

Nonprofit PR: 10 top tips to do lots with little

Are you the “communication waterwings” for a great cause? Are you paddling with a tiny budget in the nonprofit pond after swimming in the corporate communication ocean? These tips are what worked for me when I dived into the nonprofit and pro bono pool. Take the plunge and make a splash.

1. Embrace the creative challenge of standing out in a chockablock market. Many organisations that can't fund ongoing media advertising and coverage go for impact – communication guerrilla raids. Sometimes this is appropriate but offending potential supporters is always the go/no go trigger. Advocacy organisations use this tactic well. One example is the UK's Help the Aged campaign that sought to bring to government attention the number of elderly people dying of cold in the winter. Posters and media featuring the image of a dead body's feet jutting into the House of Commons had a result. Flex your creative muscles.
2. Use e-media – and m-media. Your website is usually the first port of call for reporters. So keep stories and fact sheets archived there for their background. Journalists need information and up to date statistics and interviewees with phone contacts (email may take too long). They need quick downloads and strong search functions. You can use your site to add credibility to your organisation. Link to articles about your programs written up by others or use quotes from these. Downloadable graphics and photos may also help media. Use You-tube and the like. A little known but debilitating skin condition in the US gained great exposure by running a prize for the best video-awareness tool people could send in – instant CSA's that had that wow factor of being amateur but real and heartfelt. Great viral marketing potential emerged. Causes are also running events on Second Life and raising money, awareness and champions. Of course, enabling people to create their own fundraising webpages for sponsored events is netting huge personal networks of new supporters.

M-media are also finding their way into the marketplace. Mobile fundraising taps into the nowadays almost ubiquitous mobile phone to link with donors and donations, volunteers, members and advocates. Wildlife organisations are one example. Supporters – mostly generation Y – can download wilderness ringtones or wallpapers that feature pandas, Siberian Tigers and the like. In Australia, we can all have a Tasmanian Devil growling as our ringtone to help the plight of this iconic threatened species, who are facing serious problems due to facial tumours. Crisis relief organisations establish links with their m-supporters such that they can text them when an earthquake or similar devastates an area and the supporter can immediately text a supplied number to make a donation. Advocacy organisations use similar arrangements to gather campaigners quickly to mobilise against an issue.

Greenpeace India sent the following message to 40,000 mobile phone users in Bangalore and Pune to test mobile membership recruitment:

“Don’t you wish your city was cleaner and greener? Begin by planting free saplings offered by Greenpeace. Reply GREEN to 6363 to get your sapling.”

Solid response resulted.

But e-outreach has multiple uses for the nonprofit world. Just a few examples to build from include:

- Recruiting volunteers – see the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program – <http://www.rsvpsuffolk.org>
 - Recruiting members – see Greenpeace case in Stein, M. Cell phones for civic engagement: Using Mobile Phones in Fundraising Campaigns Strategy Guide #3, MobileActive.org
 - Event promotion and sign-up – see The Lost Dogs Home <http://www.dogshome.org> or the Leukaemia Foundation’s Shave for a Cure https://secure.worldsgreatestshave.com/wgs/pages/frm_donate.asp or Be an Icon – <https://webservices.artez.com/clients/GuluWalk/BeAnIcon/index.html>
 - Recruiting donors – see The Lost Dogs Home Adopt a Dog
 - Informing donors about funds use – see Mama Cash in the Netherlands – <http://www.mamacash.nl/site/en/index.php>
 - Sell merchandise – see America Cry - <http://america.cry.org/site/index.html>
 - Create online communities – see American Rivers – <http://www.americanrivers.org/site/PageServer>
 - Whip up support and advocates – see Dogs Deserve Better – <http://www.dogsdeservebetter.com/>
 - Influence public policy – see Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org.au/refugees>
 - Point to online auctions - see Dogs Deserve Better – <http://www.dogsdeservebetter.com/>
3. Look at your communication plan and see if it is likely to give you sustained coverage in the media important to you at regular occasions through the year. Remember, this may not mean prime time TV or metropolitan media. If you are beginning a major gift campaign, look at how often you have appeared in suburban media in the areas where your donors live or in magazines read by those potential donors. What feature stories can you plan to get coverage in those targeted media? Local press will cover local news so look at your volunteers or clients /beneficiaries for an appropriate human interest story to highlight your cause. A useful technique is to look for the ‘story within the story’. Don’t highlight that you are holding a cake stall – this isn’t newsworthy. Rather, the story is that your volunteer Maggie Smith will be hosting that stall for the 40th year in a row.
4. Approach more communication volunteers. For instance, your local university may offer student help for a particular campaign. Some courses will require students to run a project and/or work as an intern for a set time. Only use students or any volunteers for appropriate tasks and with fair supervision. Remember the virtual volunteering trend is here – many expert fingers on keyboards are yours for the asking. Try Volunteering Australia’s free GoVolunteer service <http://www.govolunteer.com.au/> or internationally you

may find the UN's <http://www.onlinevolunteering.org/en/index.html> might apply to your cause. I used to have the odd offer from ex-pat Aussie PR folk keen to help with the myriad communication tasks that can be done offsite.

5. Compile a 'Media - How to' manual for your branches and train volunteers to be the local media representative and establish good relations with local journalists. Remember public relations is an attitude not a department so train *everyone* in key messages. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has an award-winning program in which it established a worldwide network of 3,000 people in 51 countries who voluntarily build bridges with the local media and feed information regularly as well as assisting the local spokesperson on any controversial issues. The group works to an annual plan for their area and together on national/international media opportunities or issues as they arise.
6. Look at any corporate partners or supporters you have and find out if they have volunteers and expertise to share for projects or ongoing. Can their advertising agency help you? Can you use their buying power to run a television advertisement at a reasonable cost?
7. Talk to local consultancies about pro bono work or being a mentor or part of an advisory committee. (Such committees are useful if involved in tasks such as evaluation, identifying media opportunities and contacts, reaching out to businesses and so on.)
8. Compile a Crisis plan. Something may go wrong sometime and that all important trust and credibility may be destroyed. As someone once said issues might be ones of opportunity (potential to position your nonprofit as a leader) or issues of vulnerability (potential to harm your cause). Charity bashing is almost a national sport with the media so a Crisis or 'Situation' plan may be essential. Who will be your spokesperson? Have they had formal media training? How will staff be advised and instructed? Who is on the team planning the communication? The more that can be thought through ahead without the press(ure!) – the better the result. Public scrutiny is increasing as are negative nonprofit stories – CEO salaries, board boo-boos, fraud, distribution of disaster funds, board infighting. Sagging public confidence is the result.
9. Look for coalitions – such as a business, media outlet and charity (eg. Queensland Newspapers and Suncorp's Metway Bridge to Bay Fun Run). If you have an event that relies on volume - rear ends on seats - it is almost mandatory to have a media partner on board.
10. Negotiate a regular column in your local paper where someone authoritative from your organisation writes about something relevant to your cause (eg. Dealing with family conflicts, aspects of fundraising, preserving our local environment, dealing with stress, handling grief, recipes to help avoid cancer etc). This editorial approach creates a profile and credibility for your cause as well as getting out key messages.

People give to organisations they know and trust. Nonprofit communication is vital. Be creative!

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