

**The Association of  
Registered Graphic Designers  
of Ontario**

**L'association des  
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# A Graphic Designer's Guide to Pro Bono Work

## INTRODUCTION

The Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario (RGD Ontario) is pleased to provide this guide for graphic designers to assist in the process of working with non-profit organizations on pro bono communications projects. If you have questions or would like to receive a copy of *A Non-Profit Organization's Guide to Pro Bono Work*, contact Hilary Ashworth, by email at [hilary@rgdontario.com](mailto:hilary@rgdontario.com) or by phone at 1 888 274 3668 x 23 (in Toronto: 416 367 8819).

It is not uncommon for professional graphic designers to offer their services free of charge to non-profit and charitable organizations. It is a valid way for designers to give back to the community, support causes they believe in, add work to their portfolios and make valuable connections with prospective paying clients.

Many non-profit and charitable organizations do pay for professional graphic design services. In particular, you may request payment if the non-profit requires a major commitment or if the project is very targeted with tight timelines and strict guidelines, as in the case of a fund-raising campaign, identity program or annual report.

Pro bono work is not the same as working on spec. This involves taking on a design project and doing the preliminary work (perhaps even a finished product) with nothing more than a hope that the non-profit will like the work enough to pay for it. Members of RGD Ontario are not permitted to practise spec work. See next page for a full explanation.

## WHAT IS PRO BONO WORK?

Pro bono is defined in RGD Ontario's book, *The Business of Graphic Design: A Professional's Handbook*, as: "The donation of a person's time or expertise at no charge generally conducted for charitable, religious, civic, community, governmental, educational and other non-profit organizations."

## COMPENSATION AND SPEC WORK

Spec (or speculation) work is defined in the *The Business of Graphic Design* as: "Providing design services to develop creative concept work for free (or for a set fee) as part of a new business pitch."

As is stated in RGD Ontario By-Law 3: Rules of Professional Conduct: "a member may compete in any design competition for projects of general, community or public interest if they are of a non-profit nature and if the rules of competition have been approved by the Board or conform to general competition rules approved by the Board."

RGD Ontario's Board of Directors will not approve a project competition that is 'open call' where designers are required to submit uncompensated creative work as part of the selection process.

If the non-profit organization has a budget for design and advertising services, it should be stated at the outset. Pertaining to compensation, The Rules of Professional Conduct state: "A member shall not work for a client or employer without compensation, with the exception of the occasional pro bono work for charitable purposes or for work performed for family members."

## WHAT IS A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION?

According to the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), a non-profit organization (NPO) is a club, society or association that is organized and operated solely for:

- social welfare
- civic improvement
- pleasure or recreation
- any other purpose except for profit.

Non-profit means that there are no shareholders. It does not mean that a non-profit organization may not strive for and show a surplus. However, the surplus is not shared as profit by any shareholders, as by definition there are none. The surplus is to be plowed back into the organization. Some non-profit organizations can be exceedingly well off, such as the IOC, for example.

## WHAT IS A CHARITY?

A "registered charity" is defined in subsection 248(1) of the Income Tax Act. According to the CRA, the courts have identified four general categories of charitable purposes. For an organization to be registered, its purposes must fall within one or more of the following categories:

- the relief of poverty;
- the advancement of education;
- the advancement of religion; or
- certain other purposes that benefit the community in a way the courts have said are charitable.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF DOING PRO BONO WORK?

### CREATIVITY

It is refreshing and inspiring to work with dedicated staff who believe in what they do.

### NETWORKING

Non-profit or charitable organizations' Board of Directors and other volunteers are great people to network with since some of them are business owners and prospective clients.

### PHILANTHROPY

What is better than using your talent and knowledge to help effect change and support something that you believe in?

### PORTFOLIO

It is a way to explore areas of design that are not yet prominent in your portfolio and develop creative and innovative new work.

## WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF DOING PRO BONO WORK?

### LEARNING

Clients in the non-profit sector often have not worked with designers before. As such, a designer's time may not be appreciated or understood and the clients may need to be educated about design and its value and the design process.

### VOLUNTEERS

Working with any sort of committee on the design process, particularly one made up of volunteers, can be extremely challenging.

### DECISION-MAKING

Lengthy decision-making processes are common due to the number of stakeholders and considerations that need to be addressed.

### BUDGETS

On pro bono projects, there may not be much money for printing, paper and other supplies. Designers may even be called upon to identify and ask suppliers to donate their services.

## HOW TO SELECT A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION TO WORK WITH

It is important to get as much information as possible before you begin a project with a non-profit organization so that both you and the organization have a clear understanding of each other, your roles and your expectations on the project.

### ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Make sure to verify that the organization is recognized by the CRA as a non-profit or registered charity. You may also want to find out how long the organization has been in operation and exactly what the organization's mandate is. The more you know about the organization and are committed to its goals, the more satisfying can your experience be.

### THE ORGANIZATION AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH DESIGNERS

You may wish to ask if there are other designers or studios that the organization has worked with in the past. You may even want to ask permission to contact them to understand how the organization has dealt with designers in the past. You should also clarify if there are any other designers currently involved with the organization or being considered.

### BUDGET

It is important to ask if the organization has a budget for external services that might be required on the project such as printing, paper, web programming, web hosting, photography or illustration. If not, ask about any relationships the organization may have with print/paper/other suppliers who would be willing to donate to the project and/or whether the organization expects you to assist in identifying and securing pro bono services from suppliers.

### PROJECT/CREATIVE BRIEF

You should ask for a project brief and timeline for the project. In the event that this isn't available, you should ideally develop one based on your discussions with the client. The more information you have down on paper clarifying your roles and responsibilities, the easier the process will be.

### TIMELINE

Make sure you are very clear about how much time you have available for the project and how much time your contribution will take. You may want to accept the project on a "as time is available" basis so as not to take away from your paying work. You may also want to identify the maximum total duration of the project including the time it takes for the non-profit to make decisions. You do not want to be in a situation entering a busy time for you with paying clients just when your pro bono client is in need of your services. If you do not identify any limitations on your time, you should treat the pro bono client exactly the same as a paying client. Make sure to build in extra time for non-profit clients who are often over-worked staff or volunteers with limited time available.

### DECISION-MAKING

As with any project, but particularly with non-profit organizations, it is important to identify a clear project leader within the organization. Ideally this person would be an employee rather than a volunteer to ensure timely turnaround and would have final say on decisions regarding the project but this may not be possible if a Board of Directors is involved. If the organization is made up of volunteers, you should ensure there will not be any significant changes to the executive leadership or Board of Directors. Although you should identify a project leader within the non-profit organization, you should be prepared to take charge of the project.

### COPYRIGHT

As with any project, make sure you make your intellectual property rights clear at the outset and whether or not your client will be permitted to modify the project in the future without your permission. Copyright ownership should remain with you.

### BENEFITS OF YOUR PRO BONO WORK

Most designers working on pro bono projects request creative latitude so as to ensure the experience is meaningful and results in a valuable portfolio addition. Although this is important, you should never ignore your pro bono client's needs, objectives and target audience. Always make sure that you communicate to the client how your work fits into the project brief you initially agreed upon. Although your participation in this project may be completely altruistic, it doesn't hurt to get as much marketing and exposure as you can out of the experience. Ask for credit on any printed pieces associated with the project and for additional copies so that you can show them to potential clients. You may also want to create and distribute a special press release about your involvement in the project. If any events are involved in the project, ask for free tickets and use the event as an opportunity to network and promote your services.

## BOOKKEEPING/ACCOUNTING CONSIDERATIONS

### FOR A REGISTERED CHARITY:

1. Invoice the charity for the value of the work done.
2. When the charity cuts a cheque for the invoice amount, sign it back to the charity as the donation.
3. Receive a tax receipt for the donation.
4. Be sure to report the revenue and claim a non-refundable donation tax credit.

### FOR A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION:

1. Do the work and that's it.
- For pro bono non-profit work, there is no requirement to report your pro bono service donation as income since there is no consideration received for work performed ie. no cheque should be issued by the non-profit organization and no donation can be made by the designer.

*Caveat: The above information should not be considered to be official tax advice. Specific facts relevant to your situation may change the application of the tax. RGD Ontario shall not be liable for any damages whatsoever arising out of, or in connection with, the use of this information.*

## OTHER RGD ONTARIO RESOURCES

RGD Review – The Association publishes a monthly pdf newsletter which can be downloaded at [www.rgdontario.com](http://www.rgdontario.com). In particular, RGD Review # 3 includes an article, "Designing for a Better World", a showcase of pro bono design work.

*The Business of Graphic Design: A Professional's Handbook* – The Association's handbook on operating and maintaining a professional graphic design business includes standard forms and agreements which can be modified for use with designers and design studios. These include a standard copyright agreement and an independent contractor agreement. The forms may be downloaded from [www.rgdontario.com](http://www.rgdontario.com).

## OTHER RESOURCES

### GOVERNMENT

#### Canada Revenue Agency

This website provides definitions and conditions for qualifying non-profits and charities as well as a complete list of official charities in Canada.

### ORGANIZATIONS

#### AIGA

The American Institute of Graphic Arts provides many resources on the process of working with a graphic designer including *A Client's Guide to Design: How to get the most out of the process*, which can be downloaded from the site as a pdf.

#### Sappi Ideas that Matter

This program, organized by Sappi Fine Paper, supports design for the public good. The company awards monetary grants to designers throughout the world to help them create and implement projects that serve the causes that are closest to their hearts.

#### Taproot Foundation

This organization's website provides an excellent benchmark for how to conduct a pro bono project.

### BOOKS & ARTICLES

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Taaffe, Anthony. *Piloting Pro Bono*. Marketing. May 28, 2007.