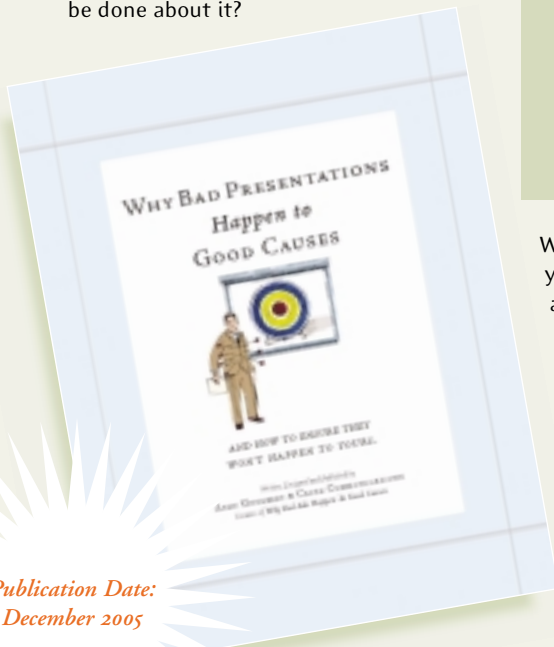


End Boredom in Your Lifetime!

Or at least make a start. If you've sat through one mind-numbing presentation too many, now's your chance to fight back!

Why are so many of the presentations you sit through so awful? Is PowerPoint completely to blame? What about presenters who read from the screen as if you couldn't? And let's not forget about meeting rooms colder than meat lockers, sound systems worse than "Mr. Microphone," and everything else that goes wrong. Are you doomed to continually revisit this particular circle of hell, or can something be done about it?



So please take a few minutes today and complete the survey. (Details in box.) The sanity you save may be your own. ■

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Visit www.agoodmanonline.com, click on the link on my home page, and complete the on-line questionnaire. Once research is completed and our book is published (target: December 2005), we'll email a notice so you can request your free copy. Please note: this offer is available only to full-time staff members of nonprofits and foundations and is limited to the first 5,000 respondents to our survey.

We believe there's hope, but we need your help. "We" are Andy Goodman and Cause Communications, the folks who brought you *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes*. Our next book will focus on presentations, but before we start writing, we want to hear from you. We've created an online survey to capture your opinions on public interest presentations (including your own) to help quantify what works, what doesn't, and why.

Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 213.386.9501. Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com.

Newsletter edited by Carolyn Ramsay.



JANUARY 2005

When Nice is Not Enough

Caring seniors tutoring elementary school children is the stuff of Hallmark Cards, which is precisely the image Experience Corps is working to overcome.

By all accounts, Experience Corps, a nonprofit that brings older adults into elementary schools to tutor children who are falling behind in reading, is doing just fine. Studies in Boston and New York show measurable increases in reading ability, Johns Hopkins researchers have found improvements in classroom behavior, and the program now has 1,500 volunteers fanning out to more than 100 schools to help 15,000 kids each year.

So why is CEO John Gomperts scowling? "We're in a double bind," he says with more than a hint of exasperation. "Older adults are often seen as cute or endearing, but mostly peripheral. And volunteering is generally viewed as a *nice* thing, but it's rarely considered a central strategy for achieving anything significant." Put the two together, Gomperts says, and

your organization may get tagged "nice but not necessary."

"When you try to get media, you're shunted off to the style page. Policy-makers pat you on the head and then toddle off to solve some really *important* problem. And these are not exactly days of plenty for foundations and federal agencies. Things that are *nice* get left by the wayside," he says, making "nice" sound like the other kind of four-letter word.

With over 70 million baby boomers barreling towards retirement and escalating cries for help coming from schools across the U.S., Experience Corps is refusing to be marginalized. And the techniques the organization is using to stay in the fight are worth studying for any nonprofit that also isn't content to play nice. ▶



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When Nice is Not Enough

► “First, we’re very careful with our language,” says Gomperts. The term *older adults* is used instead of *senior citizens*, which can bring negative connotations. The organization’s website, fact sheets, and other publications emphasize *rigorous research* that has produced *measurable results*. Pictures that are chosen to accompany text in all communications (including this one) are carefully scrutinized to ensure they convey the feeling that serious work is being done.

Perhaps the biggest change, though, is in Experience Corps’s use of storytelling. “We told stories about our members and their personal backgrounds,” says Stefanie Weiss, Director of Communications, “but we didn’t tell stories about what they were doing that really made a difference for the kids.” Now, says Weiss, Experience Corps staff and members are using stories in every aspect of their work—talking to the media, recruiting new members, fundraising, etc.—and like the pictures, the stories are thoughtfully chosen to demonstrate that literacy is serious business.

“What’s actually happening here,” says Gomperts, “is creative problem solving by people who use a lot of patience, who apply their experience, and who impose high expectations on these kids when other people can’t or won’t.” As an example, Gomperts shares a story written by Don Holt, a 72-year old volunteer who tutors at Lucy Laney Elementary School in Minneapolis.

“Hard Work”

Anthony refused to work. He had been assigned to write an essay for the second

graders’ “Publisher’s Party” scheduled for Thursday afternoon. It was Wednesday, and Anthony hadn’t even started. So his teacher, Ms. Patterson, asked me to work with him. She told me he needed to write six sentences about his grandfather, his chosen subject. So we began.

“Six sentences is too hard,” Anthony said. I asked him if he could write one sentence. “Too hard,” he repeated. I agreed that six sentences was too hard, and I knew he couldn’t do things that were too hard. But I wondered if he was tough enough to do things that were just “hard.” One sentence would be hard. Could he do that?

He agreed. I asked him what his grandfather’s name was. “Derrick,” he said. I suggested that his first sentence could be something about his grandfather’s name. I asked him what he called his grandfather—grandpa, granddad, grandfather? Eventually Anthony wrote, “Derrick is my grandpa’s name.”

I asked him to write down a number 2 for the second sentence. Then I turned on my tape recorder and told him to tell me—and the recorder—something more about his grandfather. “My grandpa is going to take me to the movies to see *Shark Tales* and then go to church.” I played that back to him and suggested he write what he had said as his second sentence. He did. I helped with spelling.

We did the third sentence the same way. When he had completed it, he looked over his work and said, “I’m getting a lot smarter. Look at what I’ve wrote.” I could have cheered. Anthony then pressed on to the fourth sentence. When we got to the

fifth, he started, “My grandpa is taking me”—the same opening he had used for the other sentences. Then he said, “That’s too much repeating.” I agreed and suggested he use “he” for “grandpa” and “going to” instead of “taking.”

The school day ended when Anthony was half way through sentence #5. He wanted and tried to finish it but the noise from other kids in the halls was too distracting. I was still delighted. Anthony had begun unwilling to do anything that was “too hard.” Now he didn’t want to stop doing something that was only “hard.” I was proud of him—and a little proud of myself as well.

Don Holt, Experience Corps member

Holt’s story turns Gomperts’ scowl into a smile. “When we take people inside the

process and show them what’s going on, they can see *why* we’re producing results,” he says. “The focus moves away from ‘there’s this nice thing happening’ to the difference we’re making in children’s lives.”

In August, Experience Corps launched a monthly e-newsletter that prominently features a story in each issue. According to Weiss, more readers click to the story than any other part of the newsletter, and there are signs that the message these stories convey is breaking through. In September, *The Wall Street Journal* wrote an article lauding Experience Corps for its important contributions to schools and communities. The piece carried the headline, “Volunteering That Works,” and even John Gomperts would have to agree that when a major media outlet gets your story right, that’s nice. ■



Nice or necessary? Experience Corps is carefully refining all its communications to keep policy-makers focused on the latter.

Photo by Alex Harris ©

