

Title:

Non-profits: Raise Funds without Buying Ads or Mailings

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Summary:

Non-profits with tight budgets can still impact their fundraising efforts without having to buy ads or send mass direct mailings. Free editorial placements often garner more attention and cost nothing.

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Article Body:

When non-profit organizations aren't out changing the world, they're appealing to supporters and the public for donations. Fundraising is a constant challenge for non-profit organizations and it's not because people don't want to give the money - it's because people don't always know that there's a need.

Fundraising efforts include direct mailings, advertising, and marketing campaigns. Each of these is costly and there's no way to guarantee return on investment. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to gain exposure and elicit donations without having to dip into the coffers? You can - they're called "editorial placements," or as we in media relations like to say "free advertising."

Newspapers and magazines live and die by their content. If people don't want to read what they're printing, they're in trouble. Being able to offer a print publication (or even a broadcast network) with a story that will entertain, educate, or inspires its readers is a challenge, but well worth it if it's printed.

Which of the following newspaper placements do you think will garner more public response: an ad placed in the "weekender" or "volunteer opportunity" sections describing your organization and asking for donations; or a touching feature story about how the organization is making a difference in the community? The feature story will almost undoubtedly send more people to an organization's Web site than an ad, and the funny this is that the feature story cost the organization nothing to secure.

Why does the public respond more strongly to a feature than an ad? Because

appearing in the media provides instant legitimization. People tend to trust the organizations or people they see in the paper or on TV. If you run a non-profit animal shelter that is featured on the weekend nightly news' adopt-a-pet segment, chances are the public will think of you first when looking to adopt a pet as opposed to if you simply placed an ad in the Sunday paper every week.

So how do you obtain "free advertising?" By reaching out to the media every chance you get. Smaller organizations that utilize community support can offer personal feature stories on certain overachieving volunteers. The media loves a good "feel good" story: how one volunteer has made such a difference, how a beneficiary of the organization's services is thriving now, and so on. How did your organization start? Did someone sell their business to establish a women's shelter? Does a local mother care for homeless animals on her farm? Here are some ideas to help inspire you to develop a story for your organization or cause.

Every person has a story.

Discover the stories behind the people in your organization and make the media aware of them. By "story," I mean a simple, conversational story - the type you might tell a friend. Pitching a story to the media doesn't mean you have to write it and offer it in its entirety. When you pitch a story, you simply let your media contact know about it. They'll decide if it's a fit and pursue it further.

To get an idea of the kinds of stories the paper and local networks like, spend a few weeks tuning in or scanning the pages. It will be obvious the kinds of things they're looking for.

Pay close attention to the journalists and reporters who write on topics related to yours. These are the people you are going to want to contact with your story.

Local outlets want local stories, and this can represent multiple opportunities for media coverage. For instance, if the person your story focuses on lives in a town other than where your organization is based, you can pitch the story to both locales.

Let the world know what's happening.

Hosting or sponsoring an event can garner more attention than a two-line announcement in the calendar section. What is the story surrounding your event? If you're launching a clothing drive for professional attire to help women get jobs, highlight a success story, such as a woman associated with your organization who overcame hardships and landed a great job that changed her

life. If you're hosting a casual fun-day dog show for kids to benefit a local animal shelter, find a pet owner who plans to enter his or her adopted shelter dog.

Even your fundraising events can be promoted through editorial placements. You don't have to have a high-profile MC or a gala to make the news. If this is an annual event, how do you expect to surpass last year's donations? How were the funds used? If they built a library or added a wing to a senior center, what's the story behind that?

Announce Everything

Organizations in large cities face direct competition for donations and media coverage. To help improve your chances of media attention, do everything you can to stay in the news (or at least in the minds of the news writers in your area). Is there a staffing change or new hire (a positive one)? Announce it. If you've added a service to your organization, announce it. In sales and marketing, a consumer needs to hear about a product seven times before he or she will buy it, on average. The same is true for donations to non-profits. The more often the public sees your organization in print or hears about it on the radio or on television, the more likely they will be to consider donating. Keep that in mind the next time you've got news to share!

Media relations is about building relationships and having an idea of what the public wants. It's not as complicated as it may seem, after all, you are the public. What do you want to read? What would be interesting to you? Talk to your co-workers and friends and find out their opinions. Identify the media people in your area who cover the types of things you and your organization do and begin to build a relationship. Before you know it, you may have them calling you for a story.