

Marketing Your Nonprofit

Dedicate as much time as you can in developing your agency profile by establishing a compelling, attractive and interesting presence. A nonprofit organization's "message" should be distinctive. What marketing professionals mean by the term "message" is a succinct, convincing statement of identity that conveys exactly what the agency most desires to communicate about itself. The message must be crafted so that it can be expressed as a slogan or tagline, a thirty second elevator message. (The elevator message idea was that if the donor ever stepped into your elevator, you'd be able to succinctly explain your organization and your role there by the time you reached your floor). Usually nonprofits devote much of their opening message to their history and their largest donors. Instead, nonprofit organizations should focus creating their message on what the organization is today, and what it wishes most to accomplish.

You have to connect with your target groups to influence them to act, to donate, to join, to participate, or to volunteer. Your organization's messages are your greetings, the first step in building these vital relationships and a must-do for keeping them relevant over time. But without appropriate messages, it's impossible to connect. Crafting compelling messages that are easy to remember and repeat is one of the most overlooked and underappreciated, methods of ensuring you reach your nonprofit marketing goals.

There is definitely a skill to refining a simple message. The more tightly focused your niche, the easier it is to express who you are. But even the strongest niche can be weakened if you insist on saying too much. Given about thirty seconds, what would you say if asked, "What does your

organization do?" You'll need to be direct and focused, answering just these three simple questions: What does our organization do? Where is it heading? Why should anyone care?

Here's an example: Maybe you're a director for an outdoor resident summer camp consisting of special needs kids that changes their lives by allowing them to play outdoors at a campsite for the first time. There is much about this camp that donors and friends would want to know. But, as after working with such a group, it is the beauty of allowing kids to be just kids that lies at the heart of the program.

Rest assured the camp director, and founder of the camp, could speak at length about the numbers of campers served, the careful medical management of the camps, the wonderful facilities that have been created for the kids, and the important respite that the kids' going away to camp offers stressed-out parents. But you have to restrain yourself in the elevator, offering just enough to convey who you are and what's special about what you do, and no more.

Another way to think about an elevator message is to imagine a friend standing a hundred yards away on the other side of a river, and you have to shout for her to hear. What are the few declarative sentences you would be sure to get out if you were describing your organization? In the case of the special needs camp, it could possibly be,

We have an outdoor camp for special needs kids!

The experience changes their lives for the better!

The kids can play in this outdoor setting for the first time!

What do you want to call out for all to hear? Figure that out, and you have a strong, focused message that will inform every one of your marketing efforts.

Methods of Communication

Typical marketing practices by a nonprofit organization include large and small-scale events, print materials, alliances and networking. Print materials are highly important for educational and promotional purposes. Events offer fundraising opportunities in the nonprofit world, whether it is a small silent auction or a tribute banquet offered to scores of potential donors. Creating alliances with other nonprofits builds a larger quantity of people who hear of the group's goals while building the brand through other philanthropists. In addition, networking is very effective marketing for nonprofits as people spread the word about the mission and purpose of the organization.

Traditional methods of marketing include telephone, direct mail pieces, and print and television advertisements. The traditional methods of communication allow agencies to market products to their constituents. Most nonprofits should be using all of these vehicles as needed. The exception here would be paid advertising, which may or may not be appropriate depending on the agency budget and size.

With the developments and advances in so much new technology, it would be very difficult for any organization to know where to activate a comprehensive and integrated marketing and communication plan without the expertise of seasoned marketing professionals. New channels of communication have significantly increased the level of complexity of marketing. At the same

time, these new channels provide an unbelievable and significant opportunity to engage stakeholders via direct mail, email and social media in a way that move them from just members to believers and supporters of your brand. These vehicles are fundamental for any comprehensive marketing plan. If the agency is not doing any of these, they should have a good reason. There is a good chance they are giving up a competitive advantage if they are not doing them.

Defining Branding

When you are driving around town and see a burger place, there are certain and distinct images that come to mind. For some people, your answer might be thick shakes and juicy hamburgers, or for others your images may be of obese school-aged children. Another example is when you see the “swoosh”. One might think of slick apparel and technologically advanced running shoes or possibly children working in sweat shops overseas. Lastly, it would be interesting to know how customers or members perceive their nonprofit sports organization. Do they get their perception from the outstanding programs offered, colorful brochures or from the grumpy front desk receptionist?

A brand is the sum total of how someone perceives your organization. Brands are developed over time through 1) Consistent verbal and visual messaging, 2) Interactions with an organization and its representatives, 3) Recommendations and 4) Real life experiences using a service or product.

Branding is a somewhat complex term that has become more of a buzzword than anything else.

Branding is how an organization acts and behaves. Many people think that branding means logos and clever taglines, and to some small extent it does, but some organizations with terrible

logos and no taglines have mastered the art of branding. “Branding exists in the everyday actions of the nonprofit that represent the image one presents to the community”. (Cebalt, 2010)

This example may seem somewhat extreme, but it validates the significance of the big and little things that matter most to your brand. Develop your brand and be the model every day of what you want your organization to stand for, both on paper and in person. With an unstable economy, the little things become even more imperative. Even though the executive director has a major impact and responsibility in setting the tone in the agency, often it’s the housekeeper or receptionist that has more direct contacts with the members than most of the other departmental staffs. The message here is to pay close attention to the people that are hired to fill these direct contact roles in the agency; the lifeguard, daycare worker, maintenance worker and front desk receptionist. Be sure to recruit outgoing and friendly individuals in these roles, because most organizations and individuals never get a second chance to make a first impression. Agency staff can be one’s biggest customer because when they are happy and productive, they talk favorably about the agency and programs. However, listening to staff criticize or complain about their job or work environment or bad mouth management tends to be a huge turnoff.

This might sound trivial but members do in fact judge staff and the agency on not only on how well you treat others, deliver sound programs, or how the monthly newsletter looks, but whether the bathrooms are clean, the exercise machines are working, and how many light bulbs are missing. Educating and training staff to pay attention to detail will go a long way in impressing your stakeholders. Nonprofits often miss the mark when they fail to treat their stakeholders with courtesy and respect, or simply returning phone calls in a timely basis.

The experiences that stakeholders have with the nonprofit also lead to the overall brand of the organization. The brand allows donors, supporters and members to remember, recognize and trust the organization. It keeps the nonprofit separate from similar organizations by building a positive identity. Remember branding is more than developing an attractive agency logo, pay attention to and stay vigilant in keeping the public and common areas fully functioning, spotless and in good working order. No matter how slick the annual brochure might look, members might only remember that grumpy receptionist.

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