

## Organizing Volunteers in Public Relations: The Time is Right

Ann G. Raas

One dilemma of the nineties for the non-profit sector has by now become clear: how to reconcile leaner budgets with an increased demand for services. In such times, public relations becomes more, not less, important, and yet public relations expenses become harder to justify.

Pro Bono, Inc., Volunteers in Public Relations, provides a solution to this conundrum for many non-profits in northern New Jersey, and feels that their solution can work well elsewhere.

A similar organization of public relations volunteers can be developed in other communities.

According to Carole Rogers, Pro Bono founder and president, Pro Bono has been successful because it has remained faithful to its two-fold mission: to provide public relations services to non-profit organizations and to afford volunteers the opportunity to enhance their skills and to build their professional portfolios.

While today Pro Bono has an office, boasts a roster of 75 volunteers who have completed more than 400 projects and offers services from consultations to video production on a project-by-project basis, it began around Rogers' kitchen table with five writers and two graphic artists.

A new organization could follow a similar path, but it could also start as a service provided by a Volunteer Center, as a project of the Rotary Club or the Junior League, as a *pro bono* arm of a professional organization, or as a university affiliate that provides both volunteer opportunities and student internships. The key is for the new organization to meet the needs and utilize the resources of the particular community.

During an initial research phase, it is important to generate interest and enthusiasm among individuals from the non-profit sector, corporate community affairs departments and the media. Many of the people contacted in the early research stage became members of Pro Bono's Advisory Committee, a group that has continued to provide counsel, service to the organization, and contacts for human and financial resources.

Researching community needs and analyzing the skills of the initial group of volunteers helps the organization to determine exactly which services it can and should offer. It is important to start slowly and establish a track record for professionalism, timeliness and quality. To assure the latter, Pro Bono in its very early years established

---

*Ann G. Raas* is owner of Write Image, a small business providing freelance public relations and editorial services. She has been deeply involved with Pro Bono, Inc., Volunteers in Public Relations, for the past six years, four of them as president. She has served as a spokesperson for the organization at seminars and other events and has shared the concept of Pro Bono in presentations at two national conventions. As a past board member of the American Association of University Women, Somerset Hills Branch, Ms. Raas organized and moderated programs/panels on volunteerism and women's issues. She is a former teacher of English and journalism.

a Review Committee of seasoned professionals. Each project is assigned to both an agency volunteer and a Review Committee member. The reviewer serves as a sounding board for the volunteer. Together they can develop ideas and iron out any creative or other problems that might arise. The reviewer also provides a "second set of eyes" to assure the quality and integrity of each project before it is presented to a client. It is the Review Committee—and the opportunity it offers volunteers to interact with each other—that sets this model apart from a skills bank.

An organization of volunteers in public relations can start quite simply, with a few interested volunteers and a few non-profits in need of public relations assistance. Once the organization has proved itself, it can solicit additional clients, more volunteers, seed money, and ultimately, more funding for operational expenses. It can also grow to offer services beyond one-on-one projects.

Word of mouth is the best advertisement for both clients and volunteers. But one should never discount the role of the media. Any time a program is covered in the press, client and volunteer interest increases.

Clients that might use the services of public relations volunteers are small to medium-sized non-profit organizations of every type, whose budgets preclude the use of public relations/advertising/marketing firms. The greatest portion of Pro Bono's clients (29%) have been community service organizations, such as occupational training centers and food banks. Accounting for about 20% each of Pro Bono's clients are organizations providing services to families and youth in need, groups serving the medical needs of the area, and arts organizations. The remaining 11% of the clients are educational groups.

Who are the volunteers that complete projects for such a broad group? They are

equally diverse: men and women, retirees and people just starting their careers, individuals seeking a career change. They have expertise in writing, editing, marketing, graphic arts, photography, video; and they volunteer to give something back to the community, to develop portfolios, to meet other professionals, to hone skills and to learn new ones.

A new organization will probably find that it is best to concentrate for a time on whatever it determines will be its core services. That means providing a volunteer(s) to complete a particular project; for example, the writing, designing, and layout of a brochure or photographing a special event. As the group becomes established, it may wish to offer other services. Ancillary services have included producing a county-wide media directory, conducting a newsletter competition/critique, and offering a number of seminars on public relations topics. These services have a dual purpose: they help non-profits improve the effectiveness of their public relations/communications efforts and they enhance Pro Bono's position in the community, thus generating interest on the part of clients, volunteers and funders.

---

#### NOTE:

The presentation at the International Conference on Volunteer Administration was part of a concerted effort to encourage and support the development of organizations like Pro Bono throughout the country. Pro Bono has developed an information packet, *Spreading the Good Word: The Time Is Right for Volunteers in Public Relations*.

---

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This workshop was also presented by Carole G. Rogers, founder and president of Pro Bono, Inc.