

Nonprofit Communications:

Fundamental, Strategic— and Chronically Underperforming

By Christine Durand

A STRONG PROGRAM SHOULD LIE AT THE heart of a nonprofit's reputation. Once that is in place, an effective communications system can add immeasurably to your long term success.

This is a new era in which organizational transparency and accountability are ever more impor-

tant, and there is a higher premium on the public's need to know. What is the unique commitment your organization has made? How has it gone through discharging that commitment? What does it plan to do in the future? In other words, the present state of nonprofit communications requires us to engage the public in fully understanding the work we do and how we do it—and what they might be able to do to support it.

Here are the things about which every nonprofit should communicate:

CHRISTINE DURAND is the communications and marketing manager at the Minnesota Council of Nonprofit Organizations (www.mncn.org).

- The issue the organization addresses
- The way the organization addresses the issue
- The organization's ethics and what the public can expect
- What the public can do to address the issues relevant to the organization's work

In most of these communications, the brand or recognizable core identity of the organization should be visible. All communications and programming should reinforce this brand if your organization needs public support either in terms of money or involvement.

Not Always About the Organization

Don't go overboard on the branding thing, however. Sometimes our missions call for our organizations to communicate about the issue, not about the organization or work that we do. It is good for a nonprofit to generally help inform and direct the media without having the organization's name or spokesperson mentioned within the story. A story without you in it but supportive of your mission just adds to your case down the line. You don't want to be the only voice in town railing on about your issue.

It is a nonprofit's responsibility to its mission to put the mission before organizational gain. Sometimes that means playing the background bass in the orchestra of our issues—not always out front, but still critically important to the ensemble. Sometimes it means taking a risk by talking about an issue in a way that might grate upon people in power—even people who have power over your budget (see “Straw to Gold: Three Years On,” Summer 2005 issue, page 42).

In the long run, being too careful about the way you address the issues you work on actually robs you of the power your communications with the public could and should have. Controversy is the stuff of public life, and taking principled positions in public also adds to your long term credibility.

Stories Embody Your Mission

Jonathan Hutson, from Trial Lawyers for Public Justice (www.tlpj.org), a national public interest law firm, has had experience bringing consumers' environmental rights to the forefront of public interest. He recently gave some advice: “You have a story to tell, and in many cases you need to tell it because nothing changes until you speak out.

Tell your story in your own words, from the heart, and speak with passion. It's not the words you use, it's how you say it and who you are that will come through. And the passion and commitment and basic integrity will come through.”

Staffing the Communications Function

Hutson went on to say, “A lot of times people disempower themselves by thinking they need to hire outside consultants who have a lot of communications expertise. We're obsessed with experts in the nonprofit sector. We all have experience in the world and can bring that to our communications work.”

As Karen Jeffreys notes in the sidebar to her article (see page 26), the close connection with people who have been affected by a particular set of circumstances, and their stories, are a source of great potential power for nonprofits. These stories are the stuff of effective communication, and the great thing is that almost everyone on your staff probably knows them.

Everyone within the organization should be held responsible for communicating on behalf of the organization and its mission. From the board chair to the receptionist, from the executive director to the program managers, every person affiliated with the organization communicates about it, and must continually work to promote the image, trust, and value of the organization and its work. (This necessitates, of course, that they believe it themselves. You can't legislate a convincing message.) Most effective is when the people who benefit from your organization tell their own stories as a part of the larger story you want to tell.

Good organizational communications skills can distinguish a productive, effective organization from an infertile, wasteful one. We all are on the receiving end of an overwhelming number of messages every day that we somehow take in, process, and respond to. Many slide right past our radar. Messages from nonprofit organizations looking for support, advocacy, and participation are in the mix of those that make or miss the cut each day.

The success of an organization's public relations, and thus its public trust, often depends on the communications management skills of its leadership. Though few nonprofit managers are communicators by trade, good communications skills can come from nature or nurture. Often, those finding themselves in careers within the

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nonprofit sector have an inherent ability to get stories to the right audiences.

- A successful fundraiser must be able to deliver a compelling story.
- A program manager must be able to listen and relate to audiences.
- An organizer/advocate must be able to help people who have been unheard be heard.

Organizations that showcase effective communications often have a combination of both leaders with a natural sense of message and audience, and staff with the training and background to make it happen.

Small Organizations: Doing It Their Way

Small organizations must live every day with the practical challenges involved in having staff wear multiple hats. They also generally have a natural focus on building direct relationships with specific publics, rather than on getting publicity.

In *Thinking Big, Staying Small*, a 2005 study by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), small organizations were found to practice communications based more on instinct than formal training, focusing heavily on the use of personal and direct forms of communications rather than mass communications and messages. In other words, small organizations rely on what they know: their audience. By organizing their audiences and building relationships, they are able to economically build the public identity of the organization and public understanding of and support for the issues they address. As your organization grows, however, so should your dedicated communications capacity.

A Branding Effort

WomenVenture (www.womenventure.org), a small economic-development organization based in St. Paul, Minnesota, was able to realign with its desired audience by focusing tightly on communications with them. President Tené

Wells said that this work touched many parts of the organization: members redesigned the work space so it felt more like a professional economic development resource, revamped the organization's graphics, and used consistent messages in their communications. Through increased consistency at all levels, WomenVenture increased its ability to be recognized by poten-

tial clients, donors, and supporters; and provide consistent messages about the organization's work, effectiveness, and trustworthiness.

Wells emphasized the need to focus on your desired audience. "When you have limited resources, you have to figure out what's going to give the biggest bang for the buck. If I'm trying to recruit high school girls for a program, where am I putting these messages? Is there a poster on the bathroom at the high school? Am I putting these in the counselor's office? Is there a place they hang out where they'll see it?"

Technology—Making Communications Easier or Harder?

At first glance, the convenience of using e-mail and the Internet may seem to make communicating easier. After all, technology allows quick mass communications for relatively little investment. As experienced, however, the inundation factor of e-mail and Internet sites has increased the fog.

Trial Lawyers for Public Justice was able to maximize its communications budget by using technology. According to Jonathan Hutson, "You may have few people and a shoestring budget, but with a little tech savvy, you can achieve a big impact rather quickly by using innovative interactive media, including e-mail with links to Web content that reinforces your brand."

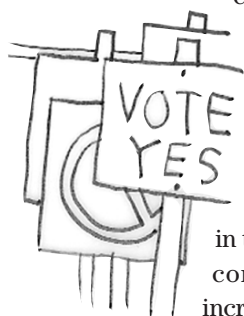
The organization learned that interactive media can be used as a key tool for marketing, but most often cannot be used alone to achieve the desired results. Web resources can be a great way to publish content in a timely, efficient manner. Hutson said, "It's about building and maintaining relationships with people."

Common Nonprofit Communication Errors

Nonprofit organizations are increasingly viewing their communications as a vital part of their operations. This has allowed us to discern some common communication errors on the part of nonprofits:

Inconsistency of messages. Contradictory messages confuse audiences and put the organization in danger of losing audience trust. Be consistent in terms of your style and moral compass. Write up your overriding communications objectives and stick with them.

Excessive neediness. Continual desperate pleas for resources for the organization or atten-



tion to an issue it cares for can become stale and ineffective. Be wary of making too many cries for help without showing what has been accomplished—it breeds depression, and depression is inactive. Make sure that if you say the sky is falling, it really is, and let people know how they can participate in replacing it properly.

Ineffective context. Saying the wrong thing at the wrong time can make the organization seem out of its element.

One-way communication. Always keep the expertise of your audience in mind. Don't preach at people who likely already know something, for instance. Couch your messages strategically and ask people who already know to talk back and talk to others.

Message framing vs. message frequency. The wrong balance of strategic message development and repetitiveness can throw your whole plan off. Spend some time thinking through your message and your communications objectives. The right message doesn't necessarily assure penetration, though—make sure your audience is able to fully absorb the messages you spent so long preparing.

"We've always done it that way." Repeating errors committed by predecessors is a surefire way to show you haven't learned anything. Just because that is the way things were done in the past doesn't mean they were effective. Think through each communication as if it were the first.

Promising something you don't deliver. This creates a problem not just for your organization, but for other nonprofits. It feeds a climate of distrust. A hotline that isn't staffed well, a child protective program that doesn't know where the children it places are, a disaster relief agency that refuses to enter communities experiencing disaster—these breaks with public trust create a climate of cynicism that makes it harder to get messages across.

Conclusion

Managed as an integral part of your programs, communication strategies can become vital assets. While they are no substitute for a good program, they can be powerful tools for bringing the stories and issues faced by those served by your organization to broader audiences; and ultimately extending the work of the organization.

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When to Hire Communications Staff

By Holly Minch

Nonprofit organizations—while eager to get the word out about their good work—must often make difficult choices when it comes to investing their limited resources. Why hire a communications director when key programs need more resources, too? It's a tough decision, but one that many groups are finding yields real payoff for their work.

Building communications capacity by bringing on dedicated staff is a significant step in the development and sophistication of nonprofit organizations. Every year more groups are turning to professional communications staff for assistance in publicizing their issues and engaging their audiences.

Evaluating Your Opportunities

A few simple questions can help you determine if hiring communications staff is the right step for your organization:

Why? Why do you want to make a commitment to increased communications efforts? What does your organization hope to get out of it? How will it advance your goals and help you achieve your mission?

How is communications currently staffed? If you have a newsletter, a Web site, or a mailing list, you are already staffing some of the core communications functions of a nonprofit. Chart how this work is achieved in your current infrastructure—Is it shared across program staff? Is your board engaged in supporting the communications work? You might choose to keep the work spread out across staff, but you'd still want to coordinate your efforts with a thoughtful, widely shared communications plan for the organization. (There's a tutorial and a template on the SPIN Project Web site to get you started; visit www.spinproject.org.)

Why now? Every organization is presented with moments of heightened opportunity—a legislator decides to take on your issue, a capital campaign is launched, etc.—and these can be great times to make an increased commitment to communications. Dedicated staffing can help you leverage those opportunities.

Your Mileage May Vary by Mission

For some types of organizations, committing staffing to communications may be more urgent. Nonprofits that employ policy advocacy, public education, or community organizing as primary

strategies may want to bring on communications staff sooner rather than later, as intensive strategic communications efforts can help you influence the context and alter the public opinion environment in which your work takes place. Service providers may find that their communications needs center on ongoing marketing of their work to target audiences, which may warrant staffing. There's no golden rule on when to hire, so let your program needs be your guide.

Whom Do We Hire?

There are three critical factors to consider when determining whom to hire to staff communications in your organization:

Commitment to mission. If this person is going to be a public champion of your work, you want them to be deeply passionate about the mission, and highly articulate on the importance of the work you do and how it benefits those you serve.

Skills. You want a polished writer and careful thinker who can position your organization both intentionally and opportunistically. You also need a diplomat—someone who can work well with key leadership and influence their thinking on matters of strategy.

Experience in nonprofits. Candidates who have worked primarily in the for-profit sector or in PR firms may find it a culture shock to work in a smaller nonprofit, as they may be accustomed to having more resources to work with. That said, if they care about the mission and understand the unique characteristics of your organization, go for it!

The SPIN Project (www.spinproject.org) and the Progressive Communicators Network (www.spiritinaction.net/pcn/) both maintain job boards and listservs that can help connect to you pools of talented people that might be a fit for your organization.

OK, We Hired a Communications Director. Now What?

Create plans—both a work plan for the new staff person and an overarching communications plan for the organization. This will help clarify expectations, establish benchmarks, and jumpstart successful communications efforts. It's vital that the new staffer have access to key leadership to help guide this planning process.

And remember that your communications budget isn't just the salary for this new staff person—you should build into the budget the materials you want them to produce for the organization (e.g. new brochures, reports) as well as the tools this person will need to do their job well (e.g. reliable database, media lists), so plan accordingly.

When Not to Hire Communications Staff

Groups that hire communications staff generally have successes to share and have the organizational infrastructure to absorb increased attention and the follow-up work that it can create. There are some circumstances, however, when hiring a communications person might not be the right step:

Start-ups. Generally, your program efforts should have some maturity and substance before communications staff is brought on board. Otherwise, you run the risk of communications considerations—rather than the mission—driving strategy. You might want to wait until after a strategic plan is in place to focus on communications.

Mission-mandated confidentiality. Sometimes increased atten-

tion can actually jeopardize the program work. Delicate negotiations, conflict resolution, and confidential family matters generally don't stand up well to the bright lights of public attention. There are, of course, ways to talk about these issues that don't breach confidence, but they must be handled carefully. Say you work on domestic violence issues, or provide support for children in the foster care system—you can pitch a media article to tell the stories of your clients, their challenges, and their success, but you must work with journalists to get them to agree to certain guidelines as they shape the piece.

Conclusion

While building communications capacity is critical for the success of nonprofits, each organization must carefully evaluate its particular circumstances to arrive at the right decision with regards to staffing this function. Be determined about getting the word out, but be diligent and deliberative in choosing how best to do it.

Holly Minch is the Director of the SPIN Project, a nonprofit communications capacity-building firm in San Francisco.