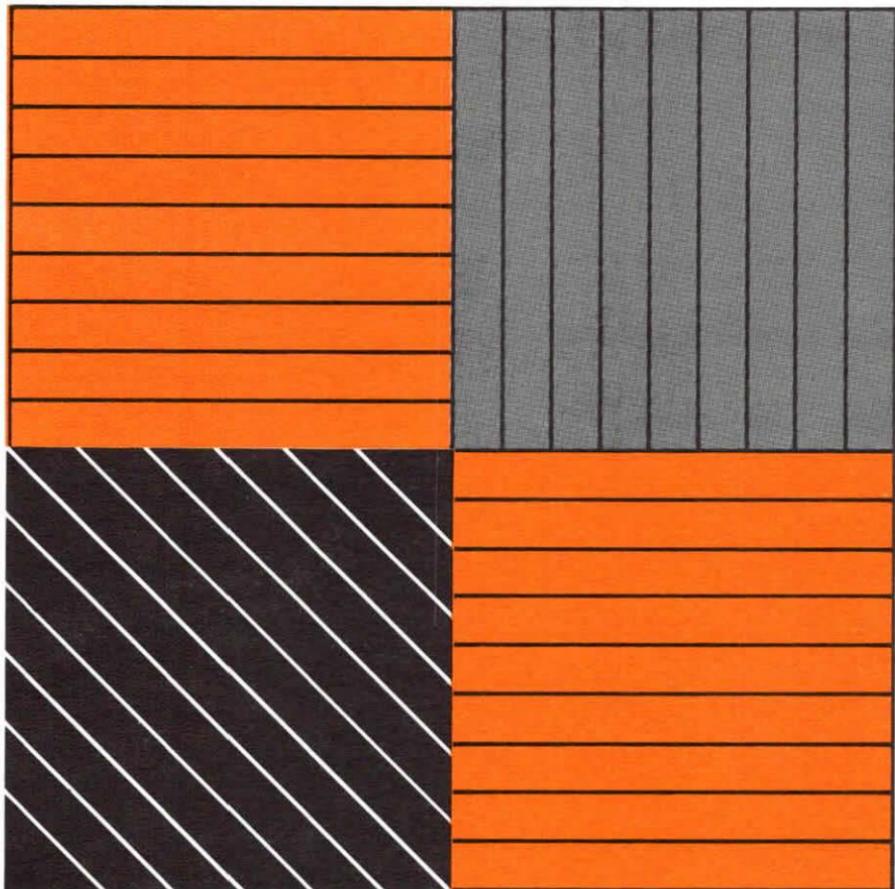


Managing Your
Public Relations:

Guidelines for
Nonprofit
Organizations

Working with Volunteers



Dorothy Ducas

About the Author

Dorothy Ducas is a journalist, magazine writer-editor and public relations consultant, noted for her work with The National Foundation — March of Dimes. She directed the Foundation's information program during the period of discovery and testing of the Salk polio vaccine. She later served as consultant to the Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service.

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Foreword

This management guide is one of a series of six designed to assist administrators and board members of nonprofit organizations to understand the principles and practices of sound public relations.

The guides cover six major areas: planning, publicity, volunteers, special events, evaluation, standards. They are applicable to a broad range of nonprofit organizations: health and social welfare agencies, hospitals, libraries, museums, educational and religious institutions, citizen groups interested in community betterment, civil liberties and other concerns.

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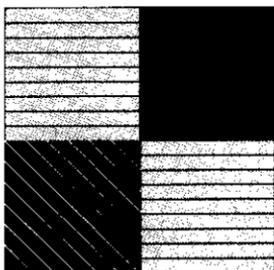
In 1978, copyright for the guides was transferred from the NCC to the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education, a 501 (c) (3) educational organization established in 1956 by members of PRSA.

Development of the series was directed by the National Communication Council's Publications Committee with the encouragement and support of NCC's Board of Directors and its president Carlton E. Spitzer. Don Bates, NCC executive director, served as staff consultant and production coordinator.

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Working with Volunteers

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By definition, volunteers are the heart of any voluntary organization. They can also be the heart of its public relations program. But they seldom think of themselves in this capacity. That's because they, like many others, confuse public relations and publicity. They fail to see that public relations embraces everything an organization and its personnel do that affects the public's attitude toward it, while publicity is limited to techniques for informing the public about the organization's policies, programs and services.

Enlisting volunteers to help with public relations may involve asking them to write or photograph something, but usually it does not. Nevertheless they are practicing public relations if they organize committees, raise funds, or conduct educational programs among special publics. This kind of public relations is particularly important with professional, ethnic and neighborhood groups; often the only way, and certainly the best way, to reach these groups is through volunteers allied with them.

Volunteers are, in themselves, participants in public relations programs. They are an organization's link with the community. After all, volunteers created the voluntary organization in the first place. And they make up the boards of trustees (or directors) that have the decision-making powers.

A volunteer is defined as a person who works for a nonprofit agency without financial compensation. This includes physicians who serve on medical committees, lawyers who represent the agency in court free of charge, advisers from such fields as education, social work or management, as well as housewives and teenagers who stuff envelopes and businessmen who lead fund-raising campaigns. Once

upon a time the only volunteers were either trustees of the agency on a very part-time basis, or people doing mundane jobs for "a good cause." But volunteer work has been changing in the last decades.

Volunteer services now are utilized in a great variety of ways, each fitting the abilities and interests of the individual. Speechmaking, running special events, helping to develop special literature, acting as liaison with schools, colleges or legislators, coaching a Little League team or being a volunteer fireman or ambulance driver—all these and more are important volunteer activities. Thus it is imperative that volunteers be selected and trained most carefully for whatever service is expected of them.

Obviously, training must be in relation to the organization's needs. A doctor does not require training in medical aspects, but if he is giving his services to a health agency he does need orientation on its program and policies. The lawyer representing an underprivileged teenager who is a client of a youth advocacy organization presumably knows the law, but he may need to be filled in on the scope of the organization's activities and its facilities for serving troubled young people.

Many different kinds of skills and talents are needed. This is fortunate because, increasingly, volunteers are not content to do routine chores week after week. Their expectations are greater. They want work that satisfies their own interests as well as those of the organization.

A few volunteers practice the profession of public relations without even realizing it. An example might be the hospital aide who visited a patient who hated the hospital, and succeeded in making the patient understand the reasons for the irksome delays and lack of communication. That patient ended up grateful to the hospital, his annoyance assuaged by the aide's communications skills. Another instance that comes to mind was the time a board member dropped into the press room at an organization's national conference and, finding a shortage of typists, sat down and typed a news release for the harried publicity director.

Today's volunteers need not be moneyed. The Lady Bountifuls have given way to middle-class housewives and working men and women, some of them even technically classified as poor. What they have to give are time and expertise and devotion. Occasionally the only way a volunteer can serve is if an organization undertakes to reimburse incidental expenses: many agencies now underwrite costs of transportation, telephone calls, occasional lunches and other incidentals, the value of services received amounting to many times these costs.

It used to be a mark of one's social position to serve as a trustee for a good cause. Society figures are no longer so much sought after. Increasingly, boards tend to be made up of leaders in many fields — education, government, ethnic communities, the arts, business and professions, as well as prominent social personalities. The motivating force for all groups is devotion to the goals of the organization. Because this impulse is not satisfied merely by attendance at quarterly board meetings, trustees also serve on various committees of the board in accordance with their interests and expertise.

The most productive role for a volunteer concerned with public relations as such is serving on the board of trustees. The board, in cooperation with the executive director and other top staff, sets public relations policy. An expert in the field, such as the president of a public relations firm, can offer valuable guidance which will be listened to with respect by other board members and staff.

A newspaper editor, advertising executive or public relations counselor is a natural selection for the public relations committee, just as a physician is for the medical advisory committee or a union official for the labor committee.

The Public Relations Committee

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Keeping an eye open for enlisting volunteers in public relations is a function of the board, the administrator and, where one exists, the public relations director. Since relatively few public relations volunteers are needed, compared to direct service volunteers, it is imperative that they be chosen wisely.

"Though scientists have succeeded in unravelling many of the world's mysteries, up to now they have not been able to set forth infallible formulae for the behavior and reactions of human beings... Committees are people. The behavior and reactions of committees are just as unpredictable as are those of people."

So wrote David Church almost 30 years ago in a booklet discussing "the task of the public relations committee, when and where it is needed, its make-up, the fields in which it operates, its relationships and what makes such a committee tick." Or not tick.

There are some agencies that do not have public relations committees, don't want them, and seem to get along quite well anyhow. On the other hand, the majority of nonprofit associations do have them and find them invaluable.

The effectiveness of a public relations committee depends on the way an organization operates. If the administrator is earnestly seeking expert advice and is unafraid to use it when given, the com-

mittee can be a vital one, depending on the competence of its members and their knowledge of the organization's program and goals and of the nonprofit field in general.

One approach to selecting suitable persons for membership is to get advice beforehand from the public relations field. This can be done in most metropolitan areas by contacting the nearest local chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. If this is not feasible, a local public relations firm may be able to suggest likely candidates.

As with the selection of trustees, backgrounds and experience must be checked out. Then, when invitations are issued, make sure your potential member gets a clear understanding of what will be expected of him. And note two precautions:

▶ Don't be dazzled by big names...they look fine in an annual report, but if their owners are not prepared to give time and thought to your problems, the prestige won't pay off. Choose no one who will merely "lend his name."

▶ Don't recruit people by promising there will be little demand on their time. Play fair...admit it will take a certain amount of time. If they can't attend regular meetings or are hard to reach by phone, look elsewhere.

There are three kinds of public relations committees: Advisory, Dual Function, and Operating.

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The Advisory Committee provides counsel to officers and staff without carrying responsibility for putting the advice into effect. Its first function is to make certain the agency's policies are in tune with the times. Through the trustee who serves as its chairman, the advisory committee's recommendations are conveyed to the policy-making board.

Suggestions offered by the committee may include ways to expose organization policies to public view, new fund-raising techniques, budget-making, better methods of service, combatting unfounded rumors. In controversial issues, the committee can often be invaluable. But don't expect members of the advisory committee to implement its suggestions. Unless there is adequate public relations staff to take action, the recommendations of such a committee may be no more than frustrating.

The Dual Function Committee, as its name implies, both gives advice and executes a share of the actual work entailed. Its members will take specific assignments, usually worked out in committee meetings with staff. It is desirable for each assignment to be confirmed by written memo.

This form of operation is appropriate for the organization with a limited public relations staff that welcomes assistance in preparing printed materials, such as artwork and layout by an advertising agency, or making arrangements for a talk show on local television or radio through the good offices of a producer or writer. It will prove valuable, however, only if the committee members take their responsibilities seriously and do not end up by loading extra jobs on an overworked staff.

The Operating Committee is needed by an organization with no public relations staff. As a substitute for the employment of professionals, it is hard to come by, even for a limited period. Committee members not only advise the board or administrator on the organization's activities and how to publicize them, but also prepare whatever publicity materials are to be distributed. A modest budget for out-of-pocket expenses is often required in working with such a committee.

Obviously, this kind of committee is difficult to develop and only volunteers with both commitment and expertise should be considered for membership. These are usually the busiest people in town. But frequently the busiest people are the best volunteers. They know how to organize their time; if they agree to do a job, they are not apt to let you down. However, they can only be expected to take over some, not all, of the duties of a professional public relations director or consultant.

Staff must be willing to work with the operating committee at its members' convenience, even if this means after hours. Committee members must agree to budget a given amount of time on a regular basis. It will also be necessary, in most cases, for the organization to pare down its public relations expectations to realistically manageable levels. Sometimes a committee member's two roles — his profession and his volunteer involvement — match: for example, the journalist who is able to get a story on the agency printed in his own paper, or the advertising executive who can lend his art department's services to creating a public service ad. But don't expect this all the time.

A good idea is to recruit retired professionals for this committee. Their skills and experience are still there and, because their day-to-day obligations are limited, they can often give a lot of time.

A number of national agencies, although large enough to command attention through their services and the prestige of their trustees, have opted to have no committee at all. They contend that if you have a really competent public relations staff, volunteers can be called upon as individuals to open doors by introducing the staff to a celebrity or a publisher or a government official, as needed. This,

they have found, can usually be accomplished by a telephone call without the need for committee meetings.

Selecting Committee Members

The smaller organizations — or those just getting started — do not have the option of doing without a public relations committee, or at least a volunteer public relations consultant. A limited staff simply cannot handle public relations adequately on its own. For such an organization, it is important to recruit public relations help from people equipped with a variety of skills: teachers, journalists, college information officers, advertising men, and so forth.

Selecting the members of a public relations committee can be a ticklish job. You want people with know-how, so the places to look for them are where their kind of know-how is used — public relations firms, newspapers, magazines, advertising agencies, radio and television stations, corporate public relations or advertising departments, journalism and communications departments of local colleges.

Finding the right people to serve as volunteers in public relations does not necessarily mean the most prominent people in town, the ones who sway elections: it does mean opinion-shapers, people to whom others listen — teachers, ministers, doctors, writers, editors, lawyers, bankers — each category has its audience.

Once identified, each prospective public relations volunteer must be interviewed to ascertain suitability for service in terms of skills, interest, knowledge and personal traits. One prospect usually leads to another. For example, the minister of a local congregation may be too busy to serve (although he may, on occasion, mention your organization in a sermon), but perhaps he can direct you to someone in his congregation who has the required attributes. It is a mistake to rule out people arbitrarily. The hospital nurse or the local postmaster may be exactly the kind of person you are looking for. Or the proprietor of the hardware store. Or the secretary to a bigwig at City Hall.

There are people who have a flair for public relations, even though they have had no training or experience in the field. They get along well with others, can write and explain things clearly, understand enough about the media to develop good relations. But they are few and far between. It is usually safer to start with individuals who have had pertinent experience and a commitment to your cause. But choose members carefully. The too-enthusiastic can be merely status seekers.

Once you have selected a small group of eligible candidates, consider the "mix." An industrialist and a union organizer might be too antagonistic to serve on the same committee. Try to get representatives of minorities and different religions, and pick those of about equal rank within their respective organizations.

Committee Responsibilities

The committee should not be so big as to be unwieldy. For a small organization, three to five members might make a good working group. For a larger one, as many as seven or eight might be chosen. Have a schedule for monthly meetings (or every other month if activities are slack) and stick to your schedule. Meeting too often is needlessly burdensome. But long intervals between meetings may result in waning interest.

Essential to the success of any committee is a strong chairman, a person with some degree of technical expertise who has sufficient stature to command the respect of co-workers and new recruits alike. As one who will be making regular reports on public relations matters to the board of trustees, the chairman should be alert to everything that happens in the community that bears on the organization's program.

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The public relations committee does not decide on program policy, which is the prerogative of the board, but it does consider the public relations implications of policy or program decisions and advises the board of its opinion. The committee's basic role is to suggest concrete ways of enhancing the organization's usefulness through public understanding and support. Among many possible examples, the committee:

- ▶ Plans a year-round public relations program, its objectives, timetable and budget correlated with agency needs and priorities.
- ▶ Determines through surveys whether the organization enjoys public favor and, if it does not, explores the reasons why.
- ▶ Recommends the media to be used in specific instances.
- ▶ On occasion, supplies technical assistance in production of print and audio-visual materials.
- ▶ Helps recruit celebrities for publicity uses.
- ▶ Helps select filmmakers or graphic artists for preparation of visual materials.
- ▶ Suggests ways to improve staff practices in meeting the public.

Volunteer Tasks

There are almost no limits to the kinds of things volunteers can do. Some volunteers delight in setting up meeting rooms for conferences, willingly distributing pads and pencils, carafes of water, setting up a slide projector, handling all the arrangement details in the realization that this kind of help saves valuable professional time. (There are, however, others who regard such chores as menial.) It is amazing how much volunteers will do if given the chance. There are some who give as much time to their unpaid work as full-time paid employees.

All volunteers, full-time or part-time, can function adequately only if they enjoy the complete trust of the executive or public relations director — and only if staff people are consistent in their dealings with them. “If a volunteer is told one thing one day and another the next, he or she will resent it to the point of quitting,” one volunteer has warned.

In general, volunteers should take on public relations responsibilities only when specifically requested to do so. For example, even if a board member is a friend of the editor of the town’s leading newspaper, he should not independently approach that editor to “place” a story. A far better way is for the volunteer to introduce the executive director or the public relations director to the editor, making it clear that future dealings with the editor will be handled by the professional staff member.

It is always wise to keep the handling of news stories in one pair of hands. Multiple calls on a newspaper, a radio or television station may well serve to confuse and sometimes, to irritate media personnel. Even if a volunteer is knowledgeable about such technicalities as release dates, deadlines, exclusives and the like, it is preferable to have staff handle media contacts. Continuity is an important consideration in this respect. A staff member builds confidence in his agency with every successful placement. While friendship with a news editor never can guarantee his use of your material, friendship for a “cause” can play a part in his understanding of the material your organization offers. Rarely does a volunteer possess sufficient knowledge of the total organization to be capable of serving as its sole representative to the media.

One might not tell all this to a volunteer who wants to visit the program manager of a television station. Explain instead that in the interests of continuity, one member of the professional staff should be the contact with that station over the months and years, so as to build a solid basis of goodwill at the same time a story is placed. Additional discussion of this point may be found in the companion management guide, *Using Publicity to Best Advantage*.

One of the most valuable services a volunteer can perform is to keep in touch with special publics whose support is desired. A board member who is identified with an ethnic group or prominent in the woman's movement knows how to reach these specific audiences personally.

Care must be taken, however, to avoid stereotyping or tokenism. A volunteer may be your major link with a particular group, but should not be treated as though this were his or her sole function in your organizational structure.

There are acceptable words for conveying an idea to members of ethnic or minority groups — and there are unacceptable ones. The volunteer affiliated with these groups knows how to enlist their interest and support. Unless one is exceptionally empathetic, the organization's administrator or public relations specialist can seldom do it alone.

A faux pas can be committed by someone from outside with the best intentions in the world. This writer did it herself in a conversation with a leading volunteer, by referring to "using" volunteers. "Volunteers are not used," was the instant response. "They contribute their services voluntarily... and deeply resent the idea of being used."

Volunteers as Communicators

Even volunteers who are not interested in public relations *per se* — the so-called "service" volunteers who make hospital visits or drive handicapped people to clinics — are carrying out a public relations activity. The people they assist will form their impressions of the organization not only from the way they relate to the volunteer, but also from what that volunteer tells them about the agency.

"Telephone, telegraph or tell-a-woman" — that time-honored saying about communications is thoroughly applicable to volunteers of both sexes when it comes to getting information disseminated. Press, platform and electronic communications may be less effective than word-of-mouth in getting facts to people. A survey after the 1954 Salk polio vaccine trials discovered that most parents whose children participated had made up their minds to do so by talking to other parents, neighbors, teachers, doctors, rather than by reading newspapers and magazines or by listening to radio and television.

Every volunteer who takes part in an active program, either as leader or follower, is bound to talk about it — to family, friends, the grocer, the religious leader, the fellow club member or the person who sits at the next desk in the office. This adds up to a torrent of word-of-mouth information.

Of the estimated 32 million volunteers in nonprofit organizations, only two or three thousand are performing strictly public relations or publicity tasks. Not that this field is unattractive — quite the contrary. Many say, when applying as volunteers, that what they want to do is public relations work. They believe they are qualified because they “like people” or “can write.” In point of fact, virtually everybody who is willing to be a volunteer likes people, so this is not a unique qualification. But writing a news release, a magazine article or a radio script involves more than just putting words together. Knowledge of the organization, its aims and activities, is one prerequisite. Another is knowledge of the language and format appropriate to the particular medium. Such knowledge and skills can be acquired but slowly, and most organizations cannot spare the staff time to teach them.

Such jobs as translating scientific or technical reports into popular language take advanced skills. Even putting groups of photographs together for an annual report layout is a part of the public relations job that can seldom be safely delegated to the average volunteer. The volunteer who has the skills as well as the time and patience to undertake such tasks is rare.

Assigning volunteers to specific chores requires good judgment and sensitivity. The experienced publicist or journalist who volunteers should be asked to take on duties of a professional type, rather than tasks a less experienced volunteer can do, and should be called upon whenever expertise is required. A local library about to embark on a fund-raising drive recently assigned a housewife to head the publicity committee, calling upon a local public relations professional merely to advise. But on the day of the opening ceremony the availability of the professional was overlooked. This oversight resulted in no local publicity for the opening of the drive — because the photographer hired to cover the ceremony was never told to get a “shot” of a famous actress laying the cornerstone of the new building! Busy professionals may not be able to give a great deal of time to volunteering — but their advice should be sought regularly and in time to take advantage of it.

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Similarly, the novice should not be entrusted with a professional task until he or she has demonstrated ability to handle it. Person-by-person analysis is a must. So is tact — it takes a great deal of it to assign jobs so that nobody's feelings are hurt.

The Orientation Process

Since volunteers are themselves a medium of communication, attention must be paid to their knowledge of all phases of the organ-

ization's work and to the implications of what they are doing. It has been found that volunteers who work on braille books for the blind invariably become interested in every aspect of improving conditions for blind persons.

Showing a new volunteer what his or her work means to the whole field is a job for the executive director or a designated member of the staff. But orientation is a two-way street. The staff also must be aware of the needs, motives and qualifications of volunteers.

Before a volunteer starts in, it is essential for someone to outline the specific job to be done. Staff people must make clear what is needed, and what is not. A concert soprano scheduled to sing at the dedication of a new building should be briefed on the organization's activities and goals, even though it won't affect her performance. Somebody may ask her a routine question or plead for a special service — and the singer must be cautioned not to promise anything to anybody, but to refer inquiries to the staff. Volunteers have been known to develop an interest in a particular individual and to try to influence the organization in that person's behalf. Explaining why this cannot be permitted is a delicate task demanding the utmost in tact.

14 The more time staff and officers can give new volunteers, the better. True orientation involves a friendly exchange not only of information but also attitudes, philosophy and aspirations. Where a wall is allowed to build up between volunteer and staff, the values of volunteer service are diminished.

The new volunteer has a lot to learn before becoming a spokesman for the organization. Top staff should provide pertinent reading material, to be followed by full discussion. Questions should be encouraged and answered, especially if the volunteer is to do a job involving contact with the public, such as selling tickets for a special event or addressing a civic group.

There is much for the staff to learn about volunteers, too. What are their talents? Affiliations? Motives? Commitments? Who are their friends who might be useful? How do they get along with people of all kinds? How well do they speak in public? What interests do they have that might impinge on the organization's goals?

Answers to these questions will dictate what kind of assignment is appropriate for an individual volunteer. The organization should capitalize on the widely varying activities and capabilities of its volunteer workers in order to make full use of each one's potential. Some people are primarily concerned with person-to-person contacts with clients, patients or members. Others have demonstrated organizing ability and work best when assigned to pulling together a new program. Still others prefer desk work inside the headquarters office.

Each has a suitable place — but assigning clerical work to a people-oriented volunteer, or vice versa, can very quickly mean a lost volunteer.

Most volunteers can give only limited time; they may have to get home at a specific hour to greet a school child, or dash back to an office left unmanned for a few hours. Others with more flexible schedules may be able to give several days a week full-time. Use their time wisely. Don't let the volunteer get bored by sitting around doing nothing!

Some volunteers want to serve only in the area of their expertise (banker advising on fiscal affairs). Some feel the need to stretch their horizons by plunging into new activities (friendly visits to the elderly). You can't always satisfy these desires, but you should be aware of them. It is equally important to match talent to need. The overly aggressive school volunteer should not be assigned to help a timid child, nor should the reticent volunteer be asked to solicit funds. But all kinds of people are needed for all kinds of jobs and it is a challenge for the organization to place people where they will perform most satisfyingly.

Staff and volunteers must respect each other's roles. There is no room for rivalry in a well-functioning organization, no room for condescension or petty criticism. Where staff tends to belittle volunteers, or volunteers are inclined to harass staff, only damage results. Larger agencies usually employ professional directors of volunteer services who keep track of job assignments and maintain amicable relations between staff and volunteers.

Values of Volunteer Service

Utilizing the skills and enthusiasm of volunteers in the public relations program of a nonprofit organization brings benefits not only to the organization but to the volunteers. A few observations are in order.

Valuable as a good volunteer is, he or she is never expected to "run the show." Ultimate responsibility for conducting a special event or preparing a brochure must remain in staff hands, as part of a continuum of past and future activities. This is the way a good volunteer wants it, too. If there is no public relations professional on staff, the executive director is the one to whom the volunteer reports and who assumes responsibility for the volunteer's work.

Volunteer roles have undergone fundamental changes in recent decades. One aspect of change has been underscored in an article by Earl Perloff, chairman of the board of two important hospitals in Philadelphia:

"The average hospital trustee years ago was a manager, who saw to it that the floors were kept clean, the food delivered hot and so on," he wrote. "Now they are consumer representatives, dealing with public policy issues within the health establishment. The hospital trustee today is really not too different from a member of the board of directors of a large business corporation."

This may sound cold and detached and in a way it is—but efficiency demands the objective view. Those who remember the confusion and short tempers and petty bickering that sometimes took place in board rooms manned by volunteers without specific assignments rejoice in the improvement.

Also, the old-time trustee often was chosen for his or her wealth. Capability to make large donations still is a factor in selection of trustees and other top volunteers, but now an individual's standing in the community and his professional expertise in specific areas are usually considered more important. Particularly in public relations work does an individual's personality, originality and empathy distinguish him or her as a valuable adjunct to the society.

Administrators and public relations practitioners alike need to have faith in their volunteers so that, over a period of time, they can delegate more and more tasks to them. This confidence comes only with time; when it has been achieved, as in some organizations with long histories, it is a blessing beyond belief.

It would be remiss, however, to overlook the rewards the volunteer derives from faithful and efficient service.

"One likes to reflect that one has saved an organization money by working without compensation," one volunteer told us. "Beyond this, however, there are deeper rewards. We all like to feel we are helping people and I know no better way to do this than to serve as a volunteer in a worthwhile nonprofit program. That is why we don't demand gratitude. We feel we are enriching our own lives as much as the lives of others, if not more."

Finally, the very fact of their volunteerism enhances the organization's reputation. Public confidence is bolstered by the knowledge that respected members of the community think enough of the cause to lend it their time, energies and expertise.

A Working Definition of Public Relations

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.

Dr. Rex F. Harlow, APR
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