

## What Works

### Attracting Attention

**The Taproot Foundation provides organized volunteers  
who deliver marketing expertise**

By Andrea Orr

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## VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

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The Taproot Foundation provides organized volunteers who deliver marketing expertise *by Andrea Orr*

People who give money to help the homeless, promote literacy, or clean up the environment often worry where their dollars are really going. They hope it is reaching the homeless, the illiterate, or the environment, but worry it is being squandered on administrative costs. Even with no-strings-attached giving, there remains a kind of unspoken presumption: I offer my hard-earned money, and you won't turn around and spend it on exorbitant salaries, cushy offices, or staff retreats. Or slick marketing materials.

A few years ago, Aaron Hurst decided there was a problem with that line of thinking. Nonprofits that lacked professional brochures and memorable logos might never be noticed by prospective donors. They needed Web sites and printed literature full of crisp copy, clear images, and heart-tugging photos that would demonstrate they served an important cause. As Hurst saw it, effective marketing was not a luxury for well-heeled companies to indulge in; it was vital for putting nonprofits on the radar screen.

"Marketing equals fundraising," says Hurst, a veteran of both the not-for-profit and the marketing worlds, who four years ago founded the Taproot Foundation in San Francisco as a network through which professionals could donate marketing and other talents to cash-strapped nonprofits. Since 2001, the foundation has helped hundreds of nonprofits create slick logos, Web sites, and brochures that stand up well against material that is put out by well-established businesses. Clients have ranged from the Institute for Fisheries Resources, which works to augment fish populations around the world, to Per Scholas, which collects, restores, and distributes old computers to needy families.

Anyone who doubts the importance of a clear, well-presented message need look no further than San Francisco's Community Awareness & Treatment Service (CATS). The organization had long offered shelters, transitional housing, substance abuse counseling, and other assistance programs to San Francisco's homeless, but after almost 25 years of service, it was facing major government funding cuts that put its future at risk. CATS turned to Taproot because it knew it had to proactively reach out to a new group of potential donors.

Over the course of three months, a volunteer team that included a copywriter, a graphic designer, and one very dedicated photographer worked through a Taproot grant valued



**Volunteer teams are accountable for delivering professional marketing to nonprofits.**

at \$15,000 to develop a brochure that put a human face on the homeless problem. After many discussions with CATS management, the team settled on the slogan "We reach farther to reach more" to emphasize the range of its treatment services. From there, they worked on the layout, imagery, and creative copy of its brochure to put together an easy-to-read flyer that presented CATS as a professional and caring organization that stood out from the crowd of homeless-assistance programs.

Over the course of the next year, individual donations to CATS went up 50 percent. This certainly validated the project, but there was an even more rewarding result. A number of San Francisco's homeless who had never visited a CATS center were showing up with a Taproot-produced brochure in hand. The marketing material had spoken not just to potential CATS donors, but also to its needy clients. It was solid proof that marketing was not just a disposable expense; it helped get the core job done.

Such stories of the power of professional marketing have created a robust demand for a grant from Taproot. The foundation currently serves between 100 and 200 nonprofits a year, but receives many more grant applications than it has the resources to handle. Its two offices in San Francisco and New York City enable it to serve large metropolitan areas on both coasts, but its reputation surpasses its reach.



## Noncash Grants Free Nonprofits

Nonprofits that have received a Taproot grant often say that the main strength of the program is that it gives grants of talent rather than dollars, freeing them from scrutiny over how they are spending their money. “We had so many needs that we never would have taken \$25,000 in cash and used it on a branding project,” says Amy Lit, director of development and community relations at Eastside College Preparatory School in East Palo Alto, Calif., a poor and crime-ridden city located inside an affluent swath of suburbs. A charter school offering a rigorous academic program, close mentoring, and an alternative to busing to more distant public schools, Eastside received marketing services worth \$25,000 from Taproot to develop a school logo. The school wanted to build a reputation both among local youth who yearned for guidance that would put them on a collegebound track and the universities where their students would one day seek admission. “When people got our mail, we didn’t want them to throw it away,” explains Lit.

To some, the simple matter of a logo may seem to require little more than a personal computer equipped with a few design software programs. Not so, says Foundation Center columnist DK Holland, who has studied the ways successful brands are developed and how nonprofits so often misfire in this area. “What I’ve found is that they name themselves incorrectly, and if they develop marketing materials at all, they tend to use people who are friends who can work for free,” says Holland. She offers the example of one New York-based convent that went by the name of Sisters of Charity, an innocuous but terribly vague label that failed to distinguish it from the hundreds of groups of nuns around the world that use the exact same name. “It’s not just about the logo, it’s about the whole look and feel of attitude you present and how it reflects on the culture,” she argues.

If nonprofits served by Taproot are often thankful for the crash course in marketing they receive, Taproot volunteers say they are equally well served. Unlike so many volunteer opportunities that have talented professionals answering phones or chopping vegetables, the Taproot program lets them give to the nonprofit world the same skills they have honed in their careers. It leaves them with a sense that they are contributing something valuable, rather than just filling a slot.

## Volunteers Held to Their Promises

Perhaps the most critical feature of the Taproot program is

the rigor with which its grants are assembled and run. Every volunteer team includes the appropriate creative talent as well as a project manager who serves as a liaison between the volunteers and the client to make sure expectations are reasonable, and that they are completed on time. Taproot grants come with firm deadlines, typically about six months from the project launch. Over the project’s duration, individual volunteers’ workloads ebb and flow, but the project manager remains throughout to ensure that the project does not go the way of so many pro bono projects – into pro bono never-never land. “There is a prescribed role for all the volunteers and there is a project manager,” says Joseph Fay, vice president for marketing and communications for the American Lung Association, who also serves as a member of the Taproot board. “There’s no

opportunity for the project to go off-kilter.” Its tight structure helps ensure that all volunteers know what is expected from them at the outset so they can schedule it around family life, full-time jobs, or planned vacations.

Jennifer Warren, who has served as a project manager for two Taproot projects, says nonprofits tend to be “thirsty for that kind of structure.” Warren believes the Taproot projects have

worked because the project manager brings organization and accountability to a disparate group of willing but somewhat disorganized volunteers. “I make the point that if we don’t meet this deadline, it is just not going to happen,” Warren says. “It’s highly structured and efficient.”

An enthusiastic supporter of Taproot, Fay nonetheless stresses that marketing and publicity should not be regarded as the end goal. “Marketing helps raise awareness, but at the end of the day you have to close the sale,” he says. “You have to get a donation, get an additional volunteer.” Fay suggests Taproot could expand to offer nonprofits additional services that would “help translate the front-end marketing into back-end sales.”

Hurst sees similar opportunities for expansion. In fact, he says that while he has found an abundance of volunteers in creative disciplines, it was never his goal to focus on marketing grants exclusively. As Taproot plans its expansion into Chicago and other U.S. cities, it is also hoping to attract more volunteers from fields like human resources, information technology, financial planning, and performance management. □

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