“Remember that time is money,” said Benjamin Franklin in his Advice to Young Tradesman.

Today, strategic use of both time and money is crucial. Stiff competition for funding, the clamor for attention from legislators and government officials and general uncertainty about the future puts enormous pressure on nonprofits to perform better across the board.

Yet, despite these pressures, and the urgent need to maximize precious funds, many nonprofits ignore a powerful and cost-efficient marketing tool - public relations.

Done well, public relations (PR) can effectively achieve impressive results. It can build your brand and attract new supporters.

For example, good PR can:
• Drive referrals by communicating your expertise and success to important audiences;
• Create advocacy positioning that raises your voice above the pack and attracts attention from potential funding sources while helping to preserve existing funding;
• Draw attention to your funding needs and your track record of success with donors.

Not surprisingly, many top-notch organizations get lost in the thicket of today’s varied marketing communications alternatives. Social media, the internet, advertising, brochures and traditional media such as print and broadcast all compete for our attention. Which alternative works best today?

Making a choice is particularly important since many of the most accessible and easy to generate communications turn out to be very time consuming, costly and ultimately ineffective.

WHAT IS PR?

Many people tend to blend PR with other similar communications disciplines. This includes the common misconception that PR equals advertising. Advertising is a powerful marketing communications tool that can help build brand identity mostly through repetition. (Think, “Race for the Cure” and fighting cancer comes to mind.) But organizations pay dearly for the privilege, and all that media saturation can be far too costly for the majority of nonprofits.

Apple, the computer firm, does not use advertising as its main vehicle to sell its products. It uses PR to build its brand. Consider the anticipation that is built up in the media for every new Apple product – no matter how similar to its predecessor it may be. Today Apple is one of the world’s most recognized brand names, and they owe much of their success to great PR!

PR is critically important to building a strong reputation. It may even be its most important element.

A brand’s identity is built, these social media driven days, as a partnership between multiple forces. It is not just a catchy name, or a striking logo, a beautiful brochure or a well-written...
PR is critically important to building a strong reputation. It may even be its most important element.

Press release. The mass market economy our parents and grandparents enjoyed has been replaced by a customer economy which calls for person-to-person communications built upon trust. PR plays an important role in building that trust.

**BUILDING COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORMS**

Events, sponsorships, newsletters and internal blogs all play a role in building a strong identity for an organization. But these communications are self-generated and the public knows it.

Positive placement of stories about an organization in editorial media, sustained over a period of time, is another low-cost way to build a brand and also build trust.

Editorial content in newspapers, on the radio and TV, and these days on the Web, carry an implicit third-party endorsement of a brand. Advertising does not. And as the media is typically thought of as being critical in their reporting, their implied or stated approval, often just from inclusion in a news article, adds great and rapid impetus to a brand’s momentum. The public believes that if someone is quoted in the press, that the press must think they are worth quoting. So that person or organization in the news must be worthy of attention!

Such third party credibility can ignite grass-roots word-of-mouth endorsement – still the best form of publicity.

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

PR is the discipline that is generally best for implementing - or at least having strategic oversight - over social media since PR has traditional strengths in fostering dialogue.

Product pushing social media programs driven by marketing are all well and good, but they should be part of a broader, strategic PR approach.

Social media use cannot occur in a vacuum; rather must be driven by high-quality content and integrated as part of a broader marketing strategy that incorporates both traditional as well as new media marketing tactics. Social media is powerful but should not be used as a standalone substitute for a communications program.

Today, the real competition doesn’t just come from other organizations, but from the extreme clutter of the marketplace. Breaking through that clutter is the job of PR. The challenge is to motivate and inform a significant majority of the audience being targeted to perceive an organization in a positive, desired manner. All PR – from single and straightforward publicity to more complex promotional campaigns – play a major role in establishing and shaping those perceptions.

PR initiatives available at comparably low cost to nonprofit organizations include:

- Informed commentary and trend analysis placed in the press;
- Media recognition of industry leading initiatives;
- Published organization profiles and thought leadership bylined articles.

Yes, such efforts do take some time. But with the help of good PR council they can be accomplished without too much time, expense or undo effort and -- most importantly -- with great impact.

Peter Roche heads the Public Relations Practice at Danosky & Associates.