

Chapter

The Power of Giving Back

We receive but what we give.

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE¹

In these times of shrinking budgets and fierce competition for charitable contributions, consultants can give to their communities and benefit themselves by volunteering to help nonprofit groups accomplish their missions. Your expertise and efforts can advance the well-being of your neighbors and improve conditions where you live and work. In the process, you can enjoy positive professional experiences, hone your skills, build goodwill, expand your network, and advance your career.

Guerrillas derive numerous benefits from giving to others. But receiving self-serving rewards is not their main motivation. Your primary incentive should be a genuine desire to help others, not merely to develop your business. If you don't passionately want to help, your focus and momentum soon will fade. Lackluster results could hurt your nonprofit clients and damage your reputation.

You can contribute to worthy causes by making financial donations or by working on pro bono projects. Pro bono is defined as "work done without compensation for the public good." On pro bono projects, you can help civic, community, or charitable organizations address their most vexing, complex issues, and your technical expertise can make the difference between the success and failure of their projects.

■ BENEFITS TO CONSULTANTS

Few activities provide as much gratification as giving help to others or are as satisfying as solving important problems. Helping is our ethic; it's the glue that bonds our society, and it feels good to work for the benefit of others. Assisting the less fortunate is a way to share our success. By shifting the focus from our needs to the needs of others, we increase our appreciation for our good fortune and affirm our compassion for others.

Giving back to the community has several benefits:

- It solidifies your reputation as a consultant who cares about people.
- It helps build your brand with people associated with charities and in your community.
- You may attract new clients, but there's no guarantee. If you do receive new business, you can never tell when it might come. It could be just days after you make a great impression, or it might take years.
- You can enhance your consultants' skills. Pro bono projects are especially helpful for younger, less experienced consultants because pro bono clients are often willing to give consultants more freedom to perform and offer friendlier, noncorporate environments, which most consultants enjoy.

■ SEVEN SKILLS YOU BUILD

Pro bono projects can be exceptional training grounds where you can grow, build your communication skills, make important network contacts, and work with a variety of clients. Firms can take greater

GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: PRO BONO MARKETING

For consultants, pro bono work is nonmarketing marketing. It's a careful balance between the desire to contribute to the community and to build your business. To be successful, follow your passion for community service and the commercial benefits that accrue will be a bonus.

risks and put less experienced consultants in roles they might not consider with paying clients. When these consultants develop the following requisite skills, they are more effective in their work with commercial clients:

1. *Ability to work independently:* Pro bono projects are often understaffed because many of the organization's team members are buried in other endeavors or are performing other part-time volunteer work. As a result, volunteer consultants usually work independently, make tough decisions, and gain vital experience.
2. *Creativity:* Volunteer consultants usually have less access to funds, people, and other resources than they would on paying projects. So they often have to find more creative solutions to accomplish even the basic tasks. On a project to create a Web site for a nonprofit organization, a volunteer consultant had no one on his team who could design the graphics for the new site. To resolve the problem, the consultant called every Web designer in town and obtained the necessary volunteer help.
3. *Process consulting skills:* Many pro bono projects are staffed with part-time volunteers, consultants, and the nonprofit's employees. This creates the need for strong process skills like meeting facilitation, data analysis, and project management. Creating a cohesive and productive team from a disparate group is challenging and provides volunteer consultants with invaluable project skills for future assignments.
4. *Executive communication:* Often, the usual business hierarchy is minimal or nonexistent in nonprofits, so consultants must interact with people at every level, from part-time volunteers to board members. A consultant with less than two years of experience had to present her team's recommendations to a nonprofit's board that included the executive director, two state senators, a deputy mayor, and two industry CEOs. That presentation conquered her nervousness in dealing with high-powered executives.
5. *Leadership:* Consultants working on pro bono projects are expected to step up to leadership roles, even if it's a stretch for them. Three consultants led an education program that required them to manage the activities of 700 volunteers working in 23 locations. After that effort, leading other projects seemed tame.

6. *Collaboration:* Community and civic organizations draw volunteers from fields such as education, business, the arts, and politics. Diverse groups frequently must come together to meet common project goals. On an assignment to develop a management structure for a nonprofit's project to reduce urban violence, the team included consultants, former street gang members, the clergy, law enforcement officials, and several prominent politicians. The consultants, in collaboration with the team, found common ground among the team members that formed the basis of a solution. When the consultants subsequently had to deal with a dispute between a client's manufacturing and distribution executives, bringing the opposing parties together was a piece of cake.
7. *Getting it done:* Consulting projects may be extended because of scope changes or other external factors. With paying clients, extensions are usually acceptable because the clients pick up the bill for the extra services, but not in the pro bono world. Consultants must be dedicated to getting the expected results within the expected time frame no matter what other events create barriers.

When a firm was working for a local nonprofit, it learned that the executive director was being replaced. The effect of the change was to freeze the team's activities until the new director's priorities could be determined, which could take months. Knowing that after a few weeks it would be virtually impossible to reconstitute the team, the consultant sought the opinions of the nonprofit's board and the new director. With their help, the project proceeded uninterrupted.

Volunteer work, when performed well, can provide exceptional media exposure, build your business identity, and boost your community and business awareness. The willingness to do good deeds can differentiate a firm and bring it to the attention of potential clients. And volunteer service reminds us not to lose track of our values in the pressure-cooker world of business.

■ CHOOSING OPPORTUNITIES

When you look for ways to give back, you'll find that numerous organizations will welcome your assistance. Expert help is expensive and many nonprofits can't afford it. In deciding which organization to help, apply the following three criteria:

1. *Find the balance between the charitable organization's specific needs and your firm's areas of specialization.* For example, if your firm specializes in health care issues, search for pro bono health care projects. You will achieve better results if you build on and align your expertise with the charitable organization's problems.

Use your skills in the most effective way. If your firm specializes in strategic planning and the local hospice organization wants you to beautify its facility's landscaping, that's not a good match. Using high-priced consultants to plant trees and bushes doesn't make sense. Volunteer to help the hospice with its five-year funding plan instead.

After polling its employees, a consulting firm found that education was its staff members' top choice for nonprofit work. So the firm concentrated its pro bono work on education programs for grades K-12. Now, education is a main focus of the firm, and its members take great pride in helping children. One of the firm's areas of specialization was strategic technology planning, so the volunteers developed a districtwide strategy for training teachers how to use computers in the classroom.

2. *Understand the nonprofit's mission.* Find the charity that best fits your values. First, make inquiries with your associates, friends, and network members. Search the Web for additional information. Consider organizations that fascinate or interest you that you think can benefit from your skills. Working on uninteresting projects will bore you and may lead to burn out—so opt for stimulating opportunities with long-term relationship potential.
3. *Uncover the facts.* Reputable organizations clearly define their programs. They have measurable goals and concrete criteria to quantify their achievements. Be sure to compare charities that have similar missions. Also investigate the organization's culture; is it conservative, radical, aggressive, innovative, flexible, or staid?

In choosing a nonprofit to assist, trust your instincts. If you have doubts, don't agree to work with the charity. Instead, find another nonprofit that does similar work, where you can feel comfortable and wholeheartedly perform. Plenty of charities need your help and will be delighted to receive whatever time and effort you can spare.

■ PRO BONO RULES

Treat every pro bono project as if you're working for your best-paying client. Expect some pro bono efforts to be difficult because of red tape or personality clashes. Ironically, the worst nightmares always seem to occur when you volunteer your services or work for a highly discounted rate.

Qualify every pro bono project. Before you agree to help, make sure that you can do it effectively, that the scope isn't too broad, and that both the nonprofit and your firm will support your efforts. Try to select projects that fit in with your other commitments and that can produce results that will be worth your investment.

Get it in writing. As soon as possible, clarify exactly what you're expected to do and put your understanding in writing. It doesn't have to be a full-blown proposal or a long, detailed contract as long as it describes:

- Your role.
- How you're to work with others.
- The results that should flow from your activities.

Use the guidelines in Chapter 16 on writing proposals to prepare a statement of the work you'll perform. Also define measures of success by including what precisely should occur for the project to be successful. Define how you'll know when the project is completed and the nonprofit is satisfied. If you don't specify what constitutes completion of the work, you may never get out of the project.

GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE COMMITMENT

Before you jump in, be certain that you have sufficient time and resources to finish what you begin. Even if you have the best of intentions, don't commit until you're convinced that you can fully deliver. Don't go rushing into a nonprofit project and get its officials all fired up, begin the work, and not complete it. Don't underestimate the obligation you agree to take on and the time, effort, and costs it could entail. By not completing what you started, you could set the nonprofit back and make accomplishing its mission more difficult.

GUERRILLA TACTIC: MAKE IT COUNT

On pro bono projects, do something *significant*. Find a nonprofit's toughest problem—a dilemma it doesn't know how to solve—and fix it. Use your skills to create solutions that make real differences. Think blockbusters. If an organization's finances are a mess, overhaul them or put in a new accounting system. If it is having trouble raising funds, implement a process that will enable it to increase contributions by 100 percent. Don't simply volunteer to collect tickets during a conference. Commit yourself to taking on important projects that bring meaningful change.

When highly skilled consultants provide nonprofits with the additional talent they need, the nonprofits frequently don't want them to leave. Charities truly appreciate the value of working with bright, dedicated consultants who produce outstanding results. As a result, they will keep stringing out projects because they're getting such great benefits at no cost.

Many charitable organizations are understaffed and need tight schedules and strong project management. Establish milestones. Create interim checkpoints throughout the project so you can monitor progress and make appropriate corrections promptly. Be responsive, easy to work with, and always meet your deadlines.

It's a good idea to give charitable organizations invoices to give them a sense of the value of your services. Clarify that the invoices are only for informational purposes and that you don't expect to be paid.

Tackling difficult pro bono projects will set you apart from the competition and provide you with interesting challenges. Your talents will be displayed and your accomplishments will be recognized, especially on high-profile projects. You will be noticed by and interact with the organization's leaders and its most important supporters.

Performing wonders for worthy causes on big issues can also get you priceless publicity. It will earn you devoted friends and supporters in the community, and you will be helping a worthwhile cause.