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Promoting the Mission: PR Strategy for Non-Profits

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Today's post is courtesy of Jeff Lavery, an account manager for Rhino Public Relations. Questions or comments? E-mail him at jeff@rhinopr.com, and follow his tweets on Twitter @RhinoPR_Jeff.



Oftentimes, a business will use its public relations program as a means to promote recently completed work or new assignments. In other instances, it may be tied to a new hire or promotion of a key executive. While a not-for-profit has similar motivations for drumming up awareness, marketers for non-profits must take a unique approach. External communications must be used to not only share news about the

organization but also to demonstrate the effectiveness of its mission and petition for support from current and prospective donors.

After absorbing the devastating impact of the global recession on charitable giving throughout the late 2000s, non-profits faced an uphill battle as the economy sputtered to life. Private giving increased by about 2% in 2010 in comparison to the previous year, according to a study by the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS). According to the same study, however, giving merely rose to year 2000 levels in 2010, to approximately \$290 billion. With numbers like these increasingly seen as the new normal, promoting a non-profit's commitment to its clients and the community can play a key factor in preserving existing donation levels.

So, in a world of decreasing attention spans and Twitter-sized word counts, how do marketers effectively tell an organization's story without overburdening the reader? Simple: build the mission statement into the details of every press release, award submission, or case study. A press release about a fundraiser doesn't just capture essential details about the event or financial goals; instead, it contains information about how previous funds have been used to provide

job training to an organization's clients, or support a capital campaign to renovate a facility to offer additional counseling services. Every form of communication is an opportunity to tell an organization's story within the context of a recent event or milestone.

Oftentimes, a non-profit can feel as if too much self-promotion will hurt them in the public eye. When times are tough, however, it's the organizations that are taking the steps to raise awareness that will most likely gain traction in achieving its fundraising goals. Many non-profits find that creating an annual gala event with a guest list that includes the rich and famous is a sure-fire way to grow awareness of the organization both among invited guests and the media.

An event can range from extravagant to simple, whether an intimate cocktail hour downtown or an evening affair complete with honorary speakers, a live auction and passed hors d'oeuvres. Despite the upfront expense of securing a venue, planning an event can potentially result in financial gain in the form of registration fees, auction proceeds, and charitable donations. Plus, events can be promoted in regional publications, using online calendars, press releases, and media alerts to target key photographers and reporters who cover the non-profit beat or party press. Think of it this way: an annual event provides three hours in a room with a non-profit's most important supporters and guests, some of whom are likely learning about the organization for the first time. A gathering to celebrate a non-profit's successes over the past year creates a setting in which new attendees are excited to learn more about the organization's mission and (hopefully!) be inspired to donate.

Other ways to create a buzz about a non-profit's mission is to identify a champion or advocate for the group. Whether the individual is a Hollywood heartthrob or a locally-recognized figure, consider pitching an area celebrity who would take up the cause and volunteer on the organization's behalf. From distributing gifts at the holidays to stacking shelves at a food pantry, having a famous face donate a few hours to pitch in presents ample opportunity for photo ops and media alerts about the non-profit and the caliber of individuals volunteering. In some cases, a non-profit can identify connections to media darlings like movie stars and popular politicians within its board of directors. 'Street cred' is huge when approaching the media to cover an event or to profile an organization, and celebrity endorsements never hurt.

No matter how you choose to promote your organization, the same rule still applies: incorporate the non-profit's mission in every form of external communication. From a press release to a case study, to a volunteer outing or gala event, don't be afraid to promote the organization's successes. In a world where every donation is considered sacred, non-profits need more than ever to highlight the positive change the organization is making in the community.