with mixed success, few companies have attempted to leverage social capital to develop new markets.

Natura and Avon, both innovative companies in the cosmetics industry, have creatively rolled out the concept of “beauty consultants” at an unprecedented scale. Both companies have more than 400,000 sales promoters each in Brazil alone. How could “network marketing” approaches be applied to other markets? Could these beauty consultants use their entrepreneurial drive to address both business and social issues? Guilherme Leal, one of Natura’s founders, is committed to exploring this new business-social frontier as he challenges his company to revisit its values and strategy beyond corporate social responsibility - an area where Natura (http://www2.natura.net) is already a leader.

Energy systems based on solar panels have been available for decades but few consumers were willing and able to take on the risk of investing a couple of thousand dollars. On the other hand, financial service providers would rarely be willing to offer credit for mobile equipment that is typically was not accepted as collateral. With no credit option available, millions of families living in rural areas are without electricity despite the fact that appropriate technology exists. To address this problem, Ashoka Fellow Fabio Rosa (www.ideaas.org.br) is spreading “micro-leasing,” a solution that allows consumers to pay over time.

Rosa started his business-social journey by asking these potential customers a different kind of question. Instead of the classical question “How much will you pay for electricity?”, Rosa researched how much these communities were already spending on combined sources of non renewable energy including kerosene, candles, diesel fuel and batteries. When he determined that most low-income families were already spending about US$25 per month, his challenge became to design a leasing system where families would not have to pay more than they used to, in order to support the spread of the technology. The system he devised is now promoted by members of these communities who are trained to be promoters by Rosa’s organization.

CEMEX, the third largest global cement manufacturer, followed a similar approach when it sent a team to live in a slum for several months with the only mission of learning about the typical decision-making processes involved for low-income families building or upgrading their homes. The answer was a combination of insights that led CEMEX to create “Patrimonio Hoy,” (www.cemex.com/cc/cc_cc.asp) one of the most successful private low-income housing programs in the world. The insights gained from the team included that women, not men, save regularly to progressively build a family home, one room at a time. Originally inspired by the Grameen Bank’s group lending concept, CEMEX/Patrimonio Hoy designed an offer that requires clients, mostly women, to save about $10 per week over a period of 70 weeks to finance the building materials needed to build a new roof or add a new room.

Patrimonio Hoy’s clients can choose from more than 250 different building materials provided by well-established suppliers. At the core of Patrimonio Hoy’s offer is the realization that the company is enabling women to pursue their aspiration of having a better home. This insight led Patrimonio Hoy to choose promoters among community members, and fundamentally changed the conversation between potential clients and the thousands of promoters of Patrimonio Hoy’s services. A conversation that was previously based on commercial transactions and building materials became centered on the life aspirations of clients. Through this approach, Cemex radically changed the logic of its business model from a commodity model competing on price to a model...
ICICI (www.icicibank.com), one of the leading commercial banks in India, is quickly reaching out to low-income consumers in rural areas by leveraging the client base and social networks of micro-credit organizations. ICICI is improving the effectiveness and profitability not only of its own operations but also those of its citizen sector partners. At the core of this pyramidal model are over 8,000 community-based self-help groups that have the ability to mobilize savings as well as group loans enabled through a social collateral system. Can the ICICI model become a new way of doing business in low-income market segments for commercial banks? Are ICICI relationships with social networks just a temporary alliance needed to reach scale? Over the long-term, can financially sustainable CSOs with significant social capital be a more effective retail infrastructure at the community level than commercial banks?

C. Advancing Towards Social-Business Congruence

When taking a closer look at all the examples included in the Mosaic of Solutions, the multiple dimensions of successful business models come to life. For low-income market segments, this translates into the combination of the three principles: affordable products that tap into the wealth of the poor; a new business model capable of reaching unparalleled scale based on small transactions; and new (often surprising) ways of leveraging the power of communities of buyers and producers.

In advancing the concept of “World Class Quality at Affordable Price,” David Green leverages the human and social capital of Aravind Hospital (www.aravind.org). Rebeca Villalobos goes beyond delivering profitable vision care services by mobilizing rural communities and primary schools to address blindness as a social issue. CEMEX/Patrimonio Hoy is combining network marketing with an integrated set of services that are designed to empower women to aspire to a better home.

Grameen Bank is able to aggregate the demand of its 7.2 million borrowers through a series of highly standardized steps but at the same time the whole system rests on the ability of tens of thousands of local credit promoters to establish trust-based relations and customized conversations with his or her micro-entrepreneurs clients. Moreover, Grameen Telecom is commercially viable because Grameen Bank (a separate entity) is not only contributing to increase the income of these micro businesses but has provided the necessary social networks and infrastructure for hundreds of thousand of “Grameen phone ladies” to operate.

Through these – and many other – examples, a new way of doing business is emerging. Overall, Ashoka believes that market approaches based on social innovations represent a tremendous potential for large-scale social impact as well as for new wealth creation for low-income communities, citizen sector organizations, and businesses.

As with most system-change innovations, creating these Hybrid Value Chains™ is raising important issues about the role and responsibilities of the different players. Under which conditions can increased access to products and services contribute to significantly improving the lives of low-income communities? How can companies serve their shareholders while committing to increasingly serve low-income consumers? Is this approach good business? Would citizen sector...
organizations deviate from their original missions by opting for profit-making approaches and commercial partnerships? And from a sustainable development perspective, how can a balance be found between the need to integrate the two thirds of the world’s population to the global economy, and the sustainability of our planet?

Finding answers to these questions will require removing the artificial barriers that exist among the different sectors of society. As we advance towards this unprecedented level of social/business congruence, it is necessary to learn to compete as well as collaborate while we invent together this new space.
About the Author

Valeria Budinich has over 20 years experience in developing innovations designed to serve micro and small producers around the world. As the founder and Chief Entrepreneur of Ashoka’s Full Economic Citizenship™ (FEC) initiative and a member of Ashoka’s Leadership Group, she focuses her work on serving low-income communities by enabling commercial partnerships between social and business entrepreneurs. The author would like to express her gratitude to her Ashoka colleagues, particularly Stephanie Schmidt and Kimberly Manno-Reott, who made significant contributions to the concepts and ideas presented here.
Jointly Paving the Way for a New Generation of Social-Business Models:

Ashoka is the largest global association of social entrepreneurs – individuals with system-changing solutions for the world’s most urgent social problems. Since 1981, Ashoka has pioneered the field of social entrepreneurship, helping over 1,800 leading social entrepreneurs, Ashoka Fellows, to get started, collaborate and succeed in 60 countries.

Ashoka launched the Full Economic Citizenship™ initiative (FEC™) to foster large-scale solutions for the two-thirds of the world living in poverty. FEC™’s vision is for all of the world’s citizens to have the ability and choice to participate in local and global economies – in other words, to be full economic citizens. At the core of its approach to drive change are “Hybrid Value Chains™”, social-business models centered on maximizing social impact while enabling long-term and profitable commercial alliances between large companies and citizen sector organizations. Read more about the FEC™ initiative at: www.ashoka.org/fec.

Our team, drawn from the private and citizen sectors, works directly with selected businesses and CSOs to broker and support Hybrid Value Chains™ in Mexico, Brazil and India. Our services include selection of social partners, business plan development, and mobilization of social and financial capital. Thus far, most of our direct interventions have focused on developing low-income markets in the following industries: irrigation/agriculture, housing and health.

We are also fostering a community of like-minded business and social entrepreneurs from all countries or sectors who are eager to advance this new way of doing business and creating social change. Join us to connect with peers from the business and citizen sectors and share "How To’s” and experiences by contacting the FEC™ team:

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