

Strategically donating your services to get exposure (or build skills)

Donating your services (in modest doses) can be a good business development tool, even for small firms and solo practitioners. You could serve on a non-profit board. You could do a pro bono (unpaid public interest) project. You could work with an association in particular ways. Strategically donating your time and skills can:

- Convincingly demonstrate your capabilities to the audience you want to serve,
- Introduce you to people you want to meet, and
- Extend your skills in a safe environment.

Demonstrate your capabilities to the right audience

You'd like your target audience to know what you can do. Better than talking about it is showing it.

You just have to find the organization where your target audience comes together in decent numbers for other purposes and volunteer to do some highly visible work for that organization. A consulting firm did a pro bono project, for example, for the orchestra in a city where the firm planned to open an office. The audience was the Board of Directors of the orchestra, made up largely of the heads of companies the consulting firm aspired to have as clients. A design firm that desires to serve the hospitality industry with custom designs can volunteer to support the industry association by providing free design for some part of the industry association's convention.

Serving on a non-profit board with the right other members and a cause you believe in lets you demonstrate your skills. An attorney can show her expertise. A marketing guru can demonstrate his skills. The other board members see what you can do and will reach out when they need something or when someone asks them for a referral.

You can do something similar by helping startups (if they are a target market) with advice and skills. You can be a mentor for an incubator/accelerator program, for example, with a small investment of time in a community where people talk to each other a lot. As the startups grow, they may need what you know or know people who do.

Meet people you want to meet

Starting relationships is the first step in business development. If you volunteer in the right place on the right kind of project, you can meet the people you want to meet. Consulting firms often volunteer to

do work for industry associations on trends or on benchmarking performance -- especially work that involves gathering information by interviewing in depth lots of senior executives in the industry. The work builds the interviewers' knowledge and provides a real introduction that the consulting firm can follow up on.

Build your skills

If you'd like to expand your skills or enhance your track record (as opposed to demonstrating your skills), you can volunteer to do some work for a small non-paying client for whom you are a good option. Law firms often do pro bono cases in part to give their people experiences -- under good supervision -- that will make them better lawyers in the future for paying clients. An indigent person would prefer a new lawyer learning the practice of law to his/her alternative, which might be no lawyer.

If you volunteer to do something you are not yet expert on, you need to be open with the organization about what they are getting. The organization may well prefer someone committed to learning how to do something the organization needs to having no one even try to do it.

What to do this week?

Think about whether this strategy could make sense for you. If so,

- Is there an organization where your target clients or an important subgroup of them gather (physically or virtually) that would be a great showcase for what you do? Think about what you could do for that group that would be relatively easy for you but very visible to the target group.
- If you have some ideas, you could approach an existing client or contact for an introduction to the right people at the organization you are thinking about volunteering to help.

What are these tips?

These monthly tips help professionals create more business and enjoy their work more. We focus on how to start relationships, how to build relationships, and how to convert those relationships into sales. Visit our [archives](#) to learn more.