

Henna work for free? Most pro henna artist say "No Way!"

A member asked if other artists will do henna for free or at a reduced rate, or maybe in exchange for being able to advertise. Many members chimed in with great advice and some excellent resources to better understand the issues at stake.

Capucine, <http://HennaMontreal.com> Montreal

The topic has come up a number of times on Henna Tribe where fellow henna artists are approached on a regular basis with requests to provide their services for free or a very nominal sum for events, charities and non-profit organizations. Seeing as how this affects professional henna artists so deeply; I decided to do some extensive research both for my own education, as well as to benefit my fellow henna artists here on Henna Tribe.

I've assembled a number of supportive articles, blog entries and other material as helpful resources showing that this sort of expectation of creative artists of all kinds to donate "free artwork or services" is rampant.

It will help to show you that:

- 1) You are not alone in facing this. Artists of all kinds face this on a regular basis.
- 2) That if you work for nothing, that is what you are worth -- people will no longer put value on the work that you do and expect you to do it for free *all* the time. Even worse, they start expecting other artists to work for free as well!
- 3) That you are perfectly within your rights to simply say "NO". There are some ways of saying "no" more gracefully than others, but basically no one should ever expect you to simply hand out your time and talent for free.
- 4) That you can learn from the experience of other professional artists who have been put through similar situations and learn ways to deal with requests for work for free at charitable events.

With all the above in mind, here is my collection of recommended reading material. Please note that the articles do not specifically mention henna body art or services, but are generally either in the creative arts (illustrating, graphic arts, painting, writing, musicians, etc.) or service-related industries (massage therapists, photographers, models, web designers), however the principals are the same. I've also added comments as to why each one might be of interest or the best part to skim forward to.

Capucine's Recommended Reading for Henna Artists:

<http://www.BalloonHQ.com/faq/charity.html>

Although this lengthy webpage deals specifically with balloon artists, much of the information can be *extremely* helpful and insightful for henna artists as well. It can help you put some reasoning behind why you might actually want to donate your time, when not to and what are some alternatives. In particular, I would strongly recommend the "How To Handle Requests To Work At Charity Events" and the "Doing It For Exposure" sections!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mj5IV23g-fE>

This is a short video of sci-fi author Harlan Ellison called "Pay the Writer" and in it he covers the topic quite vehemently (beware the occasional swear word). However, he does make an excellent point regarding how much it can devalue your work and much of the market.

<http://www.artbizblog.com/2008/06/say-no-with-grace.html>

From ArtBizBlog, here is "Saying No With Grace", with helpful tips on how you can handle saying no to requests for freebies in a graceful manner -- especially if you might like to keep the door open with potential clients or other contacts

<http://www.artbizblog.com/2008/09/donateart.html>

Another one from ArtBizBlog called "Donate Your Art Prudently" that explains that you need to set parameters for your giving and why

<http://www.artmarketmonitor.com/2010/09/29/artists-and-charities/>

Another great article entitled "Artists and Charities" by an Australian art dealer about why it is unfair and even unethical of charities to expect often low-income artists to donate their goods or services

<http://www.messageandbodywork.com/Articles/FebMar2007/GettingPaid.pdf>

A PDF version of an article from the March 2007 issue of "Massage & Bodywork" magazine, entitled "5 Tips To Help You To Avoid Working For Free". It gives compelling reasons why you should not work for free and offers great suggestions on how to deal with people who make such requests.

<http://www.messageandbodywork.com/Articles/JuneJuly2007/worthyofpayment.htm>

I This is a follow-up on the above PDF article, and covers the responses from many massage practitioners as to how they deal with these issues.

<http://mariabrophy.com/business-of-art/the-problem-with-donating-art-and-the-solution.html>

A blog entry by Maria Brophy entitled "The Problem with Donating Art and the Solution" covers how fundraiser organizers have no clue how much their antics can hurt the arts community. Includes a great "Charitable Donation Guidelines" and sample form letter that you can use as a basis for your own charitable/community work policy.

<http://drewbrophy.com/brophy-principal-giving-art-to-worthy-causes-while-protecting-the-value/>

A follow-up blog from Maria Brophy entitled "Brophy Principal: Giving Art to Worthy Causes While Protecting the Value". Has a great list of criteria you can use to judge whether you should consider giving your time/talent/skills/art to a worthy cause.

<http://freelancefolder.com/open-thread-is-doing-free-work-ever-acceptable/>

A blog posting asking "Do You Ever Work For Free"; it is particularly interesting because of the responses from many freelancers from a wide variety of fields and income levels.

I sincerely hope that these resources will prove helpful in making fellow henna artists understand why this is not a good practice to follow and how it can undermine your value as an artist, undermine the henna market as a whole; as well as suggestions

on how to deal with the issue when approached by non-profits and charitable organizations.

**Kenzi at kenzi.com
New York City**

After our discussion the other day, I got an email offer to henna at a diwali party and would be give the opportunity to hang out marketing materials. I politely declined. Perfect timing!

That said, I think that beginning artist CAN give away their work for free or cheap in order to practice or get contacts, but I hope they learn quickly and start charging soon. Better to practice on friends for free.

**Lernie, <http://www.lernie.com/henna.html>
Orange County, CA**

Thank you so much for doing this, Capucine. I, too, will read through them all when I have more time. I am amazed at how many charities, groups, etc. want our services for free, and then are very demanding in how much they want you to do...again FOR FREE. Granted, there are the occasional events that I will do, but I have to pick and choose.

**Riffat
U.K**

I always tell my henna students to always charge for their work even if it's just £3 as it's easier to start raising their rate from this then to go from nothing upwards. They all put in so much effort, time and patience to learn this fantastic art so why give it away free.

**Hennacraze, www.hennacraze.com
Michigan, US**

I have done some henna things for free, but that's only when I'll be working with a stellar photographer who's work I've seen. I love professional photos of my work and know that we ALL [henna artist, model, photographer] get some nice photos out of it!

I definitely don't like doing anything for free but have charged a lower rate in return for advertisement in a newsletter, on their websites, [in addition to advertising at the event, of course] (for ex, I lowered my normal hourly rate when I henna-d a couple of models at a fashion show in exchange for them announcing my name at the show and allowing me to advertise in their monthly newsletter). Of course, I ONLY do this when I know that the event is being hosted by a well known organization, NOT when an individual or family is hosting the event...I hate the "Oh, if you come out to my party, you'll get SO much more business because I KNOW OH-SO-MANY people."

**ajna henna, www.ajnahenna.com
Seattle, WA**

My rules are simple. If I offer to do it for free ... it's free... if you ask me to do it for free? You pay. :) OK, I am kind of joking for effect ... but not completely.

There will never be a shortage of people who will approach you either asking for free services or expecting you to "do it for the exposure". This is something most henna pros get to know well. Sometimes we choose to offer work for charities of our choosing ... sometimes it is out-and-out free and sometimes, if a fee is being charged for the henna, you can offer a percentage to the charity so you can cover the cost of your supplies.

The bottom line is, YOU are in control of what you choose to do. You can say "yes" or "no". Just because they ask doesn't mean you are under any obligation to give them what they want. Some artists respond by saying "I have 'x' number of charities I sponsor each year and I have already met that limit" or whatever.

If you are going to be publicly known for henna, you will find that this kind of call ebbs and flows and the ploys don't really change. You just need to figure out how you want to handle them and if you want to do any charity work.

Darcy, hennalounge.com
San Francisco, CA

I absolutely do not do free events. If I choose to donate to a charity or non-profit, I will do so and receive the tax deduction for it on my terms. Don't be frustrated by people asking you to work for free, it happens all the time. You just have to tune it out. Don't feel like you're passing up some great opportunity.

And I hesitate to say this in a public forum, but if you target a non-Indian community you will actually have a chance to make much more money, with way less chaos and haggling. There are people all over who want henna. I routinely have people from Southern California who visit me when they are in San Francisco, so I know there are henna-lovers down there. And again, not to dismiss the Indian community, but every time I work a big hectic Indian event I swear I'll never do it again! Tardiness, no tip, people trying to bargain after there is already a contract in place, asking me to stay late, telling me there are 20 guests when in fact there are 200. Not to say that sometimes I don't get a nice fat tip and a delicious dinner, but most of the time that just doesn't happen. While much of the time it DOES happen at other events (with the exception of corporate). So don't be afraid to target the pregnant mamas, the yoga lovers, the Jewish community, dancers/performers, and people with teenaged kids.

Also remember it takes time for the seeds you plant to grow. You can't expect to have a booming business over night. It's just not realistic. And also, very few people make 100% of their living doing henna here in the US.

Just stay positive! That has been the #1 thing that helped my business. That and taking lots of nice pictures for my website...

dagstar
Tacoma, WA

I also want to add that I have found when people get you to work for free they will hesitate to ever pay you for work in the future.

I now try to make sure they understand that my art, time and talent are worth money. and this isnt just a fun hobby. its my business.

**Sowmya, <http://joyofhenna.com/>
Toronto, ON**

I learnt this the hard way Wardah! When I first started and decided to do henna professionally, nearly every aunty would suggest that I do free henna for exposure.

Honestly, I haven't had a single person who got henna at one of these events contact me later! ok, I may be an extreme case, but still. Most people just enjoy "free henna", but when it comes to actually looking for a henna artist for their wedding or other big event, it ends up working to your disadvantage because some people automatically assume that you are not a good artist because you were doing it for free. It's weird, but I've seen it happen.

In terms of charities though, I have done events where I charge my usual rates, and at the end I got to donate a % of my earnings according to my discretion to the charity.

Also, I agree with Darcy about targeting non-Indian communities. I have an Indian background and I am saying this! Bargaining, time, comparison to what they would have paid in India/Pakistan..... way too much stress.

**Kenzi, kenzi.com
New York City**

Working for free is fine if you are just starting out and want practice, but once you go pro, as in accepting money, I wouldn't do free henna unless it's for a good cause. I still get people calling and saying that it would be a good marketing opportunity, allow me visibility.

I save "free" henna for good causes and for projects where I might get something valuable out of it like a ton of creative freedom or professional photographs of my work.

The following article makes the point that if you give away stuff for free people lose respect for you and know that you can be had for cheap: <http://tinyurl.com/2c2uawy>

When I turn down gigs I kill them with kindness: "Thanks so much for thinking of me but unfortunately I just can't turn down all the paying gigs that I'm offered in order to work for free. Good luck with your event!"

**Jessica, www.hennacaravan.com
Southern California**

Like Darcy I DO NOT do FREE events. Though I'd say I get 1 call a week for free events. The requests range from good advertising, tips, goodwill, volunteer, community support, breast cancer, fundraising, non profits.

The majority, like 98% are just throwing a party and want henna but won't pay for us to come. A non-profit is NOT the fall party at your yoga studio OR the grand opening of your salon or store.

It's very frustrating trying to explain nicely and respectfully that you don't work for free. That always gets a funny reaction - ugh... no no no I would never expect you to work for free! Well ya just asked. For some reason folks really go after the henna community for free events. A huge warning for me is when the trade off is 'good advertisement'! That inevitably means we work for free at your party with nothing in return. EVER.

**Capucine, <http://HennaMontreal.com>
Montreal, Canada**

I've had this happen to me on a number of occasions this past year. It's not so bad when they are upfront about their request; it's the wasting of my valuable time that particularly frustrates me.

The fact that most of them try to mislead about the event, that they make it sound like they are going to hire you and then flat out ask for you to work for free, or even worse, try to *guilt* you into working for free "because it's such a good cause / you'll get exposure / you can work for tips". For example, just this past week, I received a standard email request for info regarding doing henna for a charitable event for next month.

Now I should specify that my default response to potential clients via my website is *always* by email. I send out my FAQ, and any specifics and rates regarding the type and size of event they mention.

I'll explain my reasoning behind this -- I don't like to do things by phone up front, because I invariably end up spending a half hour trying to explain everything clearly, (and sometimes in French which is not my first language) when a pre-written email response covers all the details without me repeating myself or forgetting anything. That way they also can't claim they didn't understand or don't remember my explanations and the rates and conditions are clearly spelled out. Email also lets me reply at whatever time is convenient *for me* (even if that is at 4 am) rather than wasting time trying to chase them down by phone and leaving messages.

So, this lady from the charity replied by email and wrote, and I quote: "Your rates seem very reasonable." and goes on to request that I contact her by phone to discuss some of the details. I figured that if she did not have a problem with our hourly rates *per artist* for her event, then she was serious enough, so I agreed to try to reach her, despite it being by phone.

So we spend a couple of days playing phone tag (another reason I prefer to respond primarily via email!), and when I finally reach her, she goes on to basically ask me to provide two artists for an hour or two FOR FREE, and that we could put out a tip jar. Jeez -- this felt like such an insulting slap in the face, especially after mentioning how reasonable our rates are!

However, I managed to keep my cool demeanor and simply mentioned that we only do a few community service events per year and that we had committed to them for this year. I mentioned that this is how we make a living and that you can't simply ask us to work for free, as we end up in the hole simply on time and expenses.

When she pushed how it would be 125-150 mostly business women and that it would give us exposure -- I clearly but firmly explained that based on my experience and that of numerous other henna artists that I know, that none of us have never, ever, ever gotten any future work contracts based on giving our work away for free.

And that after paying an entrance fee at the door for a supposedly charitable event, people generally will not pay for any other things once they are inside, they expect it to be included, and therefore almost never give tips for what they consider a freebie anyway.

(At events like this, tips would never even come close to covering our hourly rate per artist, plus travel. And as for "exposure", jeez, you certainly found me with no problem, now didn't you?)

I explained a few other alternatives that she could consider, such as paying our usual hourly rate and then they could charge their patrons whatever they wanted per design, or THEY could put out a tip jar and keep the proceeds from it. Then she hummed and hawed and said that maybe she could try to see if they could afford just *one* artist for an hour, but she'd have to check with people, etc, etc.

I don't seriously expect to hear back from her. Oh, and she asked me if I knew any fortune tellers or card readers -- and when I asked, yes, she had the gall to expect them to work for free as well.

So now I'm going to be formulating a pre-written reply specifically addressing fundraising and charitable events so that I can hopefully minimize this waste of my time whenever I am faced with more of these kinds of requests for "freebies"...

**Hiralhenna, www.hiralhenna.com
Ann Arbor, MI**

I pretty much just agree with everyone that has already commented. And I'll add myself to the list of people who do NOT recommend specifically targeting the desi community. I definitely get more work from "other" people, and it's much less haggling. I had a desi guy call me yesterday, and this is how the conversation went:

Him: We're looking to get mehndi done, not bridal or anything - just simple.

Me: Oh, for how many people?

Him: 24 ladies

Me: (thinking probably for Karwa Chauth) Okay, for group events like that, I charge \$75/hour for one artist.

Him: 75/hour??? That's too expensive.

Me: Okay, bye.

Lol, I don't even waste my time trying to explain anything anymore. The headache alone is not worth my time!