

When is Free Not Free?

Handling requests for volunteer or free services and how to turn them into paying gigs. **By Shannon Fennell** www.shannonfennell.com



I bet that someone, sometime, somewhere has asked you to volunteer your services for free. They have various excuses for asking you this: no budget, it's only for an hour or it's for charity. Occasionally you come across a character who is also

good at laying on the guilt too – it's for their child's school or a church fete.

I used to get these requests but in the last calendar year I haven't had a single approach to work for free. I still receive calls from charities and fund-raising events, but they are quite happy to pay me. Some will even hire me to train their volunteers and then supervise them at their event.

When I started face painting I had the benefit of a few years experience working as a make-up artist, so I placed a value on my services. Many who are just starting out as face painters view work as training and experience, but the reality is you are still providing a service to the public. You are probably using your own products and equipment, are driving to the venue and spending valuable time working at the event. Why shouldn't you be reimbursed for your efforts?

If you are not charging for your services, not only are you not earning, it is costing you money. The cost of your products, overheads (insurance and transport) and time are all being met by your business. Even if you are a beginner, you are still providing a service that has an intrinsic value. And think about it... trainees in other industries still get paid.

In reality, large charities have budgets, as do most organised events, and there is usually some money for entertainment. I have worked for a

couple of different charities as well as non-profit groups and government. They all have budgets, so don't let them pull the wool over your eyes.

I have never provided my services for free. What I did, and what I recommend you do, is to set a non-profit rate for your services.

A non-profit rate can be used at your discretion. You can choose to quote it or your regular rate, depending on whether you want to help the group requesting your services. Do not advertise this rate. All I say on my website and literature is that a special rate may be available for non-profit and charitable events. Then there is no commitment or obligation to provide any kind of discount. If I feel generous towards the group I quote this rate, making sure to tell them it is discounted from my regular rate, which I will also make them aware of. My non-profit rate is approximately 45% of my regular hourly rate. This is a useful marketing technique because by making the client aware of the amount you charge your regular customers, they will usually be more than happy to pay less than half of that. In five years I have only had one group not book me after being offered my non-profit rate instead of my full price. My non-profit rate still covers all my costs as well as providing me with a basic wage for my time.

Some registered charitable organisations offer a 'Gift in Kind Receipt' which is a tax receipt for the value of the service you are providing in lieu of cash payment. While this can be used as a tax deduction it doesn't necessarily mean you can use it. It isn't any use to me as I do not require the additional tax deduction. However, if you need the tax deduction it can be an acceptable form of payment. Tax laws are different from country to country so you should ensure that any potential benefit applies to you.

Some face painters feel connected to a cause and want to volunteer their services as a method of personal support. This is commendable but you need to consider that you are a professional and should be receiving something of value in consideration of your donation of time and product. There is always space for negotiation.

Ask for a sponsor credit. Many events publish thank you advertisements or programmes and you should be listed as a sponsor if you are not receiving financial payment.

Ask to be included in their advertising and promotion materials if you are providing your services unpaid. At least you will be gaining the benefit of advertising exposure which has a value to you. This would be in addition to any other acknowledgement, be it Gift in Kind Receipt or a sponsorship credit. Ask them to provide proof of this, ie, a copy of the newspaper advertisement or similar form.

Sometimes it's also possible to barter. If the group that wants you to provide your services for free sells or provides something that you want or could use, there is nothing wrong in negotiating an exchange of services. Be sure that you put anything you agree in writing. This is still a booking and the terms agreed are your payment, so send off your usual written confirmation with the details of the deal.

I do not believe anyone should work for free simply because the person asking you to work doesn't want to or can't pay you. You are a professional artist and you are providing a skilled service which has a basic minimum value. Always establish a way to get paid, be it by offering a lower rate which still covers your expenses, an exchange of services or a tax receipt for the value of your services. Please don't give it away for free.