

Getting the word out

by Andy Robinson

Call up your favorite nonprofit group — or even a group you know nothing about — and ask, “What’s your biggest problem?” Whoever answers the phone is likely to answer, “We need more money” or “We don’t get enough news coverage.” While these answers often mask deeper problems, they are still very real. Not surprisingly, they are also related. It’s tough to raise money without broad public understanding of why you exist or what you do. Publicity and fund development are so tightly linked that in many grassroots groups, the main fundraiser is also the



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person who writes the brochure copy and mails out the news releases. Fundraising and promotional work are alike in another important way: both are based on common sense. You don’t need an advanced degree or twenty years of experience to generate positive, provocative publicity for your group — but you do need a plan.

Why publicize?

Since publicity equals attention, start by asking yourself, “Why do we want attention?” This might sound like a pointless question, but consider it carefully. Your publicity plan should be designed to meet specific publicity goals. Without a clear idea of why you’re publicizing your organization or event, it will be impossible to define your goals. A list of potential answers should

include:

1. Public education. Do you have an issue or cause or program or complaint? Do you offer a service or fill a public need? Are you doing something nobody else does? Unless the community knows who you are and what you do, the community won’t be able to act/participate/take a stand/give a damn. You have to make your concerns everyone’s concerns. In doing so, you must also provide opportunities for action.

2. Credibility. We tend to respond more favorably to an idea or an organization if we’ve heard about it previously. By publicizing your organization, you lay the groundwork for increased participation down the road. People may not care at first, but they tend to get interested after repeated exposure. (Why do you think they run the same television commercials again and again?)

3. Membership recruitment/fundraising. If you are actively seeking new members or supporters, you must get their attention first. Good publicity (even bad publicity) is often a prerequisite to successful fundraising.

4. Attendance at events. People won’t come to your benefit/rally/seminar/concert unless they know the basics: what, where, when, who, why, and how much it costs. Most organizations that produce events of any kind live and die by their publicity. Never assume that people will “just find out about it.” They won’t, unless you tell them — several times.

5. Leadership development. At the risk of oversimplifying things, promotional work is a good way to keep your members and volunteers active. People want to participate, and if you give them something to do — even something mundane, like stamping postcards or putting up posters — they are more likely to stay involved. Especially talented volunteers might want to help devise a publicity plan or take major responsibility for implementing it.

6. Morale. It sure feels good to pick up the newspaper and see an article about your

work, or talk to a friend who says, “Wasn’t that your group on the news last night?” Such morale boosters make the pick-and-shovel organizing much easier.

Designing a publicity plan

Your goal: reach the right people at the right time for the right price and the right amount of effort. Given your skills and your budget, what are your options? Some things to think about:

1. Target Audience. Who do you want to reach? Think in terms of constituencies: What kinds of people would be most likely to participate? Who is most likely to share your interests? Are there other organizations in your area whose program or constituency overlaps with yours? On the other hand, are there people who would not ordinarily be interested, but you want to reach anyway? (Warning: this strategy is seldom cost-effective.) To borrow language from the advertising industry, you have to analyze your market and target your publicity campaign accordingly.

2. Budget. How much money is available, and when will it be available? Be very cautious in budgeting for publicity.

3. Labor pool. How many volunteers and/or staff do you have? Leafletting can be a great attention getter if you have lots of volunteers to hand out flyers. On the other hand, if you have to pay people to do it, it’s probably not worth it. The same holds true for mailing parties. That’s what mailhouses are for.

4. Timeline. How much time do you have to achieve your goal? If you’re publicizing an event, how long until the event takes place? Some promotional strategies are only effective over the long run, while others are appropriate if you need instant attention. As usual, it’s best to plan ahead.

5. Newsworthiness. If you want news coverage, learn to think like a journalist and design your publicity plan accordingly. Read the newspaper analytically and try to figure

out why some stories get prominent play, some are buried on page 12, and some are ignored altogether. Remember, compelling visual images are essential, and clever or humorous messages often work well too.

Sensationalism has a lot to do with it, so if you can build something sensational into your plan, great. Conflict is always good for getting media attention. Timeliness is vital: are you doing something that’s important now? Can you “piggyback” on, or react to, a breaking news event? These are the main components of a “hard news” story.

An alternate approach is the “human interest” story: woman conquers disease, man carries on lone battle against city hall, artist paints murals of junk yards to protest garbage, etc. If you’ve got an unusual or kooky or touching angle, use it. This provides a handle for the news media to grab. If you can design your program to include several media handles, you are more likely to get coverage.

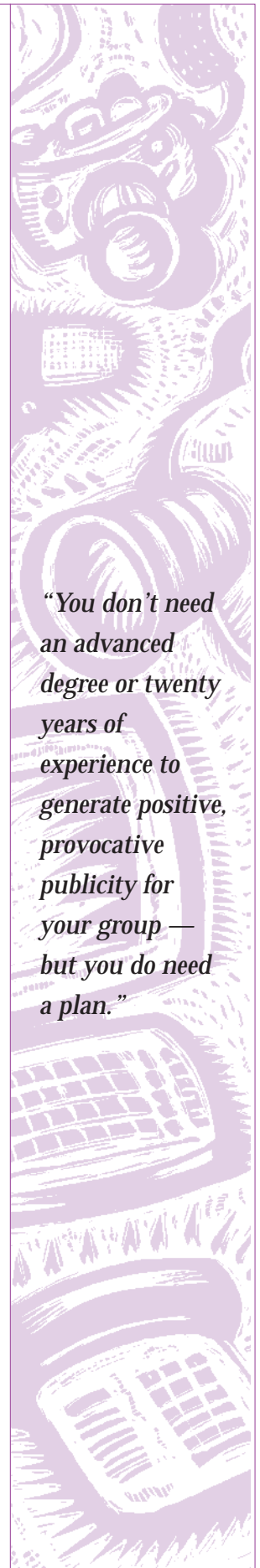
If you are just trying to get publicity for an upcoming performance or benefit, it’s simply a matter of getting your materials to the right people at the right time. Read on.

Publicity options

1. News release. Also known as a press release, even though it can (and should) be sent to the broadcast media. It might be helpful to mentally divide your releases into two categories: a “hard news” release which describes the group’s program or activities (your goal: a detailed feature story), and a “calendar” release which promotes an upcoming event (goal: a feature story and/or calendar coverage).

Most news releases are limited to one page, double-spaced, although major stories might warrant more pages. (For an international event commemorating Hiroshima Day, I once distributed a 5-page release). Be sure to provide the basic information — who, what, where, when, why — plus a relevant quotation from someone involved with the project. If available, enclose an appropriate black and white glossy photo. Newspapers and magazines are always looking for good photos.

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Many groups now distribute their news releases by fax or e-mail. This is a useful strategy for late-breaking stories, or when you're up against a deadline. Of course, very few publications can use photos that arrive via fax or e-mail, so plan ahead.

When developing your mailing list for news releases, don't forget the "alternative" media: church bulletins, alumni magazines, community radio stations, newsletters from other non-profits, community access cable TV, professional and specialty journals, weekly/suburban/rural newspapers, etc. While it may be difficult to get a big feature story in your big daily paper, smaller news outlets are



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always looking for copy. If you choose carefully, you can use them to effectively reach your best audience.

2. Public service announcements. Also known as PSAs. For radio, you'll need a brief (10/20/30 second) summary of your event for the announcer to read on the air. Many radio stations prefer to receive your news release

and write their own PSAs; check in advance. If you have access to video production equipment, television stations will sometimes air pre-produced 15 or 30 second video PSAs. Again, you should check with local stations for specifications. Most cable TV services have "video bulletin boards" for which they accept PSA copy.

3. Press conference. A press conference is most appropriate when you have information that is controversial and timely, or if you wish to respond to a recent news event. If, for example, you just discovered a cure for AIDS, you might want to call a press conference. On the other hand, a public announcement about the beginning of your fundraising drive probably won't interest the media. There's nothing more depressing than a press conference no one attends, so don't organize one unless you've got something juicy. Get a large room and set up a table where your spokespersons can be clearly seen and heard. If it's a really large room, and you organize lots of supporters to attend, you might need a microphone. Make a banner or sign with your organization's name to hang behind the speakers. Provide water and glasses for the speakers and the press. Set up chairs, but also leave room for TV cameras. Lots of handy electrical outlets will make life easier for the TV technicians. Provide press packets — news release, organizational brochure or fact sheet, relevant documents — to all media personnel. Make sure your speakers are brief and to the point, and leave time for questions. Talk about the juicy stuff up front — most news crews have several stops to make before their work day is over. Try not to schedule your press conference on the same day as competing news stories: the President's inauguration, Hurricane Zelda hits Florida, the first day of the baseball strike. Make sure to get the names of all those who attend, together with the paper or studio they work for.

If your information is site-specific, consider organizing a media tour. Call your press conference at the town dump, the abandoned house, the new art gallery, the inadequate day care center. Let the media know there will be "photo opportunities," then show them

around. Newspapers and especially television news teams are always looking for stories with a visual component.

4. Posters. Best for promoting an upcoming event. Keep costs down; if possible, arrange for design and/or printing to be donated. Keep the design simple, clear, and strong. Make sure the important information can be read at a distance. Brightly colored paper will tend to attract more attention than black and white. When hanging posters, consider placement based on your target audience. If you have the money and want to blanket your town, commercial postering firms can help.

5. Flyers. The best way to get a person's attention is to put something in his or her hand. If you've got the volunteers, handing out flyers at public events (parades, concerts, ball games, etc.) is an excellent way to promote your upcoming activity. To save printing costs, set up the flyers two or four to a page, then slice with a paper cutter. When choosing which events to flyer, target carefully. And don't be discouraged if most of them end up on the ground. Your goal is to find the people who will participate, and you'll have to sift through many who won't or can't.

6. Direct mail. Another good way to put information into their hands. Most organizations mail to their "house list" to notify members about upcoming activities. (Postcards, which are cheap to produce and mail, work well for this purpose.) If you are trying to broaden your base, consider other lists which might be available for an informational mailing. To really boost your results, wait a week and then follow up with phone calls.

7. Paid advertising. Proceed with caution. Advertising has a way of eating up your budget. If you are promoting a major public event, seek media sponsors to reduce your costs and stretch your advertising budget (see sidebar). Some publications offer a reduced rate for non-profit customers. Classified advertising, used creatively, is effective and relatively inexpensive.

8. Billboards and bus posters. Surprisingly cheap and, if used creatively, can generate additional attention via media coverage. Some advocacy groups use these advertising strategies to influence public opinion, timing their purchases around key Congressional votes, etc.

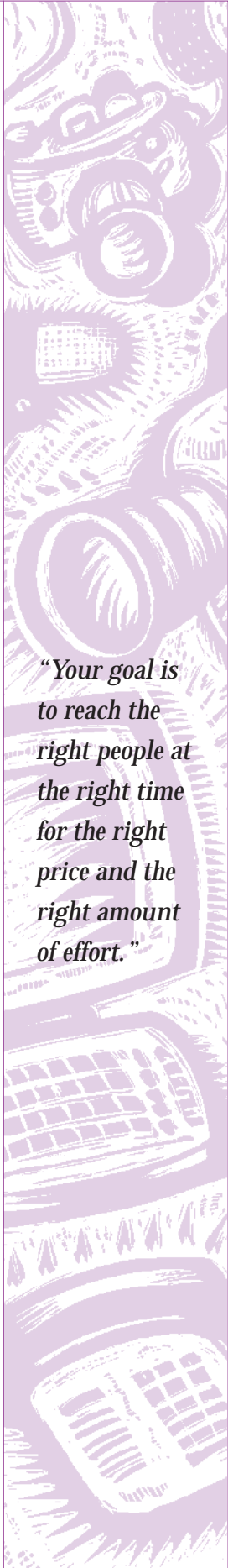
9. E-mail and the internet. An awful lot of information — much of it useless and redundant — is delivered via e-mail. Indeed, networks and list servers exist for almost every issue and constituency. If you can find the appropriate ones for your group, use them. E-mail is quick and virtually free, but will be most effective as a complement to other strategies. The potential for advertising on the World Wide Web is being tested by thousands of merchandisers, though very few have figured out how to make money doing it. If you have access to a Web site, use it. If you can set up a secure system for accepting donations via computer or selling tickets to your next benefit, do it. As with e-mail, use the Web as one small piece of your publicity campaign. It's still too soon to build a publicity campaign around a computer outreach strategy.

10. Other ideas. Be creative. You can use sandwich boards, signs hung from freeway overpasses, murals, etc. Set up a human alphabet chain at a football game and, on cue, spell out your message one letter at a time. Dress up in a gorilla suit or a Bob Dole (who?) costume. Hand out phony money with your group's ideas on the back. Once again, if you're clever enough and your timing is good, you can multiply your effectiveness by getting free media coverage of your promotional stunts.

None of this promotional work is quick or easy. It requires forethought and patience. But remember this:

- if you have a good story to tell, and
- you develop several strategies for telling it, and
- you implement those strategies with persistence — you will be heard. ■

This article first appeared in the Grassroots Fundraising Journal.



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