



MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

David Williamson

ESSAYS ON EXCELLENCE
*Lessons from the Georgetown
Nonprofit Management
Executive Certificate Program*

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Georgetown University

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS: IT MATTERS MORE THAN YOU THINK

David Williamson

Marketing gets no respect in the nonprofit world.

Program people tend to hold the most senior positions in nonprofits and accordingly have the most status. Fundraisers are often viewed as necessary evils, as are operations staff, including those who labor in the communications and marketing departments.

Several factors account for the suspicion or disdain with which many nonprofit managers view the marketing function. Mostly, it's a matter of ignorance. Usually trained in other disciplines, nonprofit leaders often fail to understand what marketing can and can't do for their organizations. Consequently, they hold some strange assumptions (e.g. "Our good work will sell itself"), unrealistic expectations (e.g., demanding to be in *The New York Times* once a week) and arbitrary funding theories (i.e., when fundraising is down, cut the communications budget). Compounding the challenge, few nonprofit managers recognize their lack of expertise in these areas. The same people who would never contradict a financial expert or ignore a scientist don't think twice about overruling marketing professionals on audiences, messages, tactics—the very essence of marketing strategy.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, primarily advocacy or social marketing enterprises where the core program involves communications, outreach and marketing. But in the main, the basic lack of respect accorded marketing comes as no surprise to anyone who tried to apply marketing to mission or build a nonprofit brand—we're used to it. After all, why is this chapter near the end of this book?

Forward-looking nonprofit leaders, however, will recognize what their counterparts in the for-profit sector understood long ago: marketing is essential.

And although the marketing function masquerades under many names within nonprofit organizations—Communications, Advancement, External Affairs, Public Relations, or Brand Management—the primary objectives are pretty much the same: to define and then defend an organization's position, and move it closer to success in its mission.

Marketing answers the questions:
How is our program distinctive?
What do we want to be known for?
Why is our work relevant?

With the competition for philanthropic resources and public attention fierce, these are absolutely critical considerations for every nonprofit.

While the benefits of investing in marketing may not be obvious to nonprofit leaders, the costs of failing to do so are becoming increasingly clear. With nonprofits coming under increasing public and regulatory scrutiny, organizations no longer can afford to relegate communications and marketing to second-class status. It's a matter of survival. When the investigative reporters are circling your organization (think of the recent unpleasantness that befell the American Red Cross, United Way, and Smithsonian Institution, among others) you will wish that you had a robust, professional communications department to handle the incoming slings and arrows. An expensive outside public relations firm is a poor substitute for people who know your organization and command the trust of the staff.

MORAL: *Show marketing some respect. It is essential for mission success, but if you wait around until the need is obvious, it will already be too late.*

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Douglas Meyer in preparing this manuscript. Note: The anecdotes herein are intended to illustrate larger themes, and not as critiques of individual organizations.

THE ELEVATOR TEST

Through the years, marketers have invented ever-more sophisticated ways to develop organizational position statements. Lots of these methodologies work, and you can spend big money with consultants on finely crafted and focus-group-tested positioning statements. At the same time, for nonprofits, the simpler approach advocated by the marketing savant Harry Beckwith may achieve much the same result at considerably lower cost and effort.

I think of Beckwith whenever I find myself confronted with a classic “elevator test” moment. You strike up a conversation in an elevator, on the subway, in the line at Starbucks and the question soon arises: What do you do? The challenge is how to answer that question in an interesting, compelling manner that invites further questions about your organization, but that does not bog down in jargon or too much detail.

You don’t have much time — maybe two sentences at most. So what do you include? What do you leave out? What’s your answer to the elevator test?

Lest you think this exercise trivial, recall that everyone on the staff of your nonprofit gets asked the “what do you do?” question, in various forms, every day. In that sense, everyone on staff is a marketer, albeit rarely trained as such. Do you know how your staff is responding? Do you have any confidence that everyone on the team — program staff, receptionists, board members — shares a common sense of the organization’s brand position? Are they communicating a consistent message?

Many nonprofit organizations fail this test. Happily, Beckwith prescribes a very simple formula that nonprofits can adapt readily to their needs in developing an elevator test that can double as a position statement. (Note that the elevator test is not a mission statement, nor should it read like one, but instead tries to distill the essence of the organization into relevant, accessible language for the particular person with whom you are speaking.)

The Beckwith formula starts with six basic questions:

WHO?

What’s your name?

WHAT?

What kind of organization are you (scale and sector)?

FOR WHOM?

Whom do your programs serve?

WHAT NEED?

What pressing social problem does your program address?

WHAT’S DIFFERENT?

What is distinctive about your program?

SO WHAT?

Why should they care?

String the answers to these questions together for a nonprofit like Population Services International, a \$350 million organization working to improve health in the developing world, and you get something that looks like this:

PSI (Who?) is a global nonprofit (What?) that works to improve the health (What need?) of the poor and vulnerable in 60 developing nations around the world (For whom?). Combating diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria that kill millions around the world (So what?), PSI saves lives by using the power of the private sector to distribute and market health products to the neediest people. (What’s different?)

Three red flags about elevator tests. First, ruthlessly eliminate jargon. Every sector has a specialized language, but don’t use it in your elevator/positioning speech. Second, avoid laundry lists of activities. Nonprofits are wonderfully inclusive organizations, with a great sense of fairness and equity between their constituent parts, but this makes for disastrous marketing. The entire point of an elevator speech is to boil your enterprise into a message that is simple, consistent, and most of all distinctive, so make hard choices and focus on the things you do particularly well.

Second, and perhaps most important, put some real thought into answering the question: So what? It's the payoff piece of the speech, the call to action that makes the programmatic work of a nonprofit relevant. And to change policy and behavior, to raise money and build a strong institution, most organizations simply must find a way to make their mission relevant to a broader constituency. Figuring out a compelling "so what?" response is a good place to start.

Third, try to make it "sticky." Is what you have said memorable? In their book, *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath identify the common currency of memorable ideas, a good story. And, specifically, they note the importance of simple, true stories with concrete details, unexpected twists and emotion. Does your elevator speech tell a story in a way that helps the listener remember it?

For the leaders of nonprofits, the elevator test also can serve as a shrewd diagnostic tool for determining differences within the management team. Have everyone sit down and simultaneously craft an elevator speech—give them no more than five minutes—and then have people share the results. You will learn a lot about the attitudes of your senior managers and how they are portraying the organization to the outside world.

MORAL: *Marketing is the only job shared by everyone in the organization. An elevator speech makes sure your people have a compelling story, they stick to it and it sticks with their audience.*

MARKETING ISN'T COMMUNICATIONS, AND VICE VERSA

Nonprofits tend to use the terms marketing and communications interchangeably—another indication of the overall lack of sophistication about these issues inside the sector. But there are substantive differences between the two, none more significant than their very different points of departure.

Effective marketing generally starts from the point of the view of the audience, or customer, and seeks to anticipate and address their needs. It's all about you,

the audience; not coincidentally, that's why lots of marketing pieces tend to start with the word "you." Looked at another way, marketing is a "pull" strategy that meets the audience where it is, and then tries to steer the audience to the desired action or behavior through incentives or other inducements. Marketing, it has been said, appeals to the heart.

Communications, on the other hand, typically appeals to the head. Representing the institutional perspective, sentences in communications materials usually start with the word "we" or else the organization's name; look at any nonprofit annual report for a case in point. Communications also tend to be declarative, laying out a statement of opinion, a detailed factual case, or an institutional position, and then try to connect those to the audience's interests. These are classic push strategies in action, with the organization pushing out information (and misinformation!) about its activities or agenda.

Best-practices nonprofits combine the best aspects of both these approaches, and appeal to both the heart and the head. Mothers Against Drunk Driving, one of the most effective advocacy groups of modern times, is famous for the powerful emotional appeal of its advertising campaigns and legislative testimony, which prominently feature the victims of drunk drivers. But supplementing these classic marketing techniques, MADD also deploys equally classic communications strategies—position papers, voter's guides, legislative briefing books, and on-line advocacy, for example.

Together, this combination of disciplined marketing and focused, issue-oriented communications has made MADD a political force in every statehouse and on Capitol Hill. And it's not just MADD. Effective organizations of all stripes are taking advantage of both sides of the coin to get the message out about their issue, cultivate donors, and impress policymakers. Take a look next time you go to the web site or get direct mail from the National Rifle Association, the American Heart Association, or CARE. You'll see a blend of marketing and communications, things to pull you in and also to push out. It's not by accident.

MORAL: *Don't just communicate. Market.*

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS FOR FUNDRAISING

Fundraising can be the fire alarm that awakens the leader of a nonprofit to the need for marketing and communications, though, chances are, the initial interest will be less focused on strategy, and more focused on stuff: glossy brochures, pretty pamphlets and verbose newsletters that they can use to “sell” the organization to major donors.

Mike Coda, the best fundraising strategist I have ever known, was famously contemptuous of this type of marketing material. “All that collateral is just a crutch for a poor fundraiser,” Mike would say. “It’s no substitute for developing relationships and listening to donors.”

Of course, he was right—but only to a point. The marketing and communications functions can play an important role in helping execute a comprehensive fundraising plan, and the truth is, the marketing/communications shop can produce stuff to help raise money. But a word of caution here about a lot of the “stuff” that currently comes out. More than anything, pressures from development account for the proliferation of publications across the nonprofit sector. Our organizations are clogged with annual reports, magazines, newsletters, case statements, working papers and brochures targeted at planned givers, annual givers, alumni givers, givers of every sort. The arrival of the electronic age has not reduced, but instead added to the volume of potential fundraising collateral. Now prospective donors are besieged with slickly produced DVDs as well as blogs, virtual communities, interactive websites, and more.

I have always been surprised how few organizations conduct honest assessments of the costs and benefits of producing all this fundraising collateral. It’s not just that it costs a lot to design, print and create it; the real issue for nonprofits is the investment of time. The true cost of a piece of fundraising collateral must reflect the amount of energy and agony that went into its development and often more painful, approval by management and the board.

Everybody has a favorite story about absurd bureaucratic hurdles they have encountered to get something approved. One CEO, for example, used to require the signatures of 17 different managers to approve text for use in direct mail solicitations. Needless to say, the impact of the language was much attenuated by the time it went through so many editors, reducing the return on investment as well as diverting senior managers from their real jobs. Globally distributed organizations, like the World Wildlife Fund or Save the Children, face particularly tough challenges in getting their colleagues overseas to sign off on collateral materials or joint announcements.

It is the job of the marketing and communications function to bring discipline and reason to this process. Smart marketing managers will resist the steady drumbeat from the fundraising staff to deliver new and different materials. Instead, they will put the ball back in the court of the fundraisers by asking some tough questions:

Who is your audience and what do you know about them?

Why do you believe this is the best way to reach that person?

What is the shelf life of this piece?

What else could you spend this money on?

We will come back to these important questions later in this chapter.

An honest recognition of the need for fundraising is required, but so, too, is a healthy skepticism about the demands for fundraising collateral. Certainly, it makes life easier for fundraisers if they have attractive, compelling materials that reinforce the institution’s key messages. But then remember the boxes and boxes of attractive, compelling fundraising materials from previous campaigns gathering dust in your organization’s basement.

Once you decide to move forward with a piece of fundraising collateral, however, don’t try to save money by cutting corners. Good marketing materials can be expensive, and you should be prepared to pay to get the kind of products that will send the right message to

your donors. At the same time, you can often mitigate the budgetary impact by substituting quality for quantity. As so often is the case in nonprofits, the key is to focus on the few things that you can do that will have the greatest impact.

MORAL: *Fundraising is often a core component of marketing and communications, but not all fundraising collateral translates into more money raised.*

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS FOR MISSION IMPACT

After a discussion of the way in which marketing and communications can help with fundraising, the opportunity often arises to bring up the potential for it to have a direct impact on mission.

Remember the movie *Arthur*? Dudley Moore plays an affable drunk who spends his time getting in hilarious fixes, many involving driving his convertible while three sheets to the wind. The movie was one of the big hits of the early 1980s—coincidentally about the same time that two housewives in California were forming a new nonprofit called Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Fast forward a quarter century. Do you think that a movie like *Arthur*, with its tacit endorsement of drunk driving, could possibly be made today? I think not. The prevailing moral winds have swung hard against drinking and driving, making anathema what was once socially acceptable. And the reason for that is MADD.

MADD is not only an exceptionally effective advocacy organization that seeks and often secures legislative victories. It also excels at social marketing—using the full grab bag of tricks and techniques from the marketer’s playbook to achieve changes in individual behaviors and social norms that also were directly in line with its mission of ending drunk driving. In the case of MADD, that means orchestrating a sustained, national marketing campaign designed to change the behavior of Americans when it comes to alcohol and automobiles.

The success of this campaign can be measured first in lives saved. Drunk-driving deaths are down about 50 percent from all time highs. Perhaps even more enduring, the key concepts of this campaign have permeated the public lexicon. Designated drivers. Friends don’t let friends drive drunk. Drink responsibly. When the beer companies spread your message for free in their massive TV advertising campaigns, you know that you have succeeded.

Lots of fine organizations run social marketing campaigns aimed at changing public behavior on a large scale: the American Legacy Fund and its anti-smoking efforts; the American Cancer Society, which emphasizes early screening in all its marketing initiatives; and the American Heart Association and diet. Choose to Save seeks to promote personal savings; the Presidential Fitness Challenge to promote personal fitness. The unifying element is the focus on changing behavior, on getting people to stop doing something they presumably like and start doing something else.

Nonprofit marketing often aims at behavior change, and social marketing was made to do just this.

CASE IN POINT: the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, which was founded in the early ‘90s to tackle the surging levels of teen pregnancies. A small organization—only \$5 million—but with powerful friends, the National Campaign thought hard about best way to change the behavior of teenage girls, the target audience. Research showed that teenagers tended to romanticize parenthood, and did not understand the impact that caring for an infant would have on their lifestyle.

But how to communicate this lesson to an elusive audience that is already deeply suspicious of adults? The National Campaign cleverly threaded this needle by reaching out to the producers of the afternoon TV shows targeted at teen girls. With a little persuading, the producers agreed to write into the scripts of these shows storylines that made it clear what a drag it was to have a baby: it ruined your figure, ruined your social life, cost a lot of money, and so forth.

If the same messages had been delivered to the same audience but in the form of a public service announcement, the impact would have been marginal. But by merging the message with the content of these shows, the National Campaign managed to get the attention of these kids in a far more effective way. A lot of factors go into the sharp drop in teen pregnancies over the last decade, but certainly some of the credit needs to go to the National Campaign for a textbook case of social marketing in action.

Social marketing can't advance every mission, and is not for every organization. It can be expensive and requires significant expertise, both in-house and out. But it works, and must be part of your marketing and communications strategy if changing the world for your organization involves changing the behavior of people: health habits, purchasing choices, social norms, voting patterns.

MORAL: *Your mission should drive your marketing. If you are trying to change individual behaviors or social norms it's time to invest in social marketing.*

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS TO BUILD THE BRAND

The best of the best are thinking not only of marketing for fundraising and mission impact, but also for brand building. Brands are powerful stuff. Apple, for instance, evokes immediate associations of hip, cool, innovative products with excellent design. Coke and Pepsi have spent decades (and billions in advertising) staking out their relative brand positions: real thing or next generation? Nike has even managed to transcend its name, evolving into a universally recognizable logo.

If you work for Apple, Coke, or Nike, you don't have to explain to anyone what your company does. Everyone knows, both in substance and style. But not so the typical nonprofit employee. Maybe you're lucky and work someplace like the National Geographic Society, which has name recognition numbers to rival IBM and Starbucks, but the chances are that few people have ever heard of your organization or care particularly about your mission or approach.

This is one of those inescapable, brutal facts about the nonprofit world, and thus bears repeating: most people have never heard of your organization, and they probably don't care much about what you do. And this is even when the work being done is undeniably "good." This is a hard pill for many nonprofit people to swallow, because we all do care, passionately, about our causes and we want others to feel the same way we do.

But you can't let that passion blind you to the objective realities of trying to carve out a position for your nonprofit organization with your most important audiences amid the clutter of so many competing priorities and so much background noise in multiple media. Strengthening that position—defending your organization's reputation, the one irreplaceable asset of any nonprofit—is the essence of branding. The key is being disciplined in articulating the distinctive set of attributes that collectively define an organization's position in the marketplace for funding, ideas, and influence.

Komen for the Cure—formerly, the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation—provides a great example of the power of nonprofit branding. It's remarkable enough that this organization has grown in less than 25 years into the largest support group for breast cancer survivors, raising almost \$1 billion for breast cancer programs. Even more impressive, however, Komen (and other initiatives, like Avon's pioneering breast cancer walks) have helped bring this once-taboo disease into mainstream and make it a top public health priority—even though there are other diseases, less well-funded, that kill more people every year. In the process, Komen has turned pink ribbons into instantly recognized symbols of support for breast cancer victims and even managed to co-opt the word "cure." No one asks any more, "Cure what?" In today's context, pink plus "cure" has become shorthand for "cure breast cancer."

Little wonder, then, that when Komen revised its name and logo in 2006, the word "cure" took center stage. And what an upgrade! Komen ditched its foundation moniker, which was always a bit confusing to donors and supporters because it did not speak to the organization's programmatic efforts to support grassroots networks of survivors, promote early screening, and

improve patient care. The words “breast cancer,” with all their negative baggage, also disappeared from the name. Instead, Komen has adroitly repositioned itself as the leading force focused on a finding a cure — a positive, future-oriented message that appeals to donors, the public, and breast cancer victims alike.

Komen’s rebranding has been successful because its new brand positioning rings true with the organization’s core values, mission, and programs. This illustrates an important point about authenticity for any nonprofit trying to strengthen its brand. In the eyes of your stakeholders, it’s fine to change the various attributes of your brand — your name, logo, messages, and programmatic emphasis — as long as what you’re changing to passes the authenticity test. (Imagine Komen moving into an issue such as prostate cancer — they simply would not enjoy the same credibility and clout that they have earned in the breast cancer arena.) The lack of authenticity also helps explain the failure of so many high-profile corporate rebranding efforts; call it Phillip Morris or the Altria Group, in the public mind both are merchants of death, and no new logo can change that. As marketing guru Seth Godin might say, Komen is an example of the tremendous power to be found in telling an authentic story in a low-trust world.

So be careful about undermining the existing equity in your nonprofit brand. The National Audubon Society learned this lesson in the early 1990s, when the organization’s new leadership decided that Audubon needed to take a much more aggressive political posture. They ditched the revered whooping crane logo (“the bird image hurts us,” the CEO said at the time), fired the veteran editor of their signature magazine, and launched the kind of political activists campaigns usually associated with the Sierra Club.

But that wasn’t what Audubon members wanted. They were birders. They liked the crane. They wanted the magazine full of handsome photographs of warblers, not partisan screeds on toxic waste. The defections were swift, and Audubon’s membership and fundraising dropped sharply. Finally the board had to act and the CEO was ousted in 1996, only three years after

launching the revolution. The new CEO wisely returned to the focus on birds, but even so, Audubon has never recovered its peak membership of the late 1980s.

Despite the importance of branding and reputation, nonprofits are notoriously poor brand managers. Building a brand can be difficult and very expensive, and the results are typically hard to measure or not immediately apparent. As a result, nonprofits rarely invest the necessary resources to secure top-flight marketing talent, to produce outstanding marketing materials, to engage the media, to implement a consistent and appropriate visual identity system, and to do all the other supporting activities that fall under the heading of “branding.” To be sure, branding is no longer a dirty word in nonprofit circles, as it was in the 1990s, but this type of advanced marketing is still the first thing that gets cut when the funding is tight and the last item in the budget to be restored.

Such foolishness wouldn’t last long in the private sector. When sales are down, do Ford and General Motors reduce the advertising budget or slash the marketing department?

Regrettably, about the only thing that compels nonprofit leaders to pay attention to branding is when something goes spectacularly wrong at a high-profile peer organization. And some of the marquee brands in the nonprofit world have taken a real battering in recent years: the American Red Cross, United Way, or the Smithsonian Institution, among others. Ask any of these nonprofits how much their brand is worth to them — and what kind of damage they have suffered and how it could have been even worse. Then you might think twice before taking a red pencil to the marketing budget.

MORAL: *Your brand defines your organization to the outside world. Take the initiative and define yourself, before one of your enemies tries to define you.*

DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

With the desire for fundraising, mission impact and brand building understood, the key question becomes one of strategy, taking you from where you are to where you want to be. And strategy is fundamentally about making choices. This scares the hell out of the typical nonprofit employee. After all, making choices means that you might not choose me! As in Lake Wobegone, we in the nonprofit sector believe ourselves to be all above average, somehow special and immune from the laws of supply and demand that govern the rest of the world. The nonprofit culture—often conflict-averse, participatory, and given to consensus decision-making—further complicates the task of making real strategic choices. No wonder so many decisions inside nonprofit institutions end up as compromises.

But making tough choices is not optional when it comes to developing communications or marketing strategy. The reason is simple. No matter who you are, it costs too much for nonprofits to compete in this realm. Even Coca-Cola has to make hard choices about whom it targets with its marketing dollars. For nonprofits, operating with only a fraction of the resources of corporations, discipline and focus become all the more important in developing effective communications strategies.

Your chances of success depend both on well-conceived strategy and on the quality of your implementation plan. Brilliantly conceived marketing concepts have failed because of disconnects between planning and doing. A good marketing or communications strategy should flow in a tight logical sequence, starting with a very explicitly articulated objective or goal, all the way through the tactics and accountability. The more measurable the goal, the better—get the state legislature to fund this or that program, reduce teen smoking rates, raise attendance at the museum. You may not be able to avoid such amorphous goals as “raise awareness,” but you can ensure that your communications plan is driving toward a specific outcome.

The real guts of a high-quality marketing and communications plan follow directly from the goal. As long as it's aimed at a measurable result, the time-honored “audience, message, vehicle” formula has lost none of its relevance:

AUDIENCE: Which individuals or institutions do you need to reach and/or influence to achieve your programmatic objective? Can they be identified according to demographic or geographic, personality or lifestyle characteristics? Are they already aware of your issue and organization?

MESSAGE: What message will motivate each of your target audiences to take the required actions? After all, awareness matters not if nothing changes.

VEHICLE: What is the best means of delivering the message to the target audience? What combination of tools and vehicles work best? What individuals can serve as effective messengers?

Not very complicated, right? And if it's as simple as that, then how come marketing consultants continue to earn handsome fees from nonprofits?

First of all, it's not that simple. Crafting a communications plan for a nonprofit that will cut through the background noise requires skill and ingenuity. But compounding the problem, nonprofits infrequently take the time to do this right. Impatient executive directors tend to focus on tactics, obsessing on such things as their column in the organization's newsletter or signing off on all direct mail copy. Audience research and message testing can be expensive, so often nonprofits will try shortcuts or simply close their eyes and do something even more dangerous: assume.

And belaboring the whole process can be the immense self-absorption of so many nonprofits. Mission-driven organizations, with their singular focus on a cause such as human rights or the environment, can come across as cults of the self-righteous, demanding that supporters drink their proverbial purple Kool-Aid. Their communications and marketing materials will ask for buy-in to a full set of beliefs, rather than support for a single solution to an identifiable problem that matters to their audience. This can lead to big problems.

Developing tightly integrated marketing and communications plans with a focus on a measurable goal, and a clearly identified target audience thus can serve as the perfect antidote for the congenital lack of discipline and self-referentialism of so many nonprofits. It will ensure that you spend what you need to spend—and not any more. It will ensure that whatever you do spend will be aimed toward a pre-determined result (and evaluated accordingly).

MORAL: *You can't go far wrong in communications if you stick to the Holy Trinity: Audience. Message. Vehicle.*

ABOUT AUDIENCES

I still get splenetic when my nonprofit clients list the “general public” as one of their target audiences. I remind them that there is no such animal in today’s sophisticated marketing universe, no one— not Proctor & Gamble, not General Motors, not Unilever— tries to sell to the “general public.” And certainly no nonprofit can be in the business of trying to appeal to such an amorphous and diverse audience.

Yet all too many nonprofits persist in the fantasy that they can reach and then mobilize a broad audience. If you are the AARP, to be sure, you can easily roust your membership of 35 million to action whenever there is a political attack on Social Security or Medicare. But even if they were to get all 35 million, that’s still barely a tenth of the country, and hardly representative of the “general public.” An exceptionally savvy and politically astute institution, AARP instead makes careful, informed judgments about what political coalition they need to achieve their legislative goals, and then methodically reaches out to those audiences. That’s a far cry, and far more strategic, than trying to spread the word about your cause through every possible channel to every possible audience.

In addition to the general public, a few other hardy perennials seem to pop up onto most nonprofit lists of priority audiences. There are “policymakers”—as if county, city, state, federal, and international institutions were all the same. This phrase lumps together elected officials, appointed officials, and legislative staff; the executive, judicial, and legislative branches; and often the media elites, academics, and other key influencers as well. Then there are “major donors” and “foundations.” These too are highly idiosyncratic audiences, requiring discrete messages and careful handling.

Specificity matters when identifying and prioritizing audiences. The more general and broad the audience, the more difficult it is to tailor and deliver a powerful, compelling message that will resonate with that audience. Political campaigns see this dynamic all the time whenever a candidate has to reach out beyond his or her base. The red meat issues that so inspired the faithful don’t always translate well when packaged for a wider audience. The same logic applies to the nonprofit sector. The narrower the audience you choose, and the more audience appropriate your approach, the higher the probability that you can move that audience to action.

Selecting and ranking your audiences is a bit like solving a puzzle. Start with your objective. Who do you need to make progress? In other words, what group of people (or institutions) will have the necessary clout to make a difference—either to block what you want or else to make it happen? The answers to these questions cannot be based on wishful thinking or guesswork; rather, it requires a clear-eyed and sometimes cold-blooded analysis of the world of the possible.

I learned about the importance of figuring out the right audience years ago, when I was involved in a campaign to protect the desert tortoise, whose listing as an endangered species threatened to shut down real-estate development in Las Vegas. The key to the whole deal was getting the local Board of Supervisors to put up a bunch of money to acquire habitat for the tortoise way out in the desert. It didn’t take us long to focus like a laser on the target audience of our campaign—the nine members of the board of supervisors.

But we really didn't even bother with all nine. Three of them were on our side already, and three opposed. To get a majority, we needed to target the two undecided supervisors — an audience of exactly two. I am happy to report that both of these fine elected officials were deeply impressed by our poll of voters that showed strong public support for protecting the tortoises. They agreed to support the appropriation we were seeking. Today a healthy population of tortoises thrives at a wildlife refuge created for them in Searchlight, Nevada.

The poll that broke the political logjam cost around \$10,000. If we had been less careful in choosing our audience — if, say, we had targeted the voters of — I have no doubt that we would have spent a lot more money and accomplished less in terms of conservation. The alternative would have been expensive and time-consuming grassroots campaign, with no guarantee of success.

With inherently limited means, nonprofits, therefore, should be ruthless in narrowing their target audiences to the greatest degree possible. What's the irreducible minimum, the smallest audience I can reach and still achieve my objective? It could be two people, as in the Las Vegas case, or it could be thousands. The numbers matter less than going through the exercise of drawing an explicit link between the audience and the desired outcome. At the very least, this keeps you from spending time and money trying to engage people who aren't interested in what you do, and never will be.

MORAL: *There is no such thing as the general public. Find the audience that matters most to your mission, and focus on them like a laser beam.*

ABOUT MESSAGES

About 45 minutes into the first meeting on developing a new communications strategy, someone — usually an long-time employee from the program side of the organization — will express frustration with all the attention being spent on audiences. "Let's just get our message straight and go from there," this person will say. "We all need to be on the same page."

I'm all for being on the same page. That's why high-impact nonprofits have a position statement and elevator speech, an organization-wide mission and unifying goals. But don't confuse or conflate these framing elements of your organization's positioning with the messages that you are trying to deliver to your target audiences. Certainly, there will be considerable overlap, and messages must be consistent with the overall brand. If you fall in the trap of starting with your message first, you will never really succeed at marketing or communicating about your organization.

Instead, the needs of the audience dictate the message. Nonprofits often miss this point and believe that the message should be about them. But it most emphatically is not. More than just slogans, messages should be designed to motivate the target audience to go beyond awareness and take action — to vote one way or another, make a donation or sign a petition, to stop smoking or exercise more. What's more, messages have to speak directly to the needs, desires, and aspirations of the audience. What's in it for them? Why should they care? And how might your messages lessen the perceived costs or highlight the perceived benefits of taking action? Messages can evoke emotion (fear or hope, for example) or appeal to reason (using statistics or anecdotes) but in either case, the message needs to address a top-of-mind concern not for you, but for your target audience, and do so in a simple, compelling way.

Obviously, the more you know about your audience, the better you can devise messages that will scratch their particular itch. Market research, consequently, plays a critical role in communications and marketing campaigns. Research helps you understand your audience's attitudes and concerns, their priorities and where your issue stands relative to others for them. Meanwhile, research into language — testing specific words and phrases — can ensure that messages will resonate with the target audience. And market research also plays a role in figuring out how to deliver your message. What are the common characteristics of those in your target audience? How does your target audience get information? Who do they trust for accurate data? What do they read? Do they all watch the same TV shows?

Brevity is the second success factor in developing effective messages. The more clear and compelling the message, the greater the likelihood of moving your audience to act. In the desert tortoise case, for example, the message couldn't have been clearer—your constituents overwhelmingly support this. In short, it is a votewinner. By contrast, once you branch out into a more complex message, especially one that requires context, it's easy to lose the thread and hence the audience. The environmental community had this problem for years with the issue of global warming, which until very recently was a hard sell to policymakers because the story wasn't being told well.

Finally, let me reiterate that effective messages incorporate an explicit call to action. A message without an explicit "ask" may help build awareness of a particular issue or cause, but awareness by itself rarely results in positive social change. The Lance Armstrong Foundation discovered the importance of this lesson when to their astonishment the yellow rubber "LiveSTRONG" bracelets exploded in popularity by the tens of millions. Within months, the market was awash in different colored bracelets: white, pink, red and so forth. Armstrong's cause—promoting cancer survivorship—was lost in this technicolor jumble, and not least because they were unprepared to channel the immense initial interest in their work into a simple ask.

The "ask" also has to align with the problem or product. The famous "Got Milk?" campaign, for example, also got a ton of attention for its innovative approach—hip advertising with milk mustaches on celebrities—and the ask was obviously there, but it initially and famously failed in its goal of increasing milk sales. It turns out people loved the ads because they were fun and clever, not because they presented a compelling argument to go out and drink more of the same old boring milk. It took better alignment with the actual product—new bottles, different flavors—before milk sales were affected. Back in the nonprofit world, the Lance Armstrong Foundation is now aimed at turning the "LiveSTRONG" awareness (wear a yellow bracelet) into an ask for united political action (vote for cancer funding), and achieving far more tangible results, such as the recent passage of a \$3 billion bond initiative for cancer research in Texas.

When the message aligns with the interests of the audience, by contrast, possibilities abound. To rejuvenate membership and participation, in 2000 the Girl Scouts ditched their stodgy Brownie image and adopted a message hierarchy organized around the theme "where girls grow strong." The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reached its teen audience by stressing how having a baby resulted in the loss of social status and the addition of many new responsibilities. But the gold standard for effective messaging in the nonprofit world revolves around the "Truth" campaign, an initiative designed by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids to reduce teen smoking in Florida.

Conventional anti-smoking messages aimed at teens asserted that smoking wasn't cool and stressed the health risks, the smell, and the cost. They preached responsibility and just saying "no." And as anyone with teenage children could tell you, those messages were doomed from the start. When you are immortal, like all 17 year olds, you don't care about developing lung cancer at 65. You also deeply resent insults to your intelligence, so being lectured that smoking isn't cool just doesn't fly. Rebels smoke, and always have: Bogart, Bacall, Dean, Che.

The "Truth" campaign started from a whole different place. The ads, funded with tobacco settlement money, were written and produced by teens. Instead of telling kids that smoking was bad for them or somehow uncool, the teenagers in the Truth ads openly acknowledged the right of their peers to make their own decisions about smoking. (Independence being a key motivator for teens.) Instead, the ads zeroed in on the tobacco companies, and, in particular, charges about tobacco advertising intended to lure children and teenagers into smoking. In essence, therefore, the message in the "Truth" ads was all about manipulation: did you know that the adults at big Tobacco are trying to manipulate you into smoking? Again, parents will recognize immediately the huge leverage in this message: the only thing kids hate more than sanctimonious adults are manipulative adults.

And “Truth” worked. Florida was one of the few states that actually experienced a drop in teenage smoking rates. Most telling, the tobacco industry absolutely loathed the Truth campaign and did everything in its power to stop it. When you have attracted the ire of the master marketers at Phillip Morris and RJR, you can be sure that you have honed a pretty effective message.

MORAL: *Figure out what motivates your audience. That’s the basis for your message, not what the board, management, and staff want.*

ABOUT MESSENGERS AND VEHICLES

When SeaWeb and other ocean advocacy organizations became concerned about the rapid decline of the swordfish and other species known as much for their popularity on our plates as their populations in the oceans, they decided to enlist top chefs, rather than movie stars, as their main messengers. Why? Their research showed that the public looked to chefs for advice on seafood. And Paul Prudhomme already had exemplified the way that a top chef, with a catch phrase and heavy seasoning, could take the relatively bland redfish, and create a dining sensation while unintentionally driving a species closer to the point of extinction. The hope was that those who set the nation’s menus would take a step in the opposite direction, and stop promoting a popular fish that was now in trouble. The organizations enlisted hundreds of leading chefs from across the nation in a campaign to “give swordfish a break.” The media liked the messenger, picked up the message, and policymakers listened, taking action to protect swordfish back in the sea.

The messenger alone is not enough, but the right messenger carrying the right message can do wonders to motivate an audience. Of course, that message also needs to reach the audience in a way they trust. For SeaWeb and the swordfish, the focus was not only on the media outlets that reached the policymakers who controlled fishing regulations, but also on arranging one-on-one meetings directly with those policymakers.

With the advent of the Internet, the number and variety of arrows in the marketing and communications quiver has increased exponentially. Once an audience is identified, there are now more paths than ever to their proverbial doorstep. While personal meetings, printed materials, earned media and advertising remain important in many cases, increasingly the centerpiece of an effective marketing strategy is no longer offline, but online. The best web sites have evolved from being simple online brochures to nodes on larger networks. Blogs offer an opportunity to send and receive more sophisticated and nuanced messages, especially to those who follow your issues with rapt attention. And email systems are becoming so cost effective that savvy organizations can now do the sort of differentiated marketing and information exchanges with large groups in a way that they once had to reserve only for use with VIPs.

The catch, of course, is that for organizations to make the most of these new tools, they need to relinquish some control and allow the public to participate. The networked nature of the Internet is at the core of a small “d” democratic revolution in the creation of distribution of information. In keeping with the title of Jed Miller and Rob Stuart’s influential article, network-centric thinking certainly is a challenge to ego-centric organizations. If a nonprofit leader still wants to employ a 17-step approval process for every bit of information going out the door, that organization will simply not thrive in the Internet age.

MORAL: *Put the right messenger in the right vehicle and let it fly.*

MANAGING A COMMUNICATIONS CRISIS

The recurring nightmare of every communications manager starts with a phone call. “I’m calling from 60 Minutes,” the nightmare begins. “I’d like to come over and ask you a few questions about your organization.”

These words typically trigger a series of immediate reactions on the part of recipient: panic, a sinking feeling in the gut, the sweats. And with good reason. When you hear from investigative journalists, it’s generally not because they are interested in all the good work you do. To the contrary: their job is to expose what you aren’t doing well. To paraphrase a reporter who covers the nonprofit sector for a leading newspaper, “‘Foundation gives grant’ is not news. ‘Nonprofit helps people’ is not news. ‘Nonprofit misuses foundation money’ — that’s news.”

This attitude infuriates the boards and staff of nonprofit organizations. It’s so unfair, they wail. Journalists don’t understand all the great work we do on behalf of our mission. Why don’t they go get a “bad guy”?

Rather than indulge in self-pity and anti-media resentment after the fact, nonprofits would be wise to prepare themselves in advance for communications crises that may never come. Planning and forethought represent your best, perhaps only hope for mitigating the institutional damage that comes from a full-blown reputational crisis. When it hits the fan, you won’t have time to do anything but react, and by that time, you will have already lost.

At the same time, how can you prepare for something that hasn’t happened yet or that you don’t know about?

Nonprofit staff, just like their peers in the private sector and government, are loath to acknowledge error and in many cases do their best to bury mistakes far from the light of day. How can the poor communications director possibly know which of these little disasters is going to burrow out of the bureaucratic morass and land on the front page of *The New York Times*?

Two kinds of stories in particular seem to agitate the media when it comes to nonprofits. The first has to do with the compensation and behavior of nonprofit managers. Much of the mainstream media has unfortunately bought into the idea that those working in the charitable sector deserve to be paid much less, and should act much better than their private-sector counterparts, and thus the spate of stories in the press about lavishly compensated nonprofit CEOs or a personal indiscretion that would go unnoticed in the for-profit world. Whether these criticisms are valid or not is irrelevant. The fact, the appearance of nonprofit “profiteering” or inappropriate behavior remains a huge red flag for the press.

Hypocrisy is the second big trigger. If the media finds out, for example, that your anti-smoking coalition has been accepting money from tobacco companies, your reputation is basically toast. No explaining that decision away. The same holds true for children’s programs that actually benefit adults or when a high-profile televangelist is discovered with his pants down. The press holds nonprofits and others working in the charitable sector to a higher ethical standard, and when organizations violate that trust, the journalistic response is usually swift and merciless.

So what can the nonprofit marketing professional do? Is the only choice to take the punches?

Actually, that’s not such a bad strategy, depending on the severity of the media attack and the depths of your organizational culpability. If you don’t argue — if you just admit that you made mistakes and assure your stakeholders that the problem is being fixed, oftentimes the press will get bored and move on to a new story. It’s no fun picking a fight with someone who refuses to fight back. This kind of institutional jujitsu works best for dealing with cases of employee fraud or theft, accidents, or other isolated incidents.

Higher-stakes assaults on your reputation — ones that suggest a pattern of inappropriate behavior — merit a more aggressive response. No one has thought more deeply about this than Lanny Davis, who helped Bill Clinton fend off media inquiries into White House

fundraising practices. Frustrated both by the lawyers inside the White House, who fought releasing any information to the public, and the press, who were convinced of a massive cover-up, Davis conceived a set of three simple rules for handling crisis communications: Tell it all. Tell it early. And tell it yourself.

TELL IT ALL: Since Watergate, generations of media relations professionals have cleaved to the mantra that the cover-up is always worse than the original sin. The reason is simple: nothing keeps a story in the news more than having information dribble out slowly, with each new revelation allowing the press to rehash everything that has gone before. What's worse, each new revelation only confirms the suspicions of the press that you aren't being straight with them. So why do so many organizations violate this basic tenet of crisis communications?

First, as noted earlier, no one likes to admit error. For nonprofits, which depend on voluntary contributions, there is also real fear that owning up to mistakes will damage their reputation and thus hurt their fundraising. Even more fundamental, though, it's often very difficult to gather and get straight all the facts about a tricky situation in time to meet the deadlines of the press. This leads to incomplete or evasive answers that often have to be "corrected" later—with predictable results. Who can ever forget Richard Nixon's press secretary saying "that information is no longer operative"?

The only possible defense against accusations of a cover-up is to get to the bottom of the issue internally and then make a complete and frank accounting externally. Even the most embarrassing details are better told up front than leaking out later. Or as Davis says: tell it all.

TELL IT EARLY: In the public mind, stonewalling equals guilt (just as most people instantly interpret the classic "no comment" as an admission of error). The longer you wait to respond to charges, the more validity those charges assume. These factors alone provide a powerful incentive for nonprofits to get their side of the story out fast.

But the most important reason to tell it early is so that you can control—or attempt to control—how the issue gets framed. If something has gone terribly wrong inside your organization, you want to be the person announcing it to the press, rather than the other way around. It gives you a chance to play a little offense, not only to reveal the transgression but also to announce what you're going to do about it. In such circumstances, your best hope of avoiding a media feeding frenzy is to acknowledge the full extent of the error (tell it all), take full responsibility for what happened (passing the buck infuriates the press), and lay out a series of action steps to prevent recurrences.

TELL IT YOURSELF: There's no guarantee, of course, that telling it all and telling it early will suffice to call off the media. Some will always question whether you've taken strong enough action, or whether the responsible people have been appropriately disciplined. But the alternative—waiting for your dirty laundry to be aired in the press—is invariably worse. And make no mistake: your unsavory organizational secrets will eventually come to light. Bad news is too juicy and has too many avenues for escape.

I learned this lesson the hard way when I was running communications for The Nature Conservancy. Disgruntled with the new directions of the Conservancy's president, at least three different people from inside management were leaking documents to *The Washington Post*. This is every reporter's dream: multiple sources with access to inside information—and a grudge. As a result, the *Post* spent months asking questions to which they already knew the answer, hoping to catch the organization in a contradiction.

You can't just worry about an errant employee, though. Even if you believe down to the depths of your soul that your organization is beyond reproach, both in its mission and its actions, there is, without doubt, someone out there who would like to see you stopped in your tracks. Identify those potential enemies in the same way you would identify your potential allies, and be prepared for when they come knocking.

MORAL: *Don't pick fights with people who buy ink by the barrel. Instead, learn to take your medicine and follow the Davis Rules.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Williamson is Managing Director of the consulting firm of Bernuth & Williamson, serving nonprofit clients in the areas of strategy, marketing, and communications. He previously served for 13 years in senior management positions at The Nature Conservancy, the nation's 10th largest nonprofit, including six years as Director of Communications (1997–2002) and terms as Vice President for Marketing and Director of Conservation Marketing. He is an adjunct professor of business administration at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University and has lectured on nonprofit management at Harvard Business School, Stanford Business School, and the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University, among others. Williamson, a summa cum laude graduate of Princeton University, serves in leadership positions on three nonprofit boards in addition to his work with clients.



David Williamson