Developing Cost-Effective Publicity for Your Next Event

By Kelli S. Rainey

One of the most important keys to the success of any campus program is good publicity. When you appropriately advertise an event, you can expect larger attendance, increased enthusiasm and positive recognition for your organization. However, many programming groups do not have the funding to pay for elaborate and expensive publicity created by large advertising agencies or graphic designers.

Once money is spent on honorariums, travel, hospitality and such, what’s left for publicity? How can you publicize an event without big bucks in the budget? Believe it or not, it’s possible! With a well-developed plan and inspired creativity, your organization can produce cost-effective publicity for all of your campus events.

As you begin planning publicity and promotion for your next event, apply the simple, yet effective, strategies that follow:

Each is essential to the development and success of your program and will open the door to a number of possibilities.
Creativity at Work

All people are born with a knack for creativity, whether they realize it or not. You do not need to be a well-known artist to be considered creative. Individual creativity can be expressed in various ways. On our programming boards, we must inspire that individual creativity in our members, especially when considering publicity. Let’s face it—the typical 8 1/2” by 11” poster or flyer and quick e-mail blurb are not longer considered cutting-edge marketing. There are many promotional possibilities that are low-cost and effective in reaching our target audience. To develop them, we must encourage our members to think outside of the proverbial box, as well as to follow through with the ideas once they’re generated. How do we accomplish this? To spark a few ideas within your group, try these approaches:

Hold a brainstorming session with your programming board members. Think of the most outrageous event possible that your organization could host. Give yourself a limited budget and see how many creative publicity ideas your group can create. Encourage the group to write down all ideas, no matter how ridiculous they may seem at the time. To make the process more challenging, divide your members into smaller groups and see which team develops the most creative ideas. Provide rewards for those who do because a little competition can get the ball rolling, especially when incentives are involved. Ultimately, this activity will provide you with a shopping list of ideas that are versatile and cost effective for just about any event.

Provide your group with a box of silly and random objects. Then ask the question, “What can we do with this?” Make a list of the ideas suggested and, afterwards, determine whether you are able to use any of these suggestions to help advertise any of your upcoming events. Apply themes to various upcoming events and have your members generate creative ideas centered on each theme.

To house all of the ideas developed through these activities, create a publicity toolbox (see display on Page 83) of strategies that can be used for future events. Remember that the greater the variety of ways you have of delivering your message, the more people you are likely to attract. When in need, refer to this resource for assistance and continue to add to the ideas stored within it throughout the year.

Timing is Everything

Timing is essential when planning an event. However, when considering publicity, programming groups often over-

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Wise Use of Resources

There are similar groups on campus and at other institutions that face the same challenges you do with respect to developing cost-effective publicity. Accept these challenges and venture outside your comfort zone. Begin by contacting other programming groups to see what successful publicity strategies they use. Ask each group for samples of their promotional materials as well as the cost of each. Then determine if these ideas can be adapted to your own needs.

Taking advantage of on-campus resources can be beneficial, as well. Contact various departments to see if they are able to provide promotional materials or assistance for your next event. For example, the art department may have student graphic designers who are looking for opportunities to gain experience and showcase their talents by designing brochures for your organization. Food service providers may alter their menu schedule to provide a theme meal centered around your event.

Resources within the community should not be neglected, either. Many community groups are looking for connections to the student population. Therefore, they might be willing to provide donations or other support for your organization. For example, the local newspaper might provide your programming group with free advertising space in exchange for complimentary event tickets.
Publicity Toolbox

Here are a few tried and true low-cost publicity ideas that will assist your organization in building its own publicity toolbox.

- Tape footsteps or handprints to the floor or wall leading to your venue.
- Progressively fill in or remove pieces from a jigsaw puzzle to reveal your advertising.
- Have event planners wear handmade T-shirts or buttons before each event that say, "Ask me about tonight's event."
- Paint information on exterior windows—with proper approval and removal of paint afterwards, of course.
- Send handwritten personalized invitation cards to your targeted audience.
- Work with the food service department to have miniature flags with information about your event added to deli sandwiches.
- Get permission to stick labels about your event to bags of chips and soda cans in campus snack machines.
- Laminate signs about upcoming events and hang them in the showers and bathroom stalls on campus.
- Publicize events to professors a semester ahead of schedule so they may add the information to their curricula.
- Rent a costume, walk around campus and distribute program information about events to students.
- Write a press release and distribute it to campus and community media.
- Print bookmarks with information about semester events to place in the library and bookstore.
- Host a pre-event, such as a reception or party, that will attract people's attention.
- Advertise a limited two-for-one special through which two people get into your event for the price of one.
- Identify a few charismatic leaders and ask for their help in recruiting people to attend your event.
- Create a dial-up hotline for event information.
- Purchase a junkyard car, park it in a visible lot on campus and post information about your event on it.

Evaluate, Evaluate, Evaluate

Once you have created and executed your newly developed, low-cost publicity strategies, you must review them to see how well they worked. Document your thoughts about an event immediately afterwards while everything is still fresh in your mind. Determine whether your methods were successful and if they can be used again in the future. In doing this, you are helping ensure that cost-effective publicity methods are considered for all events.

As a programmer, you have the ability to create astounding and creative publicity that will generate great excitement for your events and your organization. Although many of our programming organizations face limited budgets, with a little imagination and the assistance of the right strategies, your events will be successful.

References


About the Author

Kelli S. Rainey is director of Student Activities at Johnson C. Smith University (NC). She previously served as assistant director of Student Activities at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte and as director of student activities at Fairfield University (CT). She holds a bachelor's degree in communications from Lynchburg College (VA) and a master's degree in applied psychology from Fairfield University (CT). In NACA, she has presented educational sessions on the national and regional levels. She has served as an NACA National Convention graduate intern and an NACA Workshop facilitator. Currently, she is the National Convention Program Committee Lecture Showcase Selection Coordinator.