Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

Volume 2013 *Proceedings of the 71st New York State Communication Association* Article 9

2014

Making the Case for Pro-bono Public Relations Services for Nonprofit Organizations on Long Island

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Cover Page Footnote
Thanks to graduate research assistant Samantha McManus, Hofstra University; and student aide Nikki Gyftopoulos, Hofstra University for their assistance.

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Nonprofit organizations have historically struggled to effectively use public relations tactics and campaigns to communicate with their publics. Three annual surveys of Long Island, New York-based nonprofits conducted in 2011, 2012 and 2013 add evidence to this anecdotal knowledge. These nonprofits either do not have or do not devote significant resources to public relations efforts. As media becomes more complex and the skill sets needed to navigate these changes increase, it may be more incumbent on experienced public relations practitioners to assist these organizations through pro bono services.

Introduction

Public relations professionals have an anecdotal awareness of the difficulties nonprofit organizations experience when attempting to communicate with their respective audiences. A result of increasingly cumbersome funding challenges perennially experienced by these organizations and agencies is a lack of resources for public relations programs, campaigns and staff. Seok Kang and Hanna E. Norton (2004) wrote, “For nonprofit organizations (NPOs), the public relations struggle is reaching potential publics with generally limited financial means.” (p. 279) Often there is minimal staffing devoted to public relations, media relations and general communication efforts; it is common for public relations functions to be handled by staff or volunteers with little or no formal communication education or training. Public relations planning is often ignored or not given much priority, and basic public relations tools are implemented with inconsistencies and limited competencies. When a budget does exist for a public relations staff, it is often minimal and inadequate; it is usually only within large organizations with multi-million dollar budgets where significant public relations staffing and related resources can be found.

In the for-profit world, significantly more attention is being paid to corporate social responsibility (CSR), which for many firms includes activities designed to "give back" to the communities and publics they serve. Some of these businesses, particularly public relations agencies, provide pro bono public relations assistance to nonprofit organizations. The case should be made to other for-profit institutions with significant public relations resources to provide similar pro bono services as part of their own CSR efforts.

Literature Review

Deficiencies in budget and staff devoted to public relations are clearly detrimental to sustaining nonprofit organizations, as communication with their constituencies is often essential to their survival. Combined with tremendous competition for donor and foundation dollars, it can become more difficult for nonprofits to demonstrate and communicate their mission and value, an essential component for successful fundraising.

Nonprofit organizations have long struggled with communicating well with their publics, a challenge noted within the early work of Philip Kotler and Sidney J. Levy (1969) who wrote:

> Customer communication is an essential activity of all organizations, although many non-marketing organizations often fail to accord it the attention it deserves. Managements of many organizations think they have met their communication responsibilities by setting up advertising and/or public relations departments. They fail to realize that everything about an organization talks. (p. 13)

Later, in a study of marketing strategies for nonprofits, Kotler (1979) noted, "Of all the classic business functions, marketing has been the last to arrive on the nonprofit scene." (p.38)

Research in this area has been provided by Julie O'Neil (2008) who measured the impact of communication on building trust, commitment, and satisfaction among donors of a large nonprofit organization located in Fort Worth, Texas. Two hundred seventy-five donors responded to a survey from which results indicated that roughly 50% of the variance in trust, satisfaction, and commitment can be attributed to a combination of communication tactics. Clearly communicating to donors about how their donations affect those in need was the most important factor. O'Neil stated:

> Communications that make donors understand very clearly how their donations will help those in need explained the most variance for trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Communications that make donors feel assets are being used wisely also emerged as a significant predictor for trust and satisfaction, although not for commitment. (p. 270)

Problematic for nonprofit organizations are the multiple roles a public relations practitioner must play in many nonprofits' organizational environments. Years before the dominance of social media in the public relations field, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1991) stated, "Public relations departments have greater potential to practice management and use a two-way model of public relations if they included communications managers who conceptualize and direct public relations programs as well as communications technicians who provide technical services such as writing, editing, photography, media contacts, or production of publications." (p. 257) However, the role of the public relations practitioner often extends beyond that of a manager or a communications technician. The encroachment of fundraising as a public relations management task was recognized in an early study by Kathleen Kelly (1994). When 175 public relations practitioners were surveyed to examine the organizational relationship between public relations and fundraising functions, "25% of the respondents agreed with the statement that fund raising increasingly is taking over the management of public relations (i.e. fund raising encroachment has occurred or is occurring)." (p.13)

As the Internet and social media became a significant means to connect nonprofits' missions with their constituencies, it became clear that lack of training and staff hindered the ability to use these new tools effectively. "The minimal use of relational communication functions among sampled NPOs demonstrates they are not effectively using the Web to connect with audiences via technological advances the Web can provide," wrote Kang and Norton (2004). (p. 282) Kristen Lovejoy and Gregory D. Saxton (2012) cited studies by Kent, Taylor & White (2003) and Saxton, Guo, & Brown (2007) which "have shown that nonprofit organizations have not been able to use websites as strategic, interactive stakeholder engagement tools. Perhaps this was due to not having the know-how or the staff to create more interactive sites with feedback options and discussion boards." (p.337) Interestingly, Lovejoy and Saxton believed that this was no longer the case—or an excuse—for lack of communication efforts.

> The advent of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have taken away this excuse. These sites are free and have built-in interactivity. Any organization big or small can create a site and start building a network of friends and followers with whom they are in almost real-time contact. (p. 337)

They added a caveat: "Being on Twitter is not enough—organizations need to know how to use the medium to fully engage stakeholders." (p.352) Similar observations were expressed by Richard D. Waters, Emily Burnett, Anna Lamm, and Jessica Lucas (2009) regarding nonprofits' use of Facebook. "Most nonprofits lack the resources or time to provide constant attention to a Facebook page. Creating a profile and then abandoning it will create only minimal exposure for the organization, and it could turn off potential supporters if the witness inactivity on the site." (p. 105)

A lack of human resources, "specifically not enough staff or time," was cited by Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin (2010) (p. 41) in their study of how the American Red Cross uses social media as a reason social media is used less effectively by nonprofits. "The reality of not having enough staff or time is a barrier for many (other) nonprofits and corporations, calling for the need for more staff to be assigned to social media implementation." (p.41) Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) noted Scott Westcott's (2007) study on charities' use of social networking:

> Many nonprofits are turning to the heaviest users of social networking sites for assistance. College interns and volunteers are often in charge of managing nonprofits' Facebook presence because they have knowledge on appropriate uses of the site and are often already personally invested into social networking. (p. 105)

Even in his paper 35 years ago, Kotler (1979) discussed the problem with using volunteers. "Volunteers tend to give less attention than is necessary to the project, and often lack objectivity. It is usually preferable to engage a professional marketing consultant, one who has experience in the nonprofit subsector of the economy." (p. 41)

Methodology

Using a database of nearly 4,000 Long Island-based nonprofit organizations provided by the Middle Country Public Library located in Setauket, N.Y., survey invitations were emailed to approximately 1,100 nonprofits in each of the three years the survey was conducted. Public and private schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, religious institutions, and government and quasi-government organizations were removed from the list and were not invited to participate. Organizations represented in the surveys were human services and health care agencies; environmental groups; senior, youth and women's facilities and services; and other advocacy organizations.

Longitudinal, non-normative surveys conducted for three consecutive years of Long Island-based nonprofit organizations confirm that most, regardless of their size and budgets, are devoting relatively few resources toward getting their messages to their publics. According to the results of the surveys, conducted online and at six major regional conferences in 2011, 2012 and 2013, they are typically spending 2% or less of their budgets on public relations campaigns and staffing.

The first survey was completed online between October 27 and December 17, 2011 by 160 representatives of these nonprofit organizations, and also person-to-person at two major Long Island events in fall of 2011: the Fair Media Council's "Connection Day" and the Association of Fundraising Professionals' "Philanthropy Day." A second survey seeking comparative data was conducted online between October 13, 2012 and January 11, 2013, and also person-to-person at the same two events in fall 2012. There were 125 respondents to the 2012 survey. A third survey was emailed to the same list of potential respondents; 116 organizational representatives responded between October 13, 2013 and January 20, 2014; person-to-person surveys were again completed at the same professional events in fall 2013.

Survey Results

Category of nonprofits

Survey respondents were given 14 possible answers, including "other," to the question of which category of services they provided. The types of nonprofit organizations responding to each survey varied widely, as demonstrated on the following table:

Table 1. *What kind of organization is your nonprofit? (figures represent percentage of total respondents for each survey)*

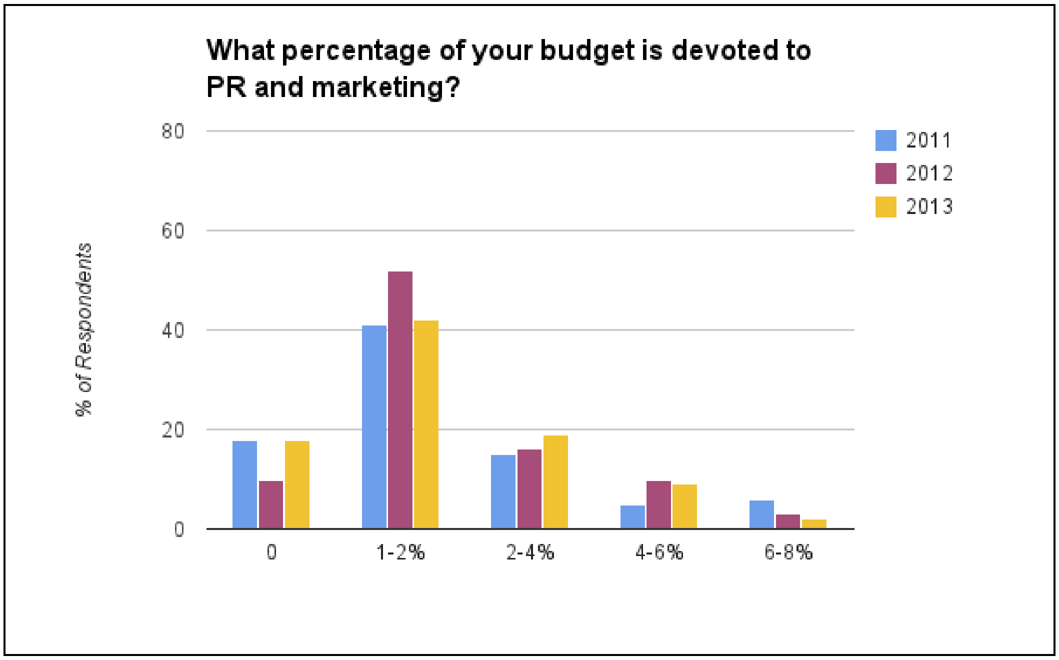
% Respondents by Type of Organization	2011	2012	2013
School	11.2	5.6	4.3
Research/Development	0.0	1.6	0.0
Arts and culture	8.7	11.2	7.7
Religious affiliate	1.2	4.8	4.3
Health care	8.7	6.4	13.7
Human services	21.2	20.1	18.1
Housing	2.5	2.4	2.5
Environment	3.7	8.0	3.4
Supporting organization	5.6	4.8	4.3
Advocacy	6.8	6.4	5.1
Youth	5.0	4.8	3.4
Economic development	3.7	3.2	0.8
Media	1.8	0.7	0.8
Other	19.3	19.3	30.1

Percentage of budget for public relations and marketing

Total budgets for the participating nonprofits varied significantly, with 39% reporting less than $250,000 annual budgets and 44% more than $1 million in both 2011 and 2013. In the 2012 survey, 33% reported budgets under $250,000 and 42% exceeded $1 million. In all three years the survey revealed that the majority of these organizations devoted 2% or less of their annual budgets to public relations and marketing efforts.

This contrasts with the private sector. According to Brad VanAuken, "The general rule of thumb is that consumer product companies should be spending between 6% and 12% of revenues on marketing, while B2B companies should be spending between 2% and 6% of revenues on marketing" (Branding Strategy Insider, 2012). In the same article, VanAuken added, "A 2010 Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) Council Report showed that 16% of companies spent between 5-6% of revenue on marketing, with 23% spending over 6%. Companies that are launching new products or brands or entering new markets often spend up to 20% of their revenues (and sometimes more) on marketing." (www.brandingstrategyinsider.com/2012/03/marketing-budget-how-much-should-brands-spend.html#.VDVGD7xg6Ro

Figure 1. *Percentage of budget for public relations and marketing*

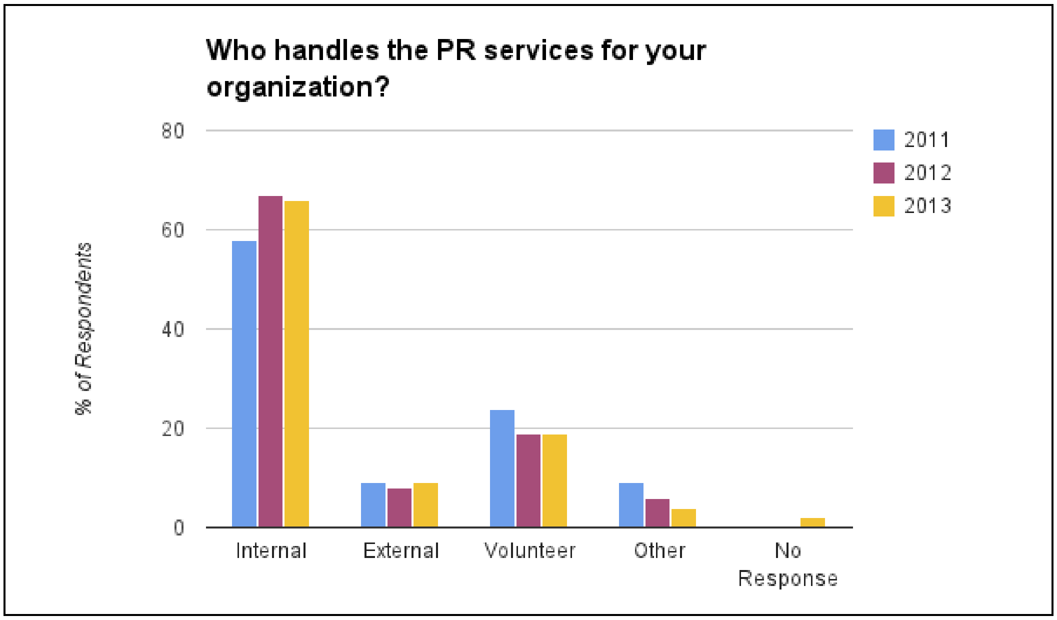


However, in its "Sixth Public Relations/Communications Generally Accepted Practices (GAP study)" (2009) the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication studied, among other data, public relations budgeting as a percentage of revenue, referred to as the PR/GR Ratio (ratio of PR budget to gross revenue). The ratio suggests large organizations spend, on average, $786 on PR for every $1 million in gross revenue or just .000786%. While this number is far below the Long Island nonprofits surveyed, the GAP survey skewed to far larger organizations since those organizations surveyed had budgets averaging $12 billion. This ratio formula therefore seems inapplicable to nonprofits with relatively tiny budgets.

Personnel providing PR services

Of the respondents, 29% surveyed in 2011, 25% surveyed in 2012, and 24% surveyed in 2013 had a minimum of one full-time public relations professional on staff. Other individuals are providing public relations services and functions; the majority of the respondents (58% in 2011, 67% in 2012 and 66% in 2013) reported that public relations was handled internally, while the remaining respondents reported such services were being provided by volunteers (24% in 2011, 19% in both 2012 and 2013), externally (9% in 2011 and 2013, and 8% in 2012) and by "other" (9% in 2011, 6% in 2012 and 4% in 2013).

Figure 2. *Personnel providing PR services*



Training history of employees

Forty-four percent (46%) of the respondents in 2011 noted their full- or part-time staff receives some public relations training; this percentage rose to 50% in the 2012 survey but dropped to 44% in 2013. In 2011, 50% of respondents reported that no public relations training is provided to their staff, volunteers or interns. This number dropped to 24% in the 2012 survey but rose to 53% in 2013.

Figure 3. *Training history of employees*

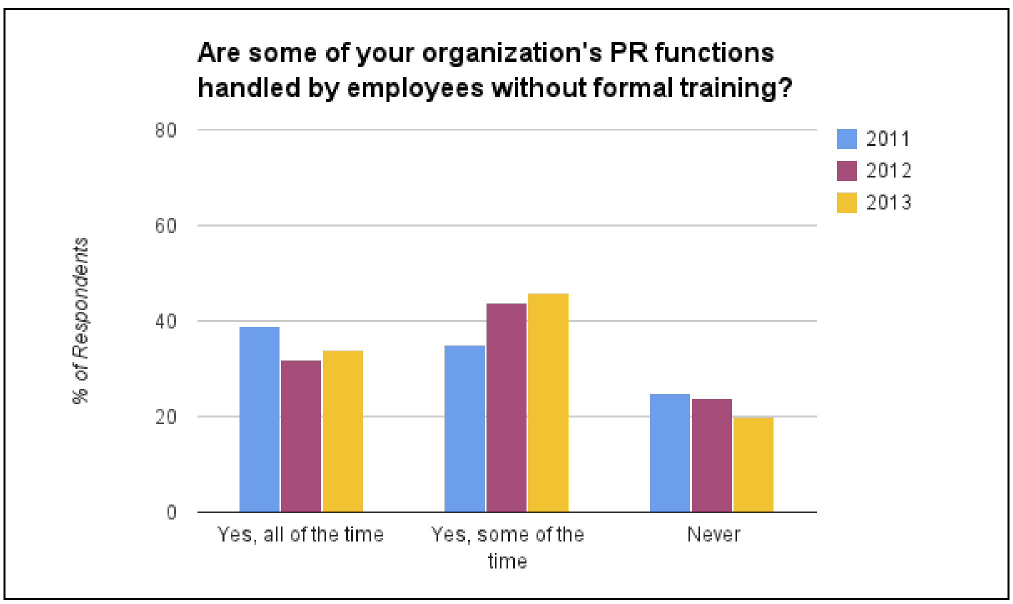
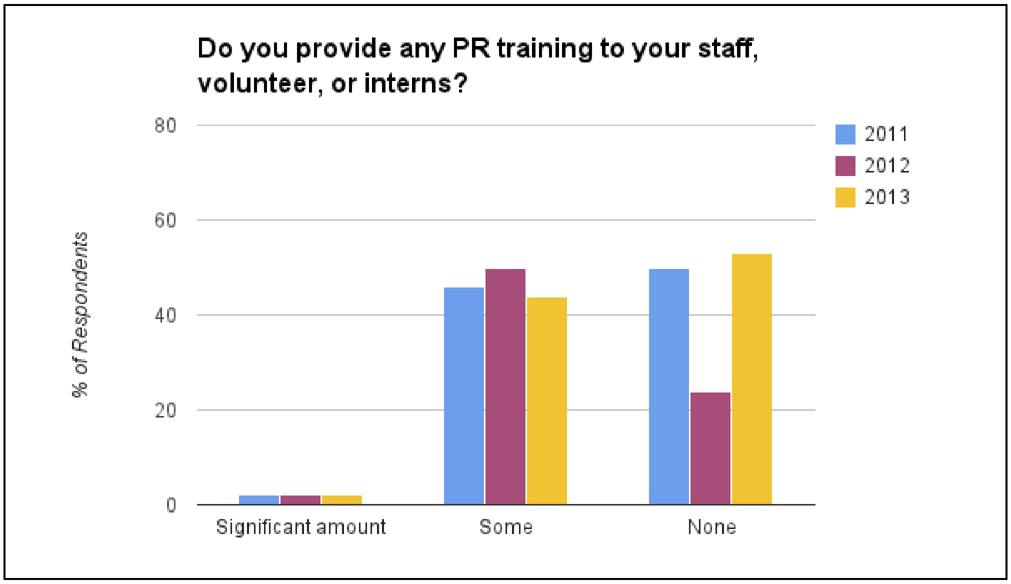


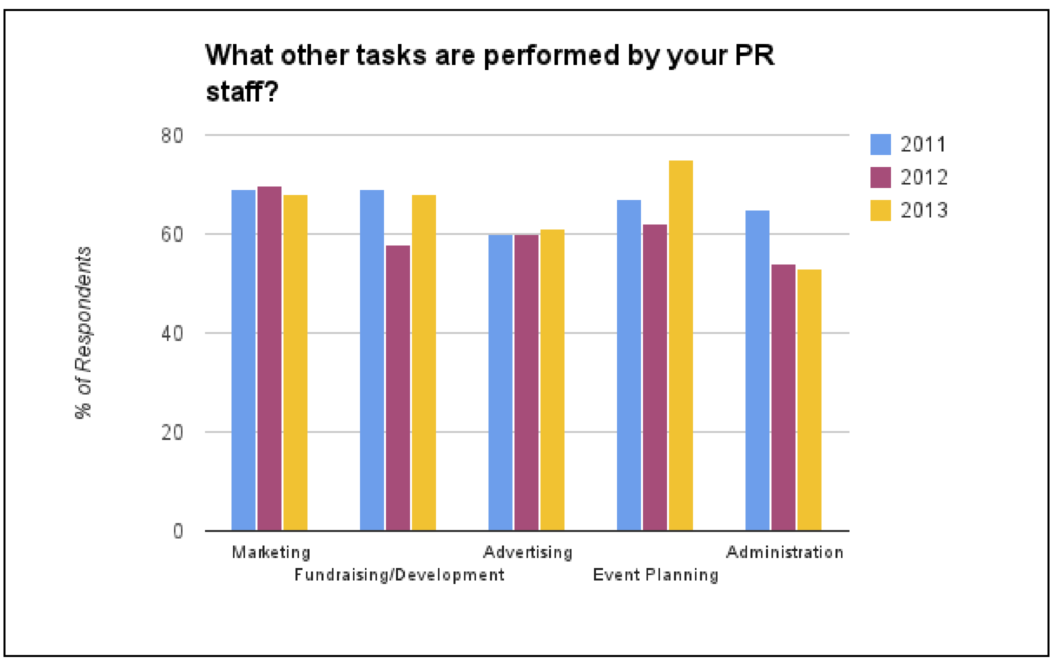
Figure 4. *Providing public relations training to staff, volunteers and interns*



Other tasks performed by PR staff

Because of their lack of resources, nonprofits are depending upon staff and volunteers who are multitasking, often combining their public relations responsibilities with others including marketing (69% in 2011; 70% in 2012; 68% in 2013), fundraising (69% in 2011; 58% in 2012; 68% in 2013), event planning (67% in 2011; 62% in 2012; 75% in 2013), advertising (60% in 2011 and 2012; 61% in 2013), and/or additional administrative duties (65% in 2011; 54% in 2012; 53% in 2013).

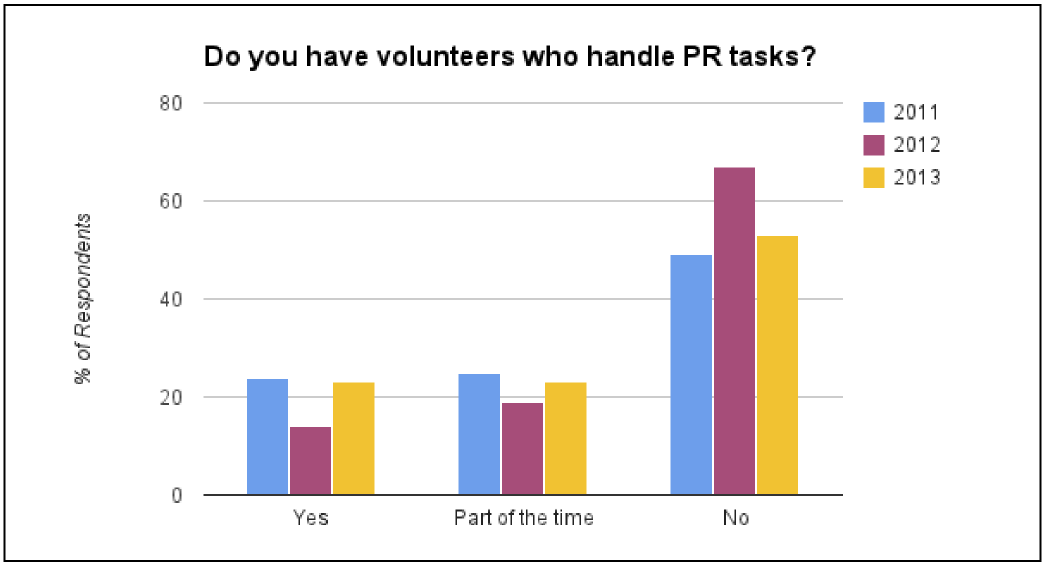
Figure 5. *Other tasks performed by PR staff*



Volunteers handing PR tasks

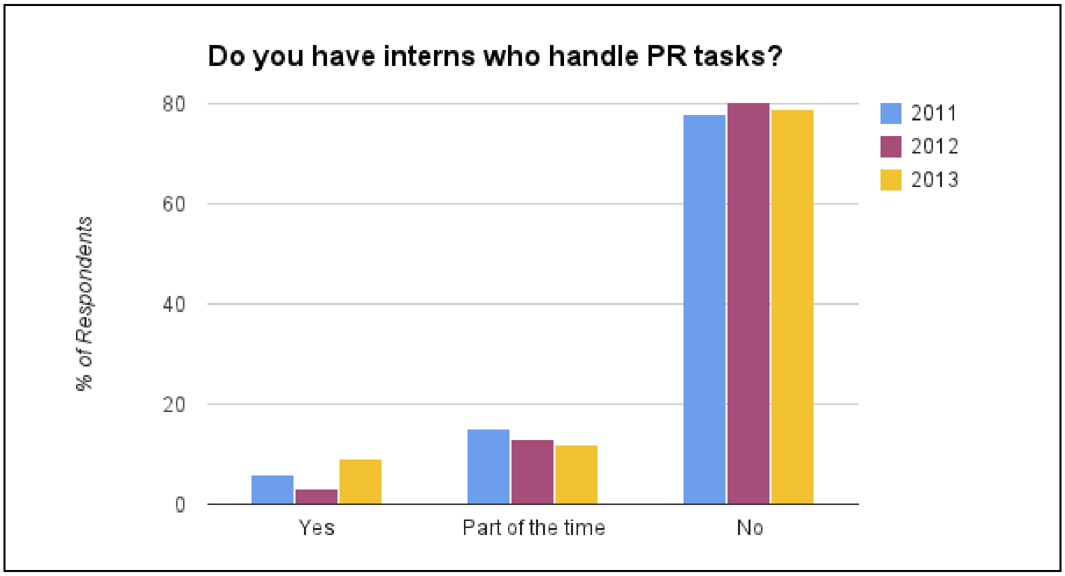
Of those surveyed, half responded in 2011 that they use volunteers for public relations tasks all or part of the time; this number dropped to less than a third in the 2012 survey but rose to 46% in 2013. Interns are depended upon to handle some public relations duties, according to approximately 21% of the 2011 respondents, 18% in 2012, and up to 24% in 2013.

Figure 6. *Volunteers handling PR tasks*



Interns handing PR tasks

Figure 7. *Do interns handle PR?*



The surveys provide evidence for what has been generally understood: nonprofits realize the value of good public relations, but few have the budgets for staff or tools to create and implement the public relations campaigns they would like with enough resources.

At the conclusion of each of the surveys, respondents were asked, "If you could achieve one significant public relations goal this year, what would it be?" The following sampling of their answers is illustrative:

- Learn how to better get our name out there.
- To complete the reorganization of our marketing program to include advertising, advocacy, government relations and PR.
- More presence in the media.
- Tell our story in a meaningful way that resonates with our community.
- Develop more personal contacts with press representatives.
- Improve social media communication to advance the goals and messages of the organization.
- To have our organization profiled in a news article and learn how to get our programs listed in the papers; radio would also be great.
- Have more time to network and pitch stories, especially those that are trending and timely.
- Placement or mention in a national publication.
- Improve creation and delivery of collateral materials.
- To have the budget to buy advertising as part of our layered PR effort that also includes traditional editorial outreach, social media and public events.
- Raise awareness, understanding and prospect for action on issues our organization cares about.
- Have someone in the staff only to handle public relationships.
- More time to actually focus on more meaningful and effective public relations campaigns.
- To get some interns to do public relations and at the end of the semester we can hold an event to let people know about us and our mission.
- To get an intern devoted just to public relations. We realize that our efforts are sporadic and should be more deliberate but our staff is so small and our time is so limited that we just do whatever we can do.

Discussion

Richard D. Walters (2007) noted, “Excellent public relations consists of two-way communication and interactivity.” (p. 66) His study on nonprofit organizations’ use of the Internet drew a similar conclusion on fund raising: “The top nonprofit organizations in the United States are not using strategic communications to maximize their e-philanthropy efforts. Relying mainly on one-way communication strategies, they are not investing enough resources into creating relationship cultivation opportunities using the Internet.” (p. 72)

Because budgeting within smaller nonprofits for public relations and marketing efforts as a percentage of total revenue is roughly one-third of reported private sector spending, nonprofits, especially smaller organizations, continue to face challenges when attempting to reach their targeted publics. Many nonprofits struggle just to pay for staff and operating costs, and subsequently devote as many resources as possible to fulfilling their missions.

However, until and unless nonprofit boards, CEOs and executive directors make public relations a greater priority by devoting additional resources to their efforts, nonprofits will be caught in somewhat of a “Catch-22,” wherein a lack of funding for public relations and marketing renders them unable to reach their full outreach potential and, as a result, leaves them struggling to enhance their messaging and grow their organizations.

It is therefore in the best interests of nonprofits to seek out corporate support by way of pro bono services. Conversely, businesses planning to enhance their corporate social responsibility programs can create goodwill by reaching out to nonprofit organizations to assist them with the most fundamental public relations and communication services.

These partnerships can serve both organizations well; the for-profits become a “good neighbor” by helping to move nonprofit organizations’ communication efforts forward, and the nonprofits open opportunities to highlight businesses as corporate partners doing good work for the communities they serve.

Further research

Plans are under consideration to continue the annual survey of nonprofits’ public relations resources on Long Island. The database would be updated and refined with approximately the same amount of organizations surveyed.

An effort will be made to expand this research, widening the survey target beyond the borders of Nassau and Suffolk counties. The breadth of this effort—how to widen the geographic outreach—is in the planning stages.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the extreme pressure nonprofits experience to raise funds and support, combined with their lack of resources devoted to effective communication, the area’s public relations practitioners in agency and corporate environs should consider making a more serious commitment to providing pro bono services to these organizations.

Significant pro bono public relations work is being done by corporations under the banner of "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR). As a management policy, CSR goes beyond what public relations practitioners call reputation management; CSR represents relationship management. CSR contains the belief that effective communication within an organization is essential to the external sustainability of the business and its public image. For public relations agencies and consultancies, this corporate policy, designed to "give back" to the communities it serves, often includes providing pro bono public relations services to nonprofit organizations. These efforts are mutually beneficial: the nonprofits' communication efforts are enhanced and strengthened through the assistance of professionals, and the businesses' "goodwill" efforts are real demonstrations of commitment to the communities in which they operate and to the customers they serve.

Many public relations professionals working in agencies, corporations or as sole practitioners already volunteer their time as advisors, mentors and volunteers to assist nonprofit organizations' communication efforts. In fact, the Council of Public Relations Firms, a trade organization, claims on its web site that a survey of its membership indicates more than 70% are currently serving pro bono accounts. Professional organizations including the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) encourage such pro bono involvement through recognition programs and advocacy:

> PRSA's 111 chapters across the United States are places where local public relations professionals come together to expand their network of colleagues and contacts, share knowledge and earn recognition for their work. But PRSA Chapters also are a conduit for these individuals to give back to the communities where they live and work in socially responsible ways. (2012)

A review of several agency web sites shows that leading public relations agencies are devoting resources to pro bono work on behalf of nonprofits. Ketchum, a New York-based public relations firm with more than 100 offices in 70 countries worldwide, touts its "KSR (Ketchum Social Responsibility)" in a 2011 annual report.

> KSR both energizes all of us working here and unites us closely with the communities in which we live and work. We are connected by our obligations to every community we touch and to the people we work with—our clients and the colleagues devoted to serving them—and to society at large. Only by meeting these commitments along with our business obligations can we possibly consider ourselves as being part of a successful business. Importantly, we believe that companies make the best contributions by offering what it is they do best. In our case, this is communication, and a tenet at the core of our mission is that the world's most pressing issues often hinge in many respects on communication challenges. (2011)

Similarly, New York-based Kwittken & Company lists 26 nonprofit organizations on its web site (2013) as recipients of its resources. Its "Kwittken Gives Back" page states:

> Philanthropy has long been a part of Kwittken & Company's philosophy, and since our founding we have committed nearly 2 percent of our net income each year to various charitable organizations. Below you'll find a list of the worthy charities that have benefited from this philosophy. (2013)

Global public relations and communications firm Weber Shandwick also touts its commitment to non-profit organizations and efforts on its web site (2013):

> Weber Shandwick is committed to supporting the communities in which it operates through pro-bono community outreach programs around the world. These efforts are an important part of our company culture and provide another way for our employees to be advocates—in this case, for community organizations worldwide. We recognize the significant contributions of our colleagues' pro-bono efforts, which are as varied and diverse as our offices, through Weber Shandwick | Making A Difference, our annual, internal awards program. (2013)

Smaller, local PR firms are also making larger commitments to pro bono services for nonprofits. An example is Agency Westchester which, in an article published by *PR Newswire* (July 8, 2013), the firm announced its "expansion of pro bono marketing support for area not-for-profits, charitable organizations, and worthy causes. Agency Westchester senior partner John Van Dekker described the program as "a way to contribute to the community and add unique value to causes with significant needs."

It is interesting to note, however, that a review of the web sites of six of Long Island's top public relations firms (based on number of employees) revealed no mention of pro bono services or volunteerism within their companies.

"The daily efforts of public relations practitioners in showcasing their organizations' efforts in a timely, thorough, and responsible way have a direct ramification in building trust, satisfaction, and commitment" (O'Neil). It should be, therefore, incumbent among public relations professionals to offer pro bono services to nonprofit organizations to help them reach their publics, particularly their donors and supporters.

While such professional volunteer activity does not and will not end the need for on-staff public relations personnel and training, it can bridge the gap that is endemic among nonprofit organizations, including those based in New York's Long Island.

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