

# How to Serve Pro Bono Clients While Building a Profitable Coaching Business

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Serving pro bono clients while still having time to make your coaching business grow appears to be a dichotomy in motion. On one hand, being a coach comes from the heart, a place where a lot of us get our drive to help people, especially those less fortunate than we. On the other hand, a full practice of pro bono clients does not a business make. How can you do both – serve pro bono clients and still build a profitable coaching business?

As a “newbie” coach faced with this dilemma a few years ago, I felt conflicted and a bit frustrated. I wanted to help everyone, but still needed to build my business or I wouldn't be able to continue coaching. My solution? I created a policy for working with pro bono clients that I still use today. Consisting of four primary keys, it evolved from a time-consuming trial-and-error method. I am offering this policy to you if you find yourself in a similar situation.

## **Key # 1: Serve only one pro bono client at a time.**

Sound harsh? Not really. Besides creating the perception that my services are highly valuable (which they are), this “rule” allows me to provide coaching services to someone who really needs my help while still having time to do marketing activities and coach my paying clients. And, since this “rule” is a policy of my business, it gives me permission to not feel guilty about turning away pro bono clients who seek me out, but that I don't have time to help. I keep a list of pro bono prospects waiting to use my services and go there whenever I have an opening.

## **Key # 2: Carefully select pro bono clients – don't let them choose you.**

What is the key to my selection process? I choose a pro bono client who will somehow contribute to the growth of my business even though the client himself may not be able to pay for my coaching services. You may wonder how that can work if the client isn't paying. Let me describe an actual situation and I think the message will become clear.

When I was looking for a pro bono client a while back, I stumbled upon a feature story in a major metropolitan newspaper about an executive who had been laid off and out of work for over a year. This person lived in my home state, though his human-interest story had been published in a different state's newspaper. The man had a large family, a wife who worked part time, and a rapidly depleting savings account. He was discouraged and tired of not working.

I read the story with interest and emailed the reporter who had written it. (You can find email addresses for most reporters by visiting a newspaper's website.) I asked her to forward my contact information to the man, explaining that I was offering three months of free career coaching to him in exchange for his testimonial at the end of the process. I also stipulated that the man had to show up for our coaching calls on time and do the fieldwork I offered.

The reporter thought this was a great deal, so promptly contacted the man who agreed, and we started coaching immediately. He is now working in his field. By proactively choosing the

client, I got a testimonial, media exposure, plus the chance to work with someone who really needed my services.

**Key # 3: Treat a pro bono client the same as a paying client.**

In other words, my pro bono clients sign coaching agreements that stipulate terms for our coaching arrangements. Most of the terms are the same as for paying clients (no-show consequences, confidentiality promises, minimum length of engagements, etc.), but I also include a "barter" term of some kind.

Just as with the executive in Key # 2, I always ask for a testimonial, but I may ask for something else, too, that the client is able to give. For example, one pro bono client had a personal website, so I asked him to link to my website for the duration of our coaching. The link gave me more exposure on the Web and helped him feel more vested in the coaching process. This is very important: If a client makes an investment of any kind, he is more likely to stay committed to the coaching process. (Have you ever had a pro bono client who just disappeared?) Just make sure that the "barter" item is business related - coaches aren't country doctors treating patients for produce.

**Key # 4: Find a pro bono client from your niche, if at all possible.**

Do research inside your target market. Attend networking events. Read features in trade newspapers and magazines looking for individuals who could benefit from your free coaching services and reach out to them. Why stay in your niche? Word travels. You will enhance your coaching image among those you want as paying clients when they learn that you are coaching their peers who need help but for whatever reason are experiencing tough times.

By staying in your niche, you also reduce your "ramp up" time connected to understanding your pro bono client's situation. Yes, I know, you can coach someone without knowing all about them, but if you can use some of their jargon and understand their typical challenges, they will more quickly perceive you as credible.

There, you have it! We all have personal needs to give back to the community. However, if you want coaching to be your livelihood, then treat it as a business, not a social service - unless, of course, you receive grant money to support your business. There are a lot of worthy causes deserving our time, efforts and money. You can satisfy your need to help the needy by supporting one of these causes through volunteering in some way other than coaching, and still coach a limited number of pro bono clients. Then, watch your coaching business grow!

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