

Partnering with corporates:

What startups need to know

Strategic partnerships between startups and large corporates are a powerful and increasingly necessary lever for achieving alternative protein industry commercialization. Startups gain access to resources, funding, infrastructure, and expertise by partnering with large companies, while corporates benefit from innovation, entry into emerging categories, and progress toward sustainability goals. The Good Food Institute conducted interviews with ten large corporates and alternative protein startups who are actively engaged in partnerships to uncover what productive relationships look like, how they develop, how to approach them, and what each side is looking to gain. The following guide distills nine takeaways for startups looking to form resilient and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Find a strategic fit

Do your homework. Large corporates have specific long-term goals. Before pitching, take the time to understand those goals and where alignment may exist. Review publicly available resources such as annual reports, earnings calls, sustainability disclosures, press releases, and recent news coverage. If you haven't discussed these goals prior, use your first meeting to ask questions rather than delivering a misaligned pitch.

Don't force it. If conversations reveal that a potential partnership isn't a fit, don't waste your time or theirs. Accept it as puzzle pieces that don't fit, not as an invitation to push harder. Instead, ask them: *"Who else in the industry should we be talking to?"*

Know your options

Strategic partnerships can take many forms, depending on each party's goals, resources, and stage of development. Some collaborations center on technology exchange or manufacturing scale-up, while others focus on market access or

co-development. Understanding the different partnership models can help startups approach corporates with more clarity and confidence. The following are some of the most common partnership structures seen in the alternative protein industry today.

Licensing agreements allow startups to grant corporates the right to use proprietary technology, ingredients, or processes—often in exchange for royalties, milestone payments, or access to manufacturing and distribution capabilities. This structure can enable startups to scale rapidly without building extensive infrastructure, while allowing corporates to incorporate innovative technologies into existing operations.

Joint development agreements (JDAs) involve both parties collaborating on research, product formulation, or process optimization. These partnerships typically outline shared responsibilities, cost allocations, data ownership, and commercialization rights. JDAs can accelerate innovation by combining a startup's agility and novel technology with a corporate's technical resources, facilities, and regulatory expertise.

Manufacturing or co-manufacturing partnerships

allow startups to leverage a corporate's production assets or technical know-how to scale production more efficiently. This arrangement can reduce capital expenditure for startups while helping corporates optimize capacity utilization and gain early access to emerging technologies.

Distribution and go-to-market partnerships

allow startups to access established sales channels, retail networks, or foodservice platforms through corporate partners. For corporates, these partnerships offer a pathway to introduce innovative products that align with consumer trends and sustainability objectives.

Supply or ingredient partnerships involve integrating a startup's novel ingredient, protein, or input into a corporate's product portfolio. These arrangements often start with pilot-scale evaluations before progressing to long-term supply contracts. They provide corporates with differentiated, sustainable ingredients while giving startups potential for stable demand and validation.

Investment or minority equity partnerships allow corporates to support startups through direct investment, often via corporate venture arms. These partnerships can offer capital, technical expertise, and strategic insight while providing corporates with a window into emerging technologies.

Joint ventures represent the deepest level of collaboration, typically involving shared ownership of a new entity. This structure allows both parties to combine assets, expertise, and resources to pursue a clearly defined market opportunity. While joint ventures can deliver significant strategic and financial benefits, they require extensive alignment on governance, risk-sharing, and long-term vision.

Each partnership type comes with distinct advantages. The most effective collaborations align technical, commercial, and cultural factors to create long-term mutual value.

Be prepared for due diligence

Corporates will thoroughly examine a startup's technology, economics, and cultural fit before moving forward. The level of scrutiny varies depending on the type of partnership, but startups should expect at a minimum:

Product validation. Corporates will request small samples to test internally.

Proof points. Be prepared to share pilots, case studies, trial data, and, if applicable, patents or other proof points of proprietary technology to build credibility.

Cost analysis. Corporates may run joint techno-economic models to assess current and future COGS (cost of goods sold), with a strong expectation of progress toward price parity to enable broad adoption.

Cultural alignment. Beyond technology and economics, corporates may assess whether a startup's culture aligns with their own values, decision-making style, pace, and communication. Misalignment in these areas can undermine even the most promising technical fit.

Know your audience

Pitching a corporate differs from pitching a VC.

Vcs generally look for a path to rapid growth, a large addressable market, and quick returns, while corporates often care more about how your technology adds value to their existing operations, aligns with their strategy, and impacts their bottom line.

Being realistic is being respectful. Startups should frame their pitch to corporates around operational fit rather than overselling a novel technology. Corporates are well-versed in what they're looking for and can be turned off by over-promising or setting unrealistic expectations.

Expect different timelines

Startups and corporates operate on different timelines. Some corporates can move slowly at first due to internal approvals, legal reviews, and procurement hurdles, which can frustrate startups. But once a project gains momentum, it often accelerates quickly.

As a startup, it's important to **set expectations early** about pace, testing, and pilot phases. Be patient and resource-aware, as corporates have long time horizons and partnerships can take many months, or even years, to materialize. At the same time, be prepared to act quickly when corporates decide to take action.

{Corporate Callout} Some corporates highlighted the value of pre-vetted agreements or standard contract templates that streamline early engagement. These often cover common partnership elements such as NDAs, data sharing, pilot project scopes, and IP considerations. Having these frameworks in place can reduce legal review time and help partnerships move from concept to pilot more quickly.

Understand the lifecycle of a partnership

Corporate partnerships typically unfold in stages rather than jumping straight to big contracts.

Exploration phase (1–3 months): Informal conversations and early interest, often starting with pilot ideas or sample sharing.

Testing phase (3–9 months): Structured trials with clear next steps, data gathering, and evaluation of fit.

Commitment phase (6–12+ months): Formal agreements, capital investment, or long-term collaboration once value and alignment are proven.

Don't overprotect IP too early

Corporates are often hesitant to sign NDAs upfront, so startups should lead with a compelling high-level story that explains their technology without revealing trade secrets. As discussions progress and projects become specific, formal protections like NDAs and contracts can be introduced.

Develop a **non-confidential pitch** that communicates value clearly without exposing sensitive IP. Use **project-specific agreements** later, rather than blanket contracts at the outset. Avoid being overly guarded. If startups lean into the relationship, corporates are more likely to do the same. Protect your IP wisely, as advised by legal counsel, but don't let overprotection become a barrier to building trust and momentum early on.

Negotiate wisely

Partnerships with corporates often involve long negotiations, and startups should protect their independence while still moving deals forward. Don't give up exclusivity, rights of first refusal, or other major concessions without meaningful financial or strategic commitment. Remember that if a corporate approaches you, **you have more leverage than you may think**.

At the same time, negotiation requires preparation. Come with a clear business model, know your value, and use frameworks or advisors to guide your strategy. Be generous and flexible where possible, but avoid giving up too much too soon. Remember that negotiation isn't about winning at all costs; it's about creating a foundation for the partnership to succeed, ensuring both parties can deliver on shared objectives and build long-term value.

Lastly, **stay patient and realistic**. Corporate deals can take months or years to finalize. Keep your optionality open by continuing to explore other partnerships until commitments are real.

Build deep and broad relationships

Partnership success can often depend as much on mid-level leaders who can champion your solution and navigate internal politics as they do on corporate C-suite members. Strong partnerships require both technical and commercial buy-in, and the final decision-makers may vary depending on the deal.

Identify champions one level below the C-suite, people with authority, time, and influence to push things forward. Champions are often managers or directors overseeing relevant business units. You may find them through LinkedIn, conference panels, project publications, or internal introductions.

Engage across functions. R&D, procurement, sales, and marketing all bring different perspectives and levers of power.

Diversify contacts. Don't rely on a single corporate contact; build a web of relationships across technical and business teams. Turnover is very common in large companies.

Match to the decision-maker. In fast-moving consumer goods companies, for example, procurement often carries heavy weight in final decisions, while R&D shapes the pipeline.

Partnerships thrive when startups have multiple allies inside the corporate, spanning both technical and commercial roles.

Expect bumps along the way

Every partnership will face challenges. Sometimes, a partner may even walk away, but your goal is to keep building, improving, and pursuing new opportunities just as before.

When challenges arise, lean into open dialogue. Be willing to sit down for the hard conversations, and establish a clear mechanism to elevate issues when necessary. These relationships won't always be comfortable, but professionalism, transparency, and a focus on long-term goals will help both sides move forward productively.

Keep building forward

Every partnership adds value, whether or not it leads to a lasting collaboration. Each experience sharpens your understanding of what makes a partnership work—strengthening your technology, strategy, and relationships along the way.

Even when challenges arise, they contribute to your growth and to the collective progress of the alternative protein ecosystem. Each conversation, pilot, and collaboration builds momentum toward a stronger, more resilient industry—one partnership at a time.