

Three simple messages describe barbershop harmony

by Brian Lynch, Communications Specialist

In the course of teaching at COTS, I was pleased and impressed with the tremendous activity among chapter and district public relations officers in bringing greater public attention to the barbershop hobby. I heard many exciting stories of performances for governors, chambers of commerce, or at major events.

“Great job!” I’d tell them. “Now, how many members did you get out of it?”

“Uh, I don’t know. But we were on TV!”

“Great—how many members did you get?”

Tattoo this motto on your forehead: *publicity must ultimately equal membership*. Anything else gives you a warm feeling, but no one notices. Improving awareness is important, but bringing folks in the door for membership or performances even more so.

Every public relations opportunity offers three strategic objectives:

- Project the image *you* wish projected.
- Issue a call for action.
- Provide a mechanism for response.

Image is everything

Contrary to what we Barbershoppers sometimes let ourselves believe, the perception of barbershop harmony and the Barbershop Harmony Society among the general public is surprisingly high. The independent marketing survey showed that, of the general public who are aware of the Society, 48 percent believes, to some extent, that the Society has a good reputation, and 35 percent agrees the Society is very professional in its approach to singing.

The image your chapter tries to project, then, should reinforce this belief. But do so skillfully; our professionalism can occasionally work to our disadvantage.

How often have you heard this from a friend, audience, or prospect? “You were wonderful. *I* could never sing with you guys—you’re just too good!”

The challenge is to project our high-quality image while still making the hobby accessible to John Q. Public. To do this, every time you speak to a potential member, or to an entire audience, or to a news reporter or television station or whomever, make sure you convey three basic messages: barbershop singing is easy, it’s fun, and you can do it, too. Then, be sure you *show* them. Here’s how.

Barbershop singing is easy

“Easy to do, hard to perfect” might be more accurate. Not everyone can sing at the level of an international champion, nor should they try to. *Barbershop harmony is about participation, not perfection.*

The very roots of our style come *not* from trained musicians teaching vocal technique and vowel shapes; they lie in average guys, with average ability, enjoying the sound of their own voices contributing to barbershop harmony.

While it may be difficult to perfect, barbershop harmony is not difficult to do pretty well. As Jim Miller says, “it’s just a bunch of guys doing the same thing, in the same way, at the same time.” Everything else is just a refinement on this.

However, you can stress that many skilled musicians in the Barbershop Harmony Society have, over the years, developed a number of materials and methods of making barbershop even easier for the average guy. Learning tapes make it possible for singers to become proficient without ever looking at a sheet of music, much less knowing how to read it.

Barbershop singing is fun

This is the area where most PR guys can really shine, waxing rhapsodic on the joys of busting a chord with friends. Try to convey the concept of creating a sound greater than the sum of individual voices, likening it to the close integration of a basketball team or a classic double-play in baseball.

Research shows that most men join the Society for the music, but end up staying for the friendships they make. Every Barbershopper has stories to tell of nightmarish road trips and bizarre stage experiences they’ve shared, of wonderful audiences, of touching moments bringing joy to shut-ins—all these serve to illustrate the great pleasure we derive from our hobby.

You can do it, too

More than a third of Society members had never sung formally before joining. Less than one percent are formally trained musicians. By comparison, about half of the general population say they have never sung formally.

Clearly, there are plenty of men out there who, like a third of our members, have never sung formally, but like to sing. If you can show them they too can do it, they just might become members.

To illustrate the universal appeal and accessibility of barbershopping, take inventory of your chapter, noting the variety of men who choose harmonizing as an important part of their lives. Look for contrasts in age, occupation, religion, education, race, and musical experience. The wider range you can show, the more likely the viewer will find a reference point that lets him say, “Hey, maybe I could do this too.”

Show them!

The very best way to convey the three basic messages is by example. Share a little *lifeblood*: get your prospect or reporter to sing with you!

Everyone should know the easy tag to “When It’s Sleepy Time Down South.” Give a prospect the two-note lead part, surround him with sweet harmony, and let him discover for himself how sublime a well-rung chord feels.

Create opportunities to demonstrate this. After a performance, instead of racing for the door, make a concerted effort to mingle with your audience. Give them a chance to thank you, and more importantly, to sing with you.

During a broadcast, try to arrange for your host to sing with a quartet. Do this by prior arrangement, of course; a poor showing by the host hurts your cause.

Generating response

The most skillful image-making in the world only works if it prompts activity. Viewers need an invitation to respond and an easy way to do so.

For face-to-face public relations, a leave-behind of some type is essential, be it a chapter brochure, chapter business card, or You Can Sing Too. Equip every member of your chapter with a supply of your business cards, and get them into the habit of using them.

For shows and public performances, many chapters enjoy success with program inserts offering a door-prize chance. Provide space for name, address, and telephone, and check boxes to indicate interest in show mailings, quartet/chorus bookings, and membership opportunities.

For television or radio, be sure to mention your chapter phone number at least three times. An easily-remembered number helps, such as 555-SING, and might be available from your local phone company.

Now what?

Of course, getting them in the door is just a starting point. Now, you need to impress your guests with your enjoyable chapter meetings and your efficient, easy approach to learning new music ... all the things that show a new adventure is just beginning.