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Getting the word out: A guide to promotion and public relations for nonprofit organizations

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Getting the word out: A guide to promotion and public relations for nonprofit organizations

Abstract

There are numerous nonprofit organizations in the United States that lack the budgets necessary to carry out large-scale public relations or advertising campaigns. Therefore, these organizations must learn about and utilize less expensive techniques to increase awareness and gain support for their institutions and ideas. The present thesis project has been created to help managers and personnel of nonprofit organizations gain a better understanding of those promotional tools and public relations activities most accessible to them.

General information about marketing and its four primary functions: distribution, price, product and communication are provided. The emphasis of this thesis is on the communication function of the marketing mix. Common misconceptions about various aspects of marketing are pointed out, including the difference between promotion, public relations and publicity.

The manual portion of this thesis project includes detailed information about techniques and tools, provides examples and outlines and offers tips and suggestions to nonprofits.

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ABSTRACT

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There are numerous nonprofit organizations in the United States that lack the budgets necessary to carry out large-scale public relations or advertising campaigns. Therefore, these organizations must learn about and utilize less expensive techniques to increase awareness and gain support for their institutions and ideas. The present thesis project has been created to help managers and personnel of nonprofit organizations gain a better understanding of those promotional tools and public relations activities most accessible to them.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview.....	1-6
<i>Background, Marketing Overview.....</i>	<i>1-2</i>
<i>The Communication Mix.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Promotion vs. Public Relations, Promotional Techniques.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Promotional Techniques.....</i>	<i>3-4</i>
<i>Public Relations Activities.....</i>	<i>5-6</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>6</i>
Manual.....	7-26
<i>Purpose.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Cost, Technique & Tools.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>About Advertising.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Print Ads, Billboards.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Posters, Broadcast Advertising.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Public Service Announcements, E-mail.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>PSA Outline.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Sample PSA.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Celebrity Endorsements, Sales Promotions.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Public Relations Activities.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Media Relations & Tools.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Press Release Outline.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Sample Press Release.....</i>	<i>20-21</i>
<i>More Media Relations Tools.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Pitch Letter Outline.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Sample Pitch Letter.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Special Events, Public Speaking.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Interviews, Word-of-Mouth.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Reminders.....</i>	<i>27</i>
Works Cited.....	28

**GETTING THE WORD OUT: A GUIDE TO PROMOTION AND PUBLIC
RELATIONS FOR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS**

by

Nakia M. Watkins

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Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan on this date _____

Supervising Instructor

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OVERVIEW

Background

Before the late 1970s, many nonprofit organizations chose not to adopt any sort of a marketing strategy because they associated marketing with expensive advertisements and forceful selling of unnecessary goods (Fine xiv). These institutions had often made the mistake of only communicating their needs to the public, instead of demonstrating what they could do for the public. When people began to change and they developed a desire to know “what’s in it for them,” nonprofit organizations were forced to adapt accordingly. In many cases, these organizations have struggled because many nonprofit managers lack knowledge of the various aspects of marketing, which is important to all institutions interested in getting the public to support their product, service, or idea.

Marketing Overview

The American Marketing Association defines marketing as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, distribution and promotion of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives” (qtd. in Fine 1). In other words, marketing is about meeting needs of others to get what your organization needs. As the definition shows, marketing covers a broad area, but its four major categories (sometimes called the four P’s) are product, price, place and promotion (Lovelock and Weinberg 14). The product is what the organization has to offer, which is an idea or service in most nonprofits. The price is the amount charged; place, also known as distribution, involves deciding where the product is available; and promotion is what your organization does to motivate people to respond (Stern 8). Some marketers prefer to

substitute communication for promotion in the marketing mix. Communication is defined as “those messages directed at prospective customers and influencers about the organization and its products, as well as the means by which these messages are transmitted” (Lovelock and Weinberg 14). According to this definition, the communication mix involves more than promotion; it includes publicity, public relations, and informational activities. Because the communication mix is a major factor in the development of an organization’s image, which can help increase support for its idea or service, this manual is designed to help nonprofit managers and personnel gain a better understanding of this aspect of marketing.

The Communication Mix

An organization should be sure all its P’s are aligned, and concentration should never be on only one area of the marketing mix. Before directing total attention to the communication mix, it is important to conduct a marketing audit to be sure your organization has a high-quality product that is not too inexpensive or costly and the product should be accessible (Stern 43). Stern also suggests considering two more P’s: publics and production. Organizations should know who would be affected by and who may benefit from its ideas and services, directly or indirectly. In addition, it is important to be sure your organization can effectively meet demand for the product offered. Once your organization has these areas taken care of, a communication mix that relates to the rest of the marketing mix can be developed.

Promotion versus Public Relations

Although the communication mix involves many activities, this aspect of marketing can essentially be broken down into two sub-categories: promotion and public relations. As a matter of fact, public relations is such a major sub-category that some experts believe it is actually a primary function of the marketing mix and should become the fifth P (Self, Wymer and Henley 8). Many people mistakenly consider promotion and public relations as one in the same, but this is not correct. Promotional techniques are designed to inform publics about price, product and distribution details (Stern 76). Public relations, on the other hand, is more concerned with an organization's image within the community. Seitel explains public relations as a function which "helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other. Public relations is an organization's efforts to win the cooperation of groups of people" (9). While promotional activities are targeted to attract new customers or donors, public relations efforts are designed to carry information in and out of institutions to broader audiences who may support or use the organization in the future (Lovelock and Weinberg 437). Organizations must have a good understanding of promotional techniques and public relations activities in order to successfully gain support for and create awareness of its ideas and services.

Promotional Techniques

Promotional techniques are designed to inform prospective clients about ideas or services your organization offers that they may need or want. These techniques have the ultimate goal of getting people to take an action, such as supporting your idea or using your service. Major promotional activities include personal selling, sales promotions and

advertising. Personal selling is expensive and it is not a technique commonly needed, or used by nonprofit organizations. Sales promotions and advertising can prove to be very beneficial for nonprofits though. Sales promotions are those strategies used to increase short-term sales or support (Peter and Olson 35). Sampling and price deals are most often used by nonprofit organizations. For instance, prospective clients may receive a free trial membership, or they may be given a discount off the membership price. Institutions must be sure to combine other strategies with sales promotions because while these tools may increase short-term involvement, they do not always create the necessary long-term support and commitment nonprofits seek. Advertising is a major type of promotional technique. It is non-personal communication from an identified sponsor through a media outlet (Andreasen and Kotler 442). Ads are created to persuade, inform or remind target audiences about a product, service or idea. There are many forms of advertising with a wide range of costs; some ads are free for nonprofits, while others may cost millions of dollars. These non-personal communications can come through mass media such as television, radio, print or outdoor; or non-mass media outlets such as displays, brochures and catalogs may be used (Lovelock and Weinberg 404). It is important for organizations to utilize both mass and non-mass media outlets to effectively reach desired targets. Advertising is a useful tool because it allows the institution to control the reach, size, location and frequency of the message being communicated. While such control is ideal, advertising can be very expensive and many people consider the message to be biased since they come directly from the organization (Seitel 336). For this reason, it is also wise for an organization to have good public relations.

Public Relations Activities

The need for good image management is often not recognized or understood by nonprofits, but this is vital to most, if not all, institutions (McLeish 238). Communicating with publics about what your organization is doing may be more important now than ever before because recent scandals have made people less trusting of businesses. Sharing information about how finances are used, fundraising efforts, goodwill activities, events and even failures is absolutely necessary in order to develop and maintain the honest and trustworthy image an organization needs (McLeish 238). Publicity is often used interchangeably with public relations, but the latter is about more than just creating newsworthy events that will attract the interest of the media (Lovelock and Weinberg 347). Public relations also entails developing relationships, establishing communication with publics and maintaining a favorable image of the organization. Media relations and informational activities are widely used in the public relations arena. Media relations is a function of public relations that is concerned with developing and maintaining a relationship between an organization and media professionals (Seitel 331). Effective media relations can lead to increased publicity and offers a better chance for organizations to express themselves if a crisis should arise. This function uses a number of tools to communicate with the media, but news, or press releases are the most common. Press releases must be newsworthy; meaning they should be of human interest, have a topic with impact on members of the community or the entire society, they should discuss something rare or extraordinary, a conflict should be covered, they should be about a prominent figure or the releases should be relative to a current “hot topic” (Seitel 257). Informational activities are used to provide publics with knowledge about your organization’s cause or service. Popular ways to carry

out this function include special events, interviews and public speaking. These activities are useful because they help support the image an organization seeks to uphold. In addition, these informational activities could lead to increased support or future clients.

Conclusion

The most powerful tool any organization has is word-of-mouth. For this reason, a communication mix that uses many different types of promotional techniques and public relations activities is very important. An organization should be sure it uses enough outlets to reach as many members of the target audience as possible because they will store this information and possibly share it with others. While it is wise to use a variety of strategies, institutions should also be sure that all communications are conveying a consistent message to publics. The following manual has been designed with small-budget nonprofit organizations that lack much knowledge about promotion and public relations in mind. It is not comprehensive, but it will familiarize readers with promotional tools and public relations activities that could help increase support and awareness of an organization's cause.

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