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## 'Help A Reporter Out' Hits Paydirt Crowdsourcing News Sources

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Yet another area is being disrupted by the internet's capacity for crowdsourcing: the gathering of sources for news articles. Help A Reporter Out (HARO) is one of a handful of services that lets journalists ask questions to a large number of people quickly in the hopes of adding valuable perspective to the news.

Public relations veteran Peter Shankman launched HARO early last year as a Facebook group for connecting sources with reporters, as he had already been doing manually. It has since grown into a serious business with almost no overhead, averaging over one million dollars in yearly revenue as massive, general-interest social networks like Facebook and Twitter delay or struggle to [find profitability](#). Shankman (who [speaks quite rapidly](#)) says he started the Facebook group after being frustrated by a reporter who'd heard he knew lots of experts turned to him for a source on sub-Saharan Nigerian farming soil. He didn't know of anyone, so he decided to launch Help A Reporter Out as a Facebook group to make it easier for authors and reporters to track down sources.



Two months later, the Facebook-group version of HARO hit the 1200-user limit, thanks to a mix of experts, public relations specialists, and people who just plain like to see their name in print. Shankman spun the service out into an email list in March of 2008 with 200 members. Now, around 30,000 bloggers, reporters and other news gatherers use the service to ask 150 to 200 questions each day to the network's 80,000 or so members.

One reason his social network is profitable, according to Shankman, is that it advertises with precision to a desirable demographic, an average of 80-85 of whom open each e-mail. He says the ads on the site are currently sold out through January 2010. Advertising wasn't always part of the plan, Shankman says, but he started including them after being approached by clothing company American Apparel. "They said, 'a couple of our people are on your list, and they assume that most of the other people on the list are like them — publicists, and they wear our clothing. How much do you want for an ad?'"

To an extent, the inclusion of so many public relations professionals in the network might be seen as a weakness (reporters want expert sources, after all, not PR people trying to insert their client's brand into the conversation). A significant portion of the network are public relations professionals, according to Shankman, but he says the fastest-growing group on the site is small business owners who want to be quoted as an authority on a particular topic, but don't know how to surface themselves to reporters, and can't afford a PR firm to help.

Besides, everyone on the HARO list has experiences outside of their field of expertise, simply by being human. Shankman says reporters from major publications use the service to ask such questions as "I'm looking for moms and dads who had to put off buying a second car because they missed the Cash for Clunkers program. An analyst for a financial firm might also have managed to miss getting his second car, and all of a sudden he's in the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times, and that person wouldn't necessarily pay" for a public relations firm to tout him as an expert on Cash for Clunkers. (We won't speculate on whether a financial analyst would want to be known as someone who couldn't navigate the Cash for Clunkers program, but the general principle is sound.)

Shankman credits his site's free, ad-supported business model with surpassing the 14,000-source-strong ProfNet, founded in 1992, which charges sources and their PR firms to receive queries from reporters. Another firm, MediaKitty, has offered a similar service since 2001, but it also charges. Once again, a business has been disrupted by the [price of digital information dropping to zero](#).

I decided to test Help A Report out for this story, asking its nearly 110,000 members, "How has this service (Help A Reporter Out) worked for you? I welcome any feedback about how this service has or has not been effective."

By my deadline, five and a half hours later, I had received 174 responses from public relations pros, reporters, authors, and small business owners, and regular Joes. Although this is a self-selecting group (people who really hate HARO stop using it, obviously), it's still worth mentioning that the massive response to our query was overwhelmingly positive:

**149 Positive responses (86 percent)**

Example: "I spotted your HARO query, and I have to say — *I'm glad somebody finally asked*. HARO has done a ton for me. I'm a copywriter and online marketer... I've started using HARO queries to flesh out stories: if I'm writing about web design, for example, I can turn a dry list of 'things to watch out for when hiring a web designer' into an authentic horror story of design gone wrong. Whenever I don't know what to write next, I submit a HARO query and find someone else with a relevant story to tell. It's really improved my work (and my clients' results)." - Bryne Hobart

**20 neutral responses (11 percent)**

Example: "HARO has been semi-useful to me, though not as useful as I might wish. As an 'authority,' I usually hear that I'm among hundreds who write in, and I usually only get quoted on blogs, though one German woman apparently did write about me (published in Germany, so hard to follow up). However, it's not leading to widespread name recognition or increased book sales. As a writer/reporter placing a query, I've found that I usually only get one or two replies. I'll hear from a couple of PR firms, so I still have to do a good bit of traditional leg work. So it kind of works a little, and I'll still use it whenever I have an assignment that could use an additional expert opinion. But it isn't 'the answer.'" - Cynthia Clampitt, author of [Waltzing Australia](#)

**5 negative responses (3 percent)**

Example: "Personally, it seems to me that I used to get a more credentialed response from Profnet, which I've mostly stopped using because they appear to have lost most of their experts. HARO - probably because it's free - attracts a lot of marginal experts. Don't get me wrong. I'm frequently grateful that it is there. But for the most part, I don't get responses from people at the top of their game, and I used to when I used ProfNet." - Jennie L. Phipps, editor and publisher, *Freelance Success*

Indeed, our little experiment in using HARO to find sources to talk about HARO proves Phipps' point, to an extent: although we received over 20 quote-worthy responses, we had to sort through 174 emails, some of which transparently touted the sender's own company, to find them.

The crowd, while a powerful source for information, is unfiltered - at times, a blessing, and at times, a curse. But the crowd has spoken with authority at least one area: Help A Reporter Out is profitable, while Twitter is not.