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Grants and Foundations Review

Prepared for Joyce Luhrs



New Article

In This Issue:

Use Public Relations to Attract Donors and Increase Grant Support

by [Joyce Luhrs](#)

Nonprofit organizations frequently tell me they need more public relations or plain old PR. Unfortunately, many do not fully understand what PR is or how it can help their organizations reach current supporters, attract new funders, and interest prospective donors.

While several definitions of public relations are offered in dictionaries and other sources, I use this version for third-sector organizations: *Public relations is the act of presenting a nonprofit organization's mission, actions and activities to promote goodwill between itself and the public.*

The public includes foundations, corporate philanthropic

giving programs, government agencies, local community chests, prospective donors, and current supporters.

Nonprofit organizations must be especially vigilant in these difficult economic times. They must increase their public relations efforts to attract current and prospective funders' attention by making them aware of the serious issues their constituents face, their needs, and how the organization is addressing them.

Follow the Guidelines

Publicity may be required. Funders and individual supporters may require that their grants or donations be publicized. Organizations must remember to check always with the funder first, whether an individual donor, foundation, or government agency. Written contracts and donation letters should always be examined for any specific guidelines and requirements about how their donation or grant may be publicized.

For example, the Florida Humanities Council's (FHC) web site, <http://www.flahum.org/index.cfm/do/Grants.Publicity>, indicates that its grant recipients must credit both the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the FHC in all press releases and other materials.

Following a funder's or a donor's specific publicity guidelines should be taken very seriously. Staff should check for other requirements, including the use of the funder's logo.

For example, FHC requires that grant recipients include the agency's logo on printed materials and web sites using a specific format. They state very clearly that failure to comply with their publicity guidelines could result in forfeiture of grant payments.

No publicity may be wanted . A funder's guidelines or a donor's specific directions may also state that the donation or grant must remain anonymous. They may not want publicity. If no requirements or stipulations are indicated in the donation letter or written contract, contact the funder directly and ask. Assumptions should not be made one way or the other.

Benefits to be Gained

Effective public relations offers several benefits that can complement fundraising efforts. These are some to consider.

- **Increased name recognition and interest.** Good public relations enhances an organization's visibility by publicizing projects, programs, activities, groups

helped, and its mission. News today is replete with requests for help from several types of nonprofits, including food pantries and homeless shelters. Why? These organizations are publicizing the serious needs of the people they service. These news stories attract not only the attention of the public at large, but also that of individual donors, foundations, and other funders. Some groups may even offer unsolicited requests for support.

- **Cost-effective.** Public relations tends to be free, while advertising involves a charge and may be costly. This form of marketing is also more effective for developing an organization's name recognition to a larger audience.

If a nonprofit is paying for ads on an ongoing basis while seeking donations from supporters, questions arise regarding the use of its money. Are donations being used to support the organization's mission? Are inappropriate management decisions being made? Sometimes ads are paid for with a donation at a supporter's request, which should be made clear in the ad.

- **Credibility is created.** The public views publicity as coming from a neutral source that was not paid for with advertising dollars. The organization is now vetted and considered more credible than an advertisement.

Stories about the needs of the local food pantry or homeless shelter are carried on news blogs, web site news reels, or the local television evening news channels, reaching individual donors, local community chests, and foundations. With the downturn in the economy, local radio shows and weekly newspapers (print and electronic) provide an excellent platform to inform the public about crisis situations. In the past two years, appeals for food collections have increased dramatically and propelled people and funders to donate either food or money to help local causes.

- **Builds brand awareness.** Good public relations should define a nonprofit organization and its mission more clearly. With customized techniques, this information can be directed to media outlets that will publicize an organization to specific target markets. Through consistent publicity that establishes an organization's brand, a connection is made with the public that ultimately reaches current and prospective funders.
- **Repeats are possible.** Funders can see or hear these news stories again and again. Generally for a

fee, radio, television, and Internet interviews can be posted and viewed repeatedly by people visiting an organization's web site. With permission granted by the publisher, print media articles can be duplicated.

- **Image and public perception are strengthened.**

A well-developed public relations campaign should increase the public's confidence in an organization. People begin to understand what the nonprofit represents and feel comfortable donating to support the need described.

- **An organization's expertise is valued.** An organization can distinguish itself as an expert leader in the community. For example, when a homeless shelter's executive director is quoted frequently, that person is perceived as an expert in the field. The organization becomes a go-to agency by the media for further information and resources.

Journalists, reporters, and writers consider the organization's representatives to be experts in the field. The increased positive exposure sets it apart from competitors. Prospective funders begin to recognize the organization as a leader that they may want to support.

- **Cumulative benefits accrue over time.** Public relations benefits accumulate after a while. In these tough economic times, organizations that have public relations already built into their fundraising and overall marketing plans are ahead of their competitors. The public recognizes their brand, image, mission, and constituents' needs. The benefits have accumulated over a long period of time.

Organizations that have not considered the importance of public relations in their overall marketing and fundraising plans need to take a second look. They need to find an expert in this field to help them jumpstart the process. Once the presses are rolling and positive news begins to appear, they will be on their way to increasing their name, brand, and image recognition. More importantly, they will begin to attract funders' attention and gain their support.

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