

Does Your Organization Need a Speakers' Bureau?

Don't just give a talk. Make it a strategically-developed public relations tool.

BY RUTH ELLEN KINZEY

The telephone rings. It's a civic club requesting a speaker from your nonprofit. You gladly accept the engagement. The day arrives. The delivery goes well. People ask questions. Audience members compliment you. Another success! Maybe.

Or maybe not. If the speech wasn't part of a well-orchestrated plan, it probably won't produce the results you'd like. Simply responding to requests for speeches may be a waste of precious time. Instead, you need to be sure each speech fits into a strategic public relations plan. To make the transition to a results-oriented speakers' bureau with a built-in evaluation process, follow these steps:

1. CLARIFY YOUR PURPOSE

A speakers' bureau can be used for a number of purposes. It can:

- Educate the community about your nonprofit.
- Motivate people to donate money or other tangible goods or services.
- Explain special endeavors (such as a capital campaign).
- Announce new programs or projects.
- Recruit volunteers.

Perhaps your organization hopes to accomplish all of these things. Whether you have a single objective or multiple goals, the first step is to be clear about your reasons for having a speakers' bureau.

2. IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

Next, ask yourself: Whom do you want to reach, with what results? Once you identify and prioritize audiences, you can develop content with them in mind.

For example, the American Cancer Society may create one speech for women to raise breast-cancer awareness and another for high school students to prevent teen smoking. In both situations, the American Cancer Society is true to its objective of increasing awareness and using education as a form of prevention. Yet by identifying key audiences and customizing the primary message, it has created two well-focused speeches.

3. PLAN YOUR MESSAGE

While speeches will differ from audience to audience, every talk should answer the same two questions:

- What sets your nonprofit apart from others?
- What is the future of your organization?

The answers to these questions will serve as a basis for your stock presentation, which should also explain the mission of your organization, outline your program offerings, identify those who benefit from your services, and explain volunteer opportunities.

For example, a general presentation may focus on the three major goals of the organization for the current fiscal year. You may also be seeking community support for a new building being planned. Perhaps there is a primary cause around which the whole organization is rallying. You may be able to develop a separate speech for each of these issues. Even so, you must be sure that basic infor-

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mation about your organization's mission comes through clearly in every presentation.

Once you've developed speeches, anticipate questions. What might your speaker be asked? Brainstorm frequently-asked questions, and prepare answers. Give speakers these standardized answers to ensure that they deliver consistent responses about the nonprofit and its mission.

4. DECIDE WHO SHOULD DELIVER THE SPEECH

Who should represent your nonprofit on the public platform? The executive director and key staff

members are likely choices. But don't overlook volunteers. Who can better represent the need for volunteerism than someone who passionately believes in the organization and donates time to the cause?

Most people can rise to the occasion if given proper training. Give potential speakers handbooks with preparation tips and public speaking techniques. Conduct practice sessions until you're confident that the person can professionally represent your organization.

5. MARKET YOUR BUREAU

With this work completed, you can now publicize your speakers'

bureau to the community. Develop a brochure that describes available presentations. Include information about your nonprofit and instructions on how someone can arrange for a speaker. This printed piece could be distributed at meetings or via staff members. It could be used as a direct mail piece with a personalized letter that emphasizes particular topics. A self-addressed reply form or postcard can be tucked into the mailing. This gives recipients the choice of requesting a speaker via phone or mail. You can also offer e-mail and fax options for responding.

Mail this promotional brochure to area clubs. You should be able to find a list of these community organizations through your local chamber of commerce or public library. Also consider contacting churches and educational institutions if these groups match your audience goals.

By doing a little market research, you can identify which audiences will produce the results you want. For example, if you're looking for volunteers, which groups would provide the best volunteer base to meet your needs? If fundraising is the goal, look for organizations that offer club donations or are likely to result in the most individual contributions.

Remember that personal relationships produce the best results. So, does anyone on your board belong to the target organization? If not, do board members know anyone affiliated with the target audience? Let these board members arrange a speaking engagement, as this personal approach is the most likely to ensure success.

6. TAKE CARE OF THE DETAILS

Whether you receive a speaking request via telephone or through the mail, obtain these details about the speaking environment and audience:

- name of the organization requesting the speaker (and the mission of the organization)
- group's contact person and telephone number
- program request (for example, nonprofit overview, volunteer opportunities, specific educational program, etc.)
- date, time, and location of speaking engagement
- size of anticipated audience
- room considerations (audience seating arrangement)
- audiovisual options
- availability of podium
- type of microphone (stationary or lavalier), if needed
- size and location of speaking area (stage, raised platform, behind a table).

Once this information is finalized and a speaker secured, send a confirmation letter to the contact person. In the letter, restate such details as time, location, and date of the presentation. Include the name of the presenter and a brief, prepared introduction for the guest speaker. This makes it easier for the person handling the introduction and increases the likelihood that the speaker and nonprofit are presented in the best possible light.

Send a copy of this letter to your speaker. Include any information you learned about the audience and

Do board members know anyone affiliated with the target audience?

speaking environment, so the speaker will know whether to expect a large group in a formal setting or a smaller audience in a more informal setting.

7. FOLLOW UP

Shortly after the presentation, call the contact person to ask how it went. Follow up with a formal thank-you note to the hosting organization. Such follow-up will show your commitment to excellence and help identify future speaking opportunities.

Also send a thank-you note to the speaker. If the volunteer took time from work, you can forward a copy of the thank-you letter to the individual's supervisor. Such recognition is usually helpful to the employee and appreciated by the employer.

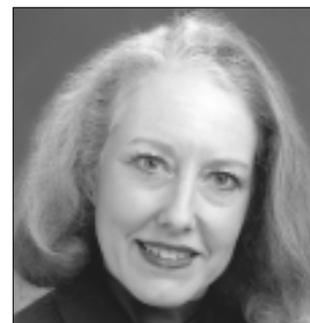
8. EVALUATE YOUR RESULTS

Now that you've established your speakers' bureau, was it worth the work? Is it producing the results you want?

The best way to answer these questions is to monitor results. Can donations be traced to audience

members from a speaking engagement? Is the nonprofit asked back to deliver a presentation on another topic, permitting other opportunities for exposure to the target group?

If you answer "yes," then the speakers' bureau is strategically developed and a useful public relations tool. If the answer is "no," then review the above steps so your speakers' bureau can graduate beyond merely promising that someone will show up to speak. ■



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