



Working for a Commission: It's Not What You Think Everything looks different when you see it through a patron's eyes.

By Karen Eber Davis

Every neck pivoted when Sasha Janes of the North Carolina Dance Theatre announced that the man who'd commissioned the dance *At First Site* was in the audience. Several years earlier, Michael Tarwater had commissioned the Theatre to create a dance for his wife, Ann. The first time he saw her, at a party 25 years ago, she wore a white dress, stood, and danced alone. At that moment, he knew she was "the one." The dance he commissioned celebrated that moment.

When I heard the story behind *At First Site*, I considered the opportunities nonprofits have to obtain commissions.* The idea of a patron hiring an artist to create art is ancient. Might nonprofits use the concept today? I decided yes. Let's take a fresh look at how commissions can work for your organization, no matter what your mission.

How a Commission Works

- 1. A patron has an idea for an experience or piece of work** your organization could provide — for example, an event, lecture, or service.
- 2. The patron wants to give a gift** to an individual, family, group (such as giving all third grade children the gift of swimming lessons), or the community.
- 3. The nonprofit and patron agree to create the experience or work**, paid for by the patron.
- 4. The experience offers ongoing value.** The evening I saw the dance was the sixth time it was performed. Each performance lists the patron's name. Each repetition creates value for the artist, the patron, the nonprofit, and audiences.

How to Use The Commission Idea

Commissioned pieces are a natural tool patrons use to create dances, plays, art, music, and the like. Even if your nonprofit isn't in the arts, you can earn commission income. At colleges and universities, for instance, commissions are behind endowed chairs, named lectures,

and lecture series. For other nonprofits, commissions are at work in requests for proposals and in grant projects designed specifically to meet the goals of foundations. Individual donations, especially large ones, are essentially commissions.

How can *your* nonprofit tap commission income?

Identify experiences patrons might desire. What might you create? How about a behind the scene tour for families during the winter holidays? A lecture or lecture series? A class for preschoolers designed around the patron's special interests? Art or other objects created by your clients?

Identify price ranges. Determine people who might commission these experiences or works. Who are your potential partners? Consider individuals, government, corporations, and foundations. Who would value something created just for them? Approach them with your ideas.

Let people know that your nonprofit seeks commissions. In the pre-event presentation, the Dance Theatre staff made it clear they welcomed more commissions. Communicate the idea in an appealing way.

Commissions are an old technique that can still create something new. A commission is always a compromise between your needs and those of your donors, but so is all funding. When you seek commissions to meet people's needs, you expand your repertoire, earn income, and reach a whole new universe of givers. **S**

** Commission, here, is not the same as hiring a fundraiser and paying them a commission (a percentage of what they raise).*



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