

The Two Most POWERFUL Words in PR

by Chris Mackowski

Jan Frederick's rum cakes are the toast of the town. They're so popular, they've become a staple at any special event our community theatre holds. People look forward to a rich, moist slice of cake. They're so popular, we've even auctioned them off, getting as much as \$40 for one.

Jan used to bake rum cakes for a different non-profit group in town. A couple years ago, she stopped. "I didn't feel appreciated," she once told me. "I didn't feel like anyone noticed the work I was doing."

And so now she bakes rum cakes for us. She donates the materials herself. And, along with the rum cake, she also sees to it that our other hospitality needs are taken care of: she arranges for hosts and servers, sets up the tables and centerpieces, gets all the other food spread out, and makes sure everything looks just perfect.

All she asks for in return—and, in fact, she doesn't even ask—is a simple thank you.

It seems so painfully obvious, so ridiculously simple. What an easy thing it is to just say "thanks." But you would be surprised at how many times people forget to do it.

Just Say Thanks

Indeed, I might argue that the two most important words in public relations are "thank you" (no, not "rum cake").

Think about the last time someone acknowledged a contribution you made or patted you on the back or said "Atta boy!" It feels good. That's powerful, powerful fuel, especially for organizations that depend on the good will of volunteers to get the work done. People

are one of our most important resources, so we should do everything in our power to cultivate that resource.

A thank-you takes two seconds to say. It costs 37 cents to mail. It takes up a line in the program. A thank-you is cheap, but the more of them you give out, the greater the return. There are people out there who will do anything for you — people like Jan — so long as you remember to say thanks. If we were talking about money, we'd have an investment banker's dream.

There are certain instances where a thank-you is obvious. A donor sends you money, you send them a thank-you note. Sophisticated operations have a database and a mail-merge program that will crank out a personally addressed letter to the donor. Or, like the theatre I work with, we have someone who has volunteered to hand-write all the thank yous to the donors (in our case, our treasurer

does it).

But forget to send a thank-you? You might just kiss that donation goodbye for next year.

You can thank your volunteers in your newsletter and on your website in a message from the president or executive director. Add in a pitch for other people to get involved, so your message of thanks serves double-duty by also showing off good examples for others to emulate.

Another obvious place to say thank you to someone is in the program for a show. A person lends you their antique Victrola, you list them under special thanks. But if someone else gives you three empty apple boxes, make sure you list them, too. In fact, look for ways to say thanks for even the smallest of things. After all, the woman with the apple boxes may also have that covered wagon you need for a show down the

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line. If you took the time to thank her for the boxes, she's going to feel appreciated and much more willing to lend out her wagon.

Thanks To The Thankless

After all, a lot of what we do as theatre people is thankless. That's all the more reason to look for ways to say "thanks."

I got my first real lesson in this the first time I ran lights for a show. No one remembered to say thanks to the tech people. The cast members gloried in the work they were doing on stage and everyone fawned over them and all I could think was "Let's see how good you look in the dark."

Since then, I have always made it a point to thank my tech people as often as possible.

That's a key notion: Go out of your way to look for ways to say thanks.

For instance, maybe a volunteer offers to do something, but you don't actually need her service at the moment. Thank her for at least making the offer.

You never know when you might need her down the road.

The board of directors for my theatre company writes out thank-you notes to every cast and crew member who assists with each show. The whole board signs them. Is that a governance issue that a board of directors should worry about? We think so. After all, people are one of our most important resources, and one of the major functions of governance is the proper management and allocation

of those resources. It sends a powerful message from the board to our volunteers that they are vitally important to us.

The extra effort gets noticed, too. We get a lot of comments from folks about how

much it means to them to get those cards. That's the kind of thing, they say, that makes them want to be associated with our theatre company.

Another company I work with does an annual Evening of Thanks and Celebration, which the board pays for. Everyone who has participated or donated in the previous year gets invited.

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The company gives out a few volunteer recognition awards, and the president offers a personal expression of gratitude to everyone. People leave feeling warm and fuzzy.

A Culture of Gratitude

But it doesn't need to just come from the board of directors and the staff members of the theatre. Strive to create a culture of gratitude within your organization. Your actors can thank the technicians for their work. Your actors can even thank each other for the work they give each other on stage.

What a great way to build camaraderie and mutual support.

As a director, at the beginning of a rehearsal process, I'll give each cast member a note card and tell them to write a note to someone important in their lives. "Remind that person how important they are to you," I tell them. Then, at my own expense, I mail the cards out at random sometime between then and the show. Inevitably, the card arrives at a time in the rehearsal process when it's needed the most, and my actors all get huge brownie points for being so thoughtful.

As I said, it needs to be a culture. Everyone needs to be encouraged to get in on the act. After all, we don't just present theatre, we are enabled to present theatre, and that's an important distinction. We're enabled by our volunteers, our donors, our staff members, our performers and technicians—all those Jan Fredericks who contribute to our success. The least we can do is say "Thanks."

You'll be thankful that you did. ■

Chris Mackowski is an assistant professor of journalism and mass communication at St. Bonaventure University and president of Bradford (PA) Little Theatre. He's also the author of "The PR Bible for Community Theatres" and "Original Works: Producing and Promoting Original Plays." Chris can be reached at 716.925.8404 or <cmackows@sbu.edu>.