



How Good Karma Mixed With Moxy and Social Media Created Close to \$1 Million in Revenue

By Kimberly Smith – from the library of www.MarketingProfs.com

Company: Help A Reporter Out
Contact: Peter Shankman, Founder
Location: New York, NY
Industry: Publishing
Annual revenue: Confidential
Number of employees: 3

Quick Read

It all began for the sake of good karma—helping out a friend, or a friend of a friend, because it seemed the nice thing to do.

Turns out those little favors were in huge demand, especially once people found out about them and eagerly spread the word. Peter Shankman, founder of Help a Reporter Out (HARO), an email-based service that brings journalists and sources together, didn't hesitate to work that to his advantage.

Less than two years later, investing little more than his time, Shankman's service boasts close to 75,000 subscribers and nearly a million dollars in revenue.

Challenge

Ask Peter Shankman, and he'll tell you that he's always been one to connect people. To begin with, he's a publicist who works to generate awareness for his clients. He also started a social-networking site (which has since been acquired) that joins business travelers with others visiting the same destination. And in between he's been considered "the go-to guy" when one of his reporter friends needs help finding a good source.

In 2007, one such source request came from a journalist who had heard that Shankman knew of soil experts in sub-Saharan Africa, for a story on Nigerian farming. Not quite.

But rather than simply turn the journalist away, Shankman figured he'd see what he could do. He established a Facebook group called "If I can help a reporter out, I will..." and told his friends about it. Voila! A source was located.

This, Shankman thought, could save him a lot of time and hassle, so he kept it up. "[I] figured if I could do it like that, it'd be easy and prevent me from having to look people up for my reporter friends when they called," he explained.

A couple of months later, Shankman faced two dilemmas: a Facebook-enforced cap on the number of group members, and threatening accusations about stealing leads from a company that was already performing such a service for a fee. (Shankman knew he wasn't stealing and eventually worked out a compromise with the company.)

In any event, it was clear to Shankman that demand existed and opportunity was knocking. So rather than back down, he opted to find means to grow.

Campaign

Shankman started by giving it a name, Help A Reporter Out (HARO); created a logo; and moved the program to its own site, HelpaReporter.com, which launched on March 20, 2008.

The site essentially consists of two main pages, one for journalists who wish to submit a query, and the other for sources—i.e., anyone who would like to sign up to receive notice of those queries via email.

The source-directed page clearly communicates what users can expect from signing up (up to three emails per day, etc.) and includes an anti-spam notice, which explains that HARO will not spam users, and in return users are expected to only respond when there's a fit between the query and the sources they can provide (i.e., they agree to not spam the journalists).

Registration incorporates a double opt-in process and is followed by a thank-you email, which again explains the program and the anti-spam policy, then asks users to share the site's link with journalists and keep the list growing.

To promote the service, Shankman has used the following free resources:

- **Facebook:** Members of the original "If I can help a reporter out, I will..." group were alerted about the new site and provided with links. In addition, Shankman launched a new Facebook fan page under the HARO brand that now has more than 4,000 fans and includes the following:
 - A link to the latest HARO queries and updates
 - Links to register as either a journalist or a source
 - A box that displays fan testimonials
 - Shankman's blog feed with links that prompt users to share the posts via email, Delicious, Digg, Technorati, Mixx, Stumbleupon, and Facebook
 - A request to follow Shankman on Twitter
- **Twitter:** Shankman intermingles HARO-related comments with his personal tweets and uses the platform to quickly broadcast urgent queries. His list of followers has rapidly grown from around 3,000 to more than 38,000.
- **His voice:** While Shankman's blog and speaking engagements have definitely helped to spread the word, the greatest success has come through his consistent reminders to users to tell their friends, to blog about it, and to share the link with reporters.

Results

A year after launch, "with exactly \$0 spent on advertising," HARO has close to 75,000 subscribers (more than five times the volume of the service that had threatened to sue) and has received queries from over 15,000 reporters, according to Shankman. He attributes the bulk of

such growth to personal recommendations from users.

Moreover, this level of usage has not only solidified the success of the program but also resulted in a boon for HARO, in the form of advertising. Completely unsolicited, American Apparel called Shankman one day to request a rate sheet, which Shankman quickly made up. Since then, the phone has kept ringing, and ad space in emails is sold out through the end of July, with some advertisers reserving space well into 2010.

As a result, HARO has also become a very profitable business, with close to one million dollars in revenue to date.

Lessons Learned

Shankman's view on social media is this: "If you're using it right, you're getting other people to do your PR for you." And this study certainly shows that that can be the case. But it's important to note that the viral might that he has wielded is also a product of the service and value that HARO offers users:

- **PR gold:** For publicists, marketers, small-business owners, and the like, HARO spells potential opportunity. HARO's email open rates "range from 90% on a Monday morning, to 50%+ on a Friday at 5pm" because, as Shankman explains, "heaven forbid you're a publicist for a widget company, and the one day you delete my email there's a reporter asking about widgets for the Wall Street Journal."
- **The "hero" factor:** For the non-journalists (the sources), HARO's service offers the potential to get their 15 seconds in the limelight, or at least, the potential to help someone they know to get theirs.
- **A hand in the "revolution":** Shankman leads people to believe that they are helping to change the way news is gathered and thanks them for being a part of this exciting "experiment."
- **Authenticity:** Shankman also adds personal stories and notes to every email, which help give the service a human touch, and he readily explains to users that he's not in it for the money, even suggesting that those who wish to send a donation should instead contribute to their local animal-rescue society. Also, he has remained vigilant about not tolerating spam. These gestures build trust and connections with users, who in turn become more willing to share.

"You can't create something viral," Shankman admits, "but you can create something good, and if it's good, it will become viral. If it's good enough that people see value in it, they'll do the legwork for you."