

Public relations and the traditions

The following is not a policy statement from the World Service Board of Trustees. It is intended merely to stimulate thought and discussion on the importance of our public relations and their effect on Narcotics Anonymous.

WSB External Affairs Committee

We know how important our relations with one another are in NA, because we need one another to continue recovering from addiction. But, even though our groups are autonomous, our fellowship needs more than just the support of our own members. Our community relations also contribute to the fellowship's growth and survival. And that's what this bulletin is about: the principles behind NA's public relations policy. First, we'll look at two reasons why our fellowship seeks good relations with the community. Then, we'll look at what NA's traditions say about our public relations activities.

Community relations--practical importance

It's a given in NA that, as recovering addicts, we have to share our recovery with others in order to stay clean. The same applies to our groups. Without newcomers, the most important people in our meetings are absent. Narcotics Anonymous maintains its vitality by fulfilling its primary purpose: carrying the message to the addict who still suffers.

What does that have to do with our public relations? Simple. NA cannot help addicts if they never hear of us, or if our reputation is such that addicts are advised to steer clear of us. True, NA will reach some addicts directly, good community relations or not. Our members will invite friends, family members, and coworkers who seek recovery to attend our meetings. Other addicts will hear of us at H&I presentations; if they need help, they'll know who to call.

The vast majority of still-suffering addicts, however, must be reached indirectly, through others in the community. Most addicts will only hear of us through media reports and announcements, through professional referral, or through direction given by members of the community-at-large--or they won't hear of us at all. To fulfill our primary purpose, we will need to seek good, cooperative relations with the community around us. We can't fulfill that purpose on our own.

Community relations--a spiritual path

In NA public information work, we acknowledge that we're "a part of," not "apart from" the community around us. We cannot play our part in fulfilling our fellowship's primary purpose on our own resources alone. And the actions we take to fulfill our primary purpose affect our community, not just our fellowship. Our group, our PI subcommittee, our ASC, our region, and our world services are but parts of a much greater endeavor--human society.

If humility means seeing oneself in proper spiritual perspective, then our community relations are a key indicator of our fellowship's spiritual condition. Public relations work offers us an opportunity, as a fellowship, to improve our spiritual condition. First, PI can help our fellowship remain teachable. As a spiritual society, as a recovery program, and as a social movement, Narcotics Anonymous can learn much from the society around us. Others have done many of the same kinds of things we seek to do. We can learn from them.

Humility also means recognizing our limitations. We don't have all the answers for every troubled person in our community; we don't even have all the answers for every drug addict in our community. In Narcotics Anonymous, one addict shares his experience, strength, and hope with another. Some of the problems related to addiction cannot be satisfactorily addressed that way, and require outside help.

NA is but one tool for addressing addiction, not the only tool. In many communities, a variety of organizations offer help to addicts seeking recovery. Some of them do so with great effectiveness. For whatever reason, some addicts might find recovery more readily through those programs than through Narcotics Anonymous. We don't pretend to have cornered the recovery market. If others can offer help where we cannot, then more power to them.

Humility means recognizing the place we occupy in our community. We have a particular role to play, and a very useful one at that. Our role is different from others'. It's not necessarily better or worse than the role played by others who focus on addiction and recovery--it's just different. Our public relations, and our primary purpose, will best be served if we fill our place in the community with life and spirit, to the best of our ability.

Having considered some of the basic issues related to public information work, it's time to take a look at the specific guidance our Twelve Traditions provide for NA's relations with the community. We'll consider our public relations policy of "attraction rather than promotion." We'll look at what we're attracting people to, and whom we're trying to attract. We'll think about how NA relates to other organizations in the community. Finally, we'll touch briefly on the use of service centers in organizing and administering our public relations efforts.

Attraction

Our Eleventh Tradition tells us that "our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion." One of the spiritual principles underlying that kind of public relations policy is humility. When we share our message in public, we state it simply and directly, rather than making overblown claims about Narcotics Anonymous. We have had what our members feel to be significant success, but we do not claim to have a program that will work for all addicts under all circumstances, or therapeutic views that should be universally adopted. All we say is that, if someone in the community has a drug problem, Narcotics Anonymous may be able to help. We've helped many addicts stop using, lose the desire to use, and find a healthy, productive place in society. We need claim nothing more than that to attract the still-suffering addict to our meetings, and to gain the goodwill of those in community who might refer addicts to us.

It should be emphasized, however, that "attraction rather than promotion" does not mean we do nothing to make ourselves known in the community. It's not only alright, but encouraged, to get the word of NA's existence and usefulness out and about. We don't go about making wild, extravagant claims about ourselves, or downing the work of others. But we're not a secret society, either. Narcotics Anonymous believes in personal anonymity, not fellowship anonymity.

The Eleventh Tradition spells out only one public relations restriction in detail: "we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films." We discourage public media use of full-face pictures of NA members, or stories which identify NA members by name. We do this for two reasons. First, we must be able to assure newcomers that their identities as NA members will remain confidential. Second, we want to keep the public media focus on NA's credibility, not on the credibility of the person carrying the message.

The need to maintain personal anonymity in the public media does not prohibit the use of spokespersons. However, those spokespersons should appear not as NA members, but as special workers whose job is to speak for the organization, or as nonaddict friends of the fellowship. More will be said later of special workers, service centers, and their role in NA's public relations.

The Eleventh Tradition focuses on the need for personal anonymity only in the public media. At other levels, personal anonymity is a matter of personal choice. When we know someone with a drug problem, we may disclose to them our identity as recovering addicts and NA members if we think it might be helpful to do so. Likewise, members who make PI presentations at community events, sharing their personal recovery experience as well as general information about the NA program, have not compromised the Eleventh Tradition. So long as we maintain our personal anonymity in the public media, we are supporting the Eleventh Tradition.

Carrying the message

Why do we publicize the NA program? "Each group has but one primary purpose," our Fifth Tradition asserts, "to carry the message to the addict who still suffers." How can we judge the usefulness of a service project? By considering the extent to which it will help our groups fulfill their primary purpose. PI's main job is to attract addicts to group meetings. As the Basic Text reminds us, "The group is the most powerful vehicle we have for carrying the message." (Basic Text, p. 65.)

But what message? It's important that public information subcommittee members be very clear on this matter, so that they do not convey inaccurate impressions of our fellowship to the community. Our Third Tradition says that "the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using." In Narcotics Anonymous, it's clear that means "to stop using drugs"--not compulsive overeating or gambling or criminality or sex-seeking. The Basic Text goes even further: "The message is that an addict, any addict, can stop using drugs, lose the desire to use, and find a new way to live.... That is all we have to give." (Basic Text, 5th Ed., p. 65)

One thing more needs to be considered when we talk about the Third and Fifth Traditions and our community relations. Our fellowship's primary purpose is "to carry the message to the addict who still suffers"--and that means any addict still suffering. Our Third Tradition reinforces the utter lack of restrictions, save one, on membership. Many NA areas begin with groups started among addicts who come from the same social, economic, racial, ethnic, or cultural background. There's nothing wrong with that, provided NA grows to reach addicts of all backgrounds. It's important that our public information subcommittees take the time to carefully study their communities. That way, they'll discover the full range of the need for what Narcotics Anonymous has to offer. In the process, they'll also learn how to effectively publicize NA's solution to addiction throughout the community.

Relations with others

Our nonaddict friends have been instrumental in starting Narcotics Anonymous in many communities, and in helping NA grow. As we've already seen, Narcotics Anonymous really couldn't fulfill its primary purpose without the cooperation of others. We do, however, have certain traditions guiding our relations with other organizations, among them the Sixth, Seventh, and Tenth Traditions:

"An NA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the NA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, or prestige divert us from our primary purpose."

"Every NA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions." "Narcotics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence, the NA name ought never be drawn into public controversy."

We seek to provide helpful information about the NA program to others in our community. We seek to cooperate with others as much as we can, as members of the community. At the same time, we maintain a clear distinction between NA and other organizations. We neither endorse nor oppose the work of others. We do not provide funds for the work of others, and do not accept outside funding for our own activities. NA has a place in the community, and it's NA's responsibility to maintain that place.

An area's public relations efforts ought to be supported entirely by its members and groups through its area service committee. Local businesses, government agencies, or civic organizations may approve so heartily of what we do that they offer advertising funds to help us carry our message. Public information subcommittees are encouraged to decline that kind of support, well-intentioned as it is. Narcotics Anonymous needs to pay its own way.

However, it should be noted that self-support questions are not always black-and-white. A phonline ad in the local paper, annotated "sponsored by John Doe Chevrolet," would clearly denote an outside contribution. However, most American TV and radio stations provide a certain amount of free public time to public-benefit organizations. Some transit companies offer reduced busbench rates to nonprofit endeavors. On the one hand, these could be considered "outside contributions." On the other hand, to decline them would be the same as to decline to drive on publicly-funded roads while on a Twelfth Step call. Each public information subcommittee will have to exercise its own best judgment in such cases.

There is one final matter to keep in mind when considering our relations with other organizations. In order to maintain its focus, Narcotics Anonymous has established a tradition of neutrality on public issues. We do not take positions as an organization on anything outside our own specific sphere of activity. Narcotics Anonymous does not express opinions, either

pro or con, on civil, social, medical, legal, or religious matters. We do not even take stands on secondary addiction-related issues, such as criminality, law enforcement, drug legalization or penalties, prostitution, HIV infection, or free needle programs. We believe our sole competence is in providing a place where suffering addicts can identify with others like themselves who've experienced substantial recovery from addiction. To remain free from the distraction of controversy, we focus our energy on what we do best, and only on that.

Community service centers

Public information work requires attention to detail, careful record-keeping, and consistent follow-up. Responsible administration of PI affairs can take a great deal of time--perhaps more time than subcommittee volunteers have available. To assist in the administration of PI services, some areas and regions have created service centers, staffed by special workers. "Narcotics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional," our Eighth Tradition says, "but our service centers may employ special workers." We don't have paid counsellors at our group meetings. Recovery is freely shared, addict to addict. Public information work, however, is not usually the kind of addict-to-addict personal sharing the first part of the Eighth Tradition refers to. Our goal is to provide consistent, responsible service, so that as many addicts as possible can find their way to our meetings. If your area needs additional help doing this, a service center might provide that help. For information on the nuts and bolts of opening and operating a community service center, contact the World Service Office.

Good community relations are vital to the fulfillment of NA's primary purpose. Without the help of others in our community, many addicts will never hear of Narcotics Anonymous. We have a responsibility to maintain our relations with the community, so that our message is carried as widely as possible, and so that, in turn, we serve our community as effectively as possible. For our fellowship's own well-being, we need to learn as much as we can from other organizations in our community, and to humbly acknowledge our place in the community. We in Narcotics Anonymous are "a part of" the larger community around us, not "apart from." The Twelve Traditions provide specific guidance for our public relations activities. But without the humble desire to serve our fellow addicts, we'll have no message to carry, and no fellowship to publicize.