

# Nonprofit Taglines: The Art of Effective Brevity

by Nancy E. Schwartz

**Editors' note:** This article is adapted from a longer report by the author based on more than 1,800 responses to an in-depth survey of nonprofit organizations' use of taglines.

**N**OTHING'S MORE CENTRAL TO your nonprofit marketing impact than your brand: that is, your organization's unique focus and impact as perceived by your base and others. Branding communicates your organization's unique identity and value via consistent messaging and "look and feel" so your audiences recognize that it's your nonprofit reaching them in an e-mail, on Facebook, or on a walkathon sign in a walker's front yard. Most important, strong branding integrates promises of quality, consistency, and authenticity, so donors, volunteers, and other key audiences become more engaged than ever. Your organization's tagline is hands down the briefest, easiest, and most effective way to communicate your brand.

A tagline is the heart of your organization's brand, so it should be designed strategically, conveyed artfully, and delivered passionately and consistently. Most essentially, it should be such a natural outgrowth of your nonprofit's name that the two are inextricably linked.

These characteristics make your tagline the most frequently heard and read aspect of your organization. Make sure it is represented: feature it promi-

nently in all print collateral and stationery; online communications (from e-newsletters and Web sites to e-mail signatures); signage, conversations, and presentations, and in some cases, your main voicemail. The American Liver Foundation puts its tagline front and center in its organizational voicemail, which is very useful, especially for those calling after hours.

When your tagline works, it has the potential to become a perennial icon of your organization, lifting your brand from the commonplace to the unforgettable. Think "A mind is a terrible thing to waste" from the United Negro College Fund.

Your tagline should also work well as a lead-in to your positioning statement (that is, the one to three sentences you'd use as a reply when asked what your organization does). In the broader picture, tagline development also serves as a way to quickly and inexpensively refresh or revise your brand. It serves as an anchor for subsequent branding work if your organization doesn't have the bandwidth or budget for an all-new or all-revised brand initiative. Of course, the more complex your organization's focus and programming, the more challenging it is to craft a powerful, accessible brand and tagline.

## Who Has Them, Who Doesn't

Some 73 percent of the nonprofit organizations responding to a survey of more than 1,800 organizations for *The Nonprofit Tagline Report* have taglines.<sup>1</sup> Human-service organizations (75 percent) and grantmaking organizations (74 percent) have the highest incidence of tagline use, while religious and spiritual organizations register somewhat lower (56 percent). Perhaps more interesting, however, is that, among respondents to the survey, 72 percent either don't have a tagline or rate their taglines as poor, while only 32 percent rate their taglines as effective and 10 percent as very effective. Such dismal responses are unfortunate and unnecessary.

## Ready for a Change?

As you create or revise your organization's tagline, consider the following.

**Your tagline must convey your nonprofit's or program's impact or value.** Here are some examples:

- "Increasing physical activity through community design" (from the organization Active Living by Design)
- "Protecting your retirement. Securing your benefits" (from the organization RetireSafe)
- "Informing grantmakers, improving our community" (from the organization Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers)

**Use your tagline for all it's worth.** If your tagline doesn't have "positioning value,"

it's a bust. Mere descriptors don't make the grade.

**Make your tagline broadly accessible and memorable; avoid jargon and acronyms.** Here are two examples.

- "Starve fear. Feed hope" (from the National Eating Disorders Association)
- "A passion to help. The ability to deliver" (from AmeriCares)

**Your tagline must be unique and specific to your organization.** A tagline should not be easily transferable to another nonprofit; otherwise, it's just a me-too phrase. Differentiation is tough, but it's also the name of the game.

- "People who change the world need the tools to do it!" (NTEN)
- "Equal play" (Women's Sports Foundation)
- "Smart policy. Sound science. Stronger communities" (Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs)

**Your tagline must be eight words or less, which is all you have of your audience's attention.** Here are some examples.

- "We help neighborhoods play" (Silken's ActiveKids Movement)
- "Where volunteering begins" (VolunteerMatch)

**Your tagline must be highly visible and integrated into all print, online, and multimedia and into most verbal communications.** For example, when audiences hear your organization's name and tagline announced as a sponsor of NPR's *Morning Edition*, it's imperative for them to be able to go to your Web site and see that tagline front and center to affirm they're in the right place.

The American Psychological Association (APA) sponsors *Morning Edition*, for example, and its name and tagline are broadcast to a huge audience. Unfortunately, the tagline is nowhere to be found on APA's home page. Invisibility and lack of integration among channels undermines your tagline power and overall marketing impact.

**Your tagline should make an emotional connection.** Here are a couple of examples.

- "Helping preserve the places you cherish" (LandChoices)
- "When you can't do it alone" (Jewish Family & Children's Service of Sarasota-Manatee Inc.)

**Your tagline should capture the spirit or promise of your organization.** Here are a couple of examples.

- "Finding the ways that work" (the Environmental Defense Fund, which is committed to taking on environmental issues with persistence and innovation)
- "Grounded in tradition . . . open to the spirit" (Memphis Theological Seminary)

**Your tagline should clearly complement and clarify your organization's name without duplicating it.** Examples include the following:

- "It's a moving experience" (the Museum of Transportation, Missouri)
- "Explore, enjoy and protect the planet" (Sierra Club)

The Sierra Club's tagline relates to the broad range of work done by the organization and balances the seemingly narrow focus that one might conclude is associated with California's Sierra Nevada mountain range. You can't presume your audience brings any particular context to digesting the tagline.

**Your tagline should be authentic.** Your organization must be able to stand behind its tagline 100 percent. When you do, you build credibility. When you don't, you lose any credibility you may have.

## Achieving Impact

To have impact, your organization's tagline needs to be distinctive and powerful. The more fully you incorporate the following elements, the more likely your tagline will convey your brand effectively.

**Use surprising or unexpected imagery, perspective, or approach.** Here are some examples.

- "Improving life, one breath at a time" (American Lung Association, which uses imagery)
- "The art of active aging" (EngAGE, which uses perspective)
- "Cancer support for the whole family—the whole time" (Gilda's Club

Nashville, which uses approach)

**Motivate the reader to action.** Here is an example.

- "Help us feed the hungry" (Food Pantries for the Capital District)

**Use verbs. Action words are more engaging.**

- "Building careers through confidence, discipline, and professionalism" (Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow)
- "Advancing immunology. Conquering cancer" (Cancer Research Institute)

**Make your audience want to know more.**

- "Rise above your expectations" (Sisters Acquiring Financial Empowerment)
- "From dependence to independence" (First Occupational Center of New Jersey)

**When your tagline stands alone, ensure consistent meaning.** That way, you can use it in conversation or other situations when your listeners don't have your organization's name or logo right in front of them.

- "Helping victims become children again" (Memphis Child Advocacy Center)

## What to Avoid

Second only to your organization's name, your tagline is the most remembered, repeated message you have at your disposal, so make sure it's right. A tagline is a terrible thing to waste. As challenging as it is to create a strong tagline, it's all too easy to craft one that fails. When that happens, your organization loses a potent tool and, even worse, may confuse or annoy audiences. Beware these pitfalls that can sink your tagline.

**Don't be generic.** Be specific and as emotive as possible to highlight a connection between an individual and your organization. Warning: don't use generic language, which is a common error.

An example of a weak tagline is "Building a better New York" from an organization that provides legal services to other nonprofits. This tagline is easily confused and could represent a construction firm or the mayor's office.

An example of a powerful tagline is

## TAGLINE AWARD WINNERS FOR 2008

Congratulations to these 12 award-winning organizations that were voted best in class by 3,062 nonprofit professionals and others who participated in an online poll as reported in *The Nonprofit Tagline Report*. All the winning taglines have been in use for four years or less. The organizations that created these taglines—which range from a new organization run by a part-time volunteer (LandChoices) to the well-established and global (UNICEF)—have done an admirable job of putting eight words or less to work to build their brands.

1. **Arts and culture.** “Where actors find their space” (NYC Theatre Spaces). This clearinghouse for NYC rehearsal and performance spaces uses a double entendre to go beyond a description of its services and highlight the value of its work.
2. **Civic benefit (civil rights, community, advocacy, social science).** “Stand up for a child” (CASA of Southwest Missouri). CASA’s tagline provokes anger, compassion, and the desire to help—in just five words.
3. **Education.** “Stay close. . . . Go far” (East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania). This simple yet distinctive tagline from East Stroudsburg cuts through the clutter. Its straightforward character mirrors that of the school.
4. **Environment and animals.** “Helping preserve the places you cherish” (LandChoices). LandChoices’ tagline thoroughly communicates the value of its work while evoking pleasant memories of walks in the woods, wildflower meadows, and childhood camping trips. There’s a real emotional connection here.
5. **Grantmaking.** “Make the most of your giving.” (The Greater Cincinnati Foundation). This clear tagline articulates the value of the foundation for donors in considering an alternative way to give.
6. **Health and sciences.** “Improving life, one breath at a time” (American Lung Association). This unexpected focus on the breath—a core element of life—gets attention and understanding.
7. **Human services (including children, youth, and families).** “When you can’t do it alone” (Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Sarasota-Manatee Inc.). This tagline tells the story succinctly and powerfully: it’s all about getting help when life becomes overwhelming. It makes a strong emotional connection.
8. **International, foreign affairs and national security.** “Whatever it takes to save a child” (U.S. Fund for UNICEF). UNICEF engages hearts and minds with its passionate focus on helping children. Who could turn down a request for a donation?
9. **Jobs and workforce development.** “All building starts with a foundation” (Building Future Builders). Voters enjoyed the word play here: It adds depth of understanding without being glib.
10. **Religion and spiritual development.** “Grounded in tradition . . . open to the spirit” (Memphis Theological Seminary, or MTS). MTS conveys the two equally important halves of its values and curriculum in a way that makes you think about the connection.
11. **Other.** “The art of active aging” (EngAGE). EngAGE surprises with the imagery of active aging and the use of the term “art” to describe the way it does its work.
12. **Other.** “Because facts matter” (Oregon Center for Public Policy (OCP)). This tagline introduces the nature of OCP’s impact in Oregon and entices the reader or listener to find out more. Its value proposition—the truth—is particularly compelling at a time when facts are frequently disregarded in public debate.

“Connecting lawyers and communities” from the same kind of nonprofit in another city. Here are other generic taglines that raise more questions than they answer.

- “We’re more than you think!” (a women’s health care provider). What are the unexpected services, and why are they important?
- “There is a difference!” (a hospice organization). Articulate what that difference is.
- “Discover!” (a camp). What is to be discovered here?

**Don’t veer off focus.** The following tagline draws attention to the organization’s location, a detail not central to the organization’s services or value:

- “Produced in Boston, shared with the world” (a public-service media producer; PBS and public radio)

**Don’t use analogies that don’t hold water.** You’ll only confuse your audience. Here are two examples.

- “Life is a team sport” (Marrow donor organization)
- “Find your edge” (a university). An “edge” is not what most students or

parents seek.

**Don’t plant uneasiness.** Don’t introduce ambiguity into your tagline. Consider these examples:

- “Protecting, strengthening, and promoting nonprofits” (a state association of nonprofits). Why do nonprofits need protection? This is bound to make audiences wonder.

**Avoid poor word choices.** They take an audience in the wrong direction. Consider this example:

- “Potential made possible” (an agency serving children with special needs).

An improvement would be “Potential brought to life.”

**Don't put two or more taglines to work.** If you do, you're doing everything you can to undermine your organization's brand. As a result, your audience won't get to know your organization and reinforce its brand among others. Instead, the audience will be annoyed and confused. One survey respondent notes this problem: “Various staff and board members and volunteers use different ones.”

### Research, Review, Test

Before you start your own organization's tagline brainstorming session, review taglines of colleague and competitive organizations (within and outside your field). Don't launch your tagline before trying it out. Before committing yourself to your top choice, get feedback from at least 10 members of key external audiences. You may discover one of two things: They just don't get the proposed tagline, or you don't feel 100 percent com-

fortable with it yourself. Before you launch, be sure that you love your tagline and will be satisfied using it for at least five years. If it remains relevant and powerful, a longer life span is possible.

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in which you work shifts dramatically, there's significant value in your tried-and-true tagline. But remember, there are good reasons to change your tagline even when your name or other brand elements remain the same. A tagline-

only change can freshen your message, confirm your promise, and rejuvenate your organization's brand.

### ENDNOTES

1. Nancy E. Schwartz, *The Nonprofit Tagline Report*, September 2008.

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