

Helping a reporter out is big business for HARO

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Brilliant inventions are usually both simple and elegant. Creating and maintaining a daily sponsored email newsletter that reaches influential movers and shakers is nothing new — it has comfortably existed since the early 90s. What Peter Shankman did, in creating [Help a Reporter Out \(HARO\)](#), was something supremely simple, graceful and generous, meeting a need that nobody even knew was so lacking in an environment where business as usual wasn't working anymore. Just add HARO, where working journalists are connected with experts in a number of fields to the tune of almost 100,000 subscribers and growing.

I spoke to Mr. Shankman recently over the phone. “Hey Peter, do you know anybody who knows about X, does Y, or has had Z experience?” HARO was the easy solution to something that he had been fielding all by himself for years and years. Because Mr. Shankman is the connector's connector, he already knew a hell of a lot of people, but even he met his limits over time. Who wanted to know? Reporters. As reporters and journalists feverishly feed the hungry maw of the 24-hour news cycle, they need to find interviews, quotes and opinions from just about everyone under the sun. And because a majority of these stories don't allow any semblance of expertise or research to be cultivated before they're due to be filed, it is essential that reporters can find reliable sources at a moment's notice. I have been a baby Shankman at points in my life. Oftentimes I get calls from my reporter friends who want the scoop on who's the best in Social Media metrics or the top man in Social Media in politics — and they don't ask because of some sort of journalistic “can't mention friends” ethics thing. Sometimes I am just the guy people go to, perhaps because I have been on CNN and BBC, and quoted in papers and online.

When Peter Shankman started getting questions that were well outside his experience and knowledge, he searched for an answer that would allow him to ‘help a reporter out’ and facilitate lots of people with quite a diversity of talents and experiences. So, this all happened back in October 2007 in the form of a Facebook Group, until it exceeded 1,200 members. 1,200 was the cap that Facebook used to have on “email all members” (it is now 5,000) so Shankman needed to evolve into something that could scale like crazy. They then moved to an email mailing list platform in March 2008. I just joined up again, and it looks like they're currently using AWeber. And scale they did — 10,000 in the first three months and 25,000 in the first six. It has come all the way to 110,000 members today and is still growing, along with around 80,000 sources with the single-minded goal of helping not just one reporter, but over 30,000 of them. I never asked if this was a global phenomenon, but I know that Shankman has now even outgrown AWeber. With 30,000 reporters and 80,000 sources, there are 3,000 queries-per-month that

result in 7 million pitched facilitated and a consistent open rate of 75-80%. According to Shankman, people have started calling HARO “email crack.”

While altruism is at the very root of HARO as a phenomenon, HARO is also a business. In its life as a mailing list, HARO has become more than just a valuable platform to the facilitation of information-exchange between sources and journalists but it is also an amazing brand-building and even sales-channel for small businesses — and large businesses such as American Apparel — who are looking to reach the eyeballs of a very rarefied cross section of society: 110k+ journalists, PR professionals, small business owners, and generally interested parties (AKA sources) who are curious and connected enough to actually proactively join a list like HARO. It is rare or impossible to get this sort of access and so the inventory of HARO email sponsorship is spoken for until January, 2010. There have been 1,250 brands promoted through HARO so far to the tune of \$1M annual revenue.

So, with growth comes responsibility and the list has started to become too much of a good thing and folks are complaining that the list has become too general, that the just isn't any way to specify specialized topics such as tech, fashion, business, finance, and any number of other topics. In much the same way that the AdAge email list is set up, where you can check one or more newsletter update, be it AdAge Daily News, AdAge Digital, or Breaking News, you will be able to check one or more of the HARO topics. You can — and are encouraged to — receive them all, of course, but you don't have to. The vision is to go from the three emails currently being sent today — morning, news, and night — to 10-15 emails-per-day. This expansion of emails would, of course, also increase the inventory of sponsorship opportunities and possibly make sponsorships more affordable and also allow the sponsorship advertising to much more targeted.

So, right now, Peter Shankman has the goal of expanding this platform, which at its heart is really about helping a reporter out, still, to be able to handle what he really wants and needs: more people. To quote Metcalfe's law, “the value of a network is proportional to the square of the number of connected users of the system.” This means that the value of HARO network to reporter increases as the number of sources increase. When there are 1,000,000 subscribers to the HARO list a reporter might potentially be able to ask for just about anything and be able to find a source for a quote.

Just in case you wonder if the HARO list might have jumped the shark in light of Twitter, HARO has adopted twitter [@helpareporter](#) with 8,830 followers. HARO also has a [Facebook Page](#) with 6,052 fans. Shankman also told me that they're developing other ways to keep in touch via RSS, iPhone, Blackberry (and Android if anyone asks — and I ask — I have a G1).