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IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

## Show How Your Nonprofit Is Making a Difference: 10 Dos and Don'ts

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Impact has long been a buzzword in the nonprofit world, but many groups are still wrestling with how best to capture data that proves they're making a difference — and share those results with donors in ways that

are informative and interesting. More than 70 percent of nonprofit leaders think measuring impact is important, but only 20 percent say they're very good at it, [one survey finds](#).

The biggest hurdle many groups face is a lack of hard data, says Sheri Chaney Jones, CEO of SureImpact, an online platform that helps nonprofits with measurement and reporting. Nonprofits' data capabilities are improving as more donors and grant makers ask for data and new technology makes this work easier, but there's still an uphill climb ahead. "That's who we talk to every single day are nonprofits who don't have access to impact measurement and want to," Chaney Jones says.

When organizations have a system in place for measurement, it's often because their leader prioritizes data and fosters a culture that values it, she adds. To get buy-in from a leader who isn't there yet, explain how strong data will help your fundraising.

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"The case for support is ... 'If I have access to impact measurement data, I can do my job better,'" Chaney Jones says. "I can raise more money for the organization."

Here are tips from several experts that can help you get started with measurement, demonstrate results in meaningful and inspiring ways, and avoid common pitfalls.

### **Define what impact means to your organization.**

Nonprofits often make decisions about evaluation based on what their funders want, not what they're trying to achieve, says Cindy Eby, founder of ResultsLab, a social enterprise that helps organizations use data well. "Often we see that measurement is disconnected from what we would call an impact strategy," she says, which lays out the problem a nonprofit is trying to solve and how it's working toward that goal.

Before deciding what to measure, you need to get really clear on that strategy, she says, which is commonly called a [theory of change](#). [ResultsLab](#) and [other organizations](#) offer online resources that can help you figure this out.

You also need to understand that impact is not the same thing as activities, like the number of people you reached or the amount of money you raised. “That’s the number one mistake is that people stop there,” Chaney Jones says. Although activities are important, impact is how your nonprofit is truly changing the lives of those it serves.

To pinpoint what that means for your nonprofit, she says, ask yourself why the organization exists: such as to get people out of poverty or keep kids in school. The answers will offer good clues about the kinds of data you should be gathering and sharing with donors.

### **Decide what to measure by asking questions that will help assess progress.**

It’s okay to start small, Eby says. Once you have your impact strategy or theory of change, define one or two questions that can help you evaluate your progress. For example, are you recruiting people into your program, and are they getting the program you think they’re getting?

“Most organizations have some things they’re wondering about, about how it’s working,” Eby says. “Start there and capture data to answer those questions.”

If you’re a larger organization, consider questions that get at your impact strategy more holistically, Eby suggests. Those could include whether you’re serving the population you think you are, providing the services your strategy says you should be, and starting to see the outcomes you’re expecting.

**“Whatever data you’re collecting, ask yourself, ‘So what’? Like, how are we going to use this? How is it going to help us with our operations? How is it going to help us tell our story?”**

Don’t spend too much time counting things that don’t matter, Chaney Jones says. “Whatever data you’re collecting, ask yourself, ‘So what’? Like, how are we going to use this? How is it going to help us with our operations? How is it going to help us tell our story? And if you don’t have a clear answer to that ‘so what,’ then maybe it isn’t as important.”

### **Impact reports require advance planning; allow time to lay the groundwork.**

If you want to create an impact report, start planning early, says Aliana Piñeiro, impact director at Boston Impact Initiative, a nonprofit impact investing fund focused on economic and racial justice. Don’t worry if

you don't have every metric you want at first, she says. You can add more later, but it's important to start somewhere.

For some organizations, that may mean spending time building relationships with your community before seeking data such as survey responses, Piñeiro says. "You're not able to do that if you don't have real touch points — and other touch points besides 'Please fill out the survey.'"

Consider the timing of your report. If you want to use it for year-end fundraising, for example, you should start collecting data at least six months before the deadline, Chaney Jones says. "What we often see is, you know, GivingTuesday is coming up in November, and the executive director is like, 'We need an impact report,' and the poor fundraisers are like, 'Well, there's no impact data.'"

### **Don't let the potential costs of data-tracking hold you back.**

Philanthropy Together, a nonprofit focused on collective giving, uses [Airtable](#) in cost-effective ways, but you could also just use spreadsheets. The key thing is consistency, says chief strategy officer Isis Krause. "We are ruthlessly consistent with how we track all of our data, and that doesn't cost money; that just costs willpower and the dedication to do that." And that's how you can aggregate your information over time.

Even if your nonprofit has never gathered data before, she says, the sooner you can start, the better prepared you'll be to show results in a year or two. Collect more than you think you need at first, she suggests, and narrow down your metrics as you go.

### **Blend quantitative and qualitative data.**

Numbers are crucial — but shouldn't be the only way you communicate your nonprofit's impact. Not everyone who reads your report will want to see just a bunch of stats and charts without qualitative context, Piñeiro says. "People just kind of glaze over; they're not going to engage with it." Try to bring your data to life in a variety of ways, she suggests, including quotes or testimonials that illustrate your outcomes.

But be specific. When seeking a quote, think about what kind of information you're looking for, Piñeiro suggests. "Ask a really specific question and then you get a quote that is really speaking to the impact that you want to show."

Philanthropy Together tries to include a strong mix of quantitative and qualitative data in its [impact report](#) to show both the breadth of its work and the depth of its impact, Krause says. The report, which is cumulative since the organization's launch in 2020, features stats on [program outputs](#) — the direct results of activities, such as people trained, media mentions and views, and money raised for grassroots organizations — together with case studies, stories, and quotes connected to "real human beings."

## **Include engaging and informative visual elements.**

The report also includes graphics and photos to help readers follow along and see the organization's impact, not just read about it, Krause says, even if that means screenshots of Zoom calls or tool kits.

You don't need to hire a fancy designer or data-visualization expert to create a report that is visually appealing, Piñeiro says. There are plenty of DIY resources online that can help you, such as [Canva](#), which offers simple tools, templates, and free how-to resources.

Be careful not to go too heavy on pie charts and bar graphs, she says. "Sometimes you might just want to call out a number really big and in very simple terms explain what that number means to the organization and for the people it serves."

You could incorporate infographics, short explainer videos, or photos that are clearly linked to your mission. "If it's all the kids that graduated from your program, it's like, wow, 35 kids graduated ... and now are trained on A, B, C, D," she says. "That photo speaks a thousand words."

## **Be selective and strategic about what you share.**

Don't try to share all your results. Instead, focus on the strongest ones. "Folks don't read a lot anymore, so we want to show the breadth of our impact but really in the tightest way possible," Krause says.

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Philanthropy Together's report is divided into its four strategic priorities, with big header statements related to each. This makes it easy for donors to digest the organization's goals and impact while helping potential new donors understand its strategy, Krause says. More details and pop-up examples are available for those who want to go deeper, but the report is more geared toward photos, highlighted stats, and quotes to pull readers along.

It's important to avoid jargon, she adds, especially if you're using your report as a tool to attract prospective supporters who may not be as familiar with your cause. "We really scrubbed our entire impact report for any acronyms or anything that didn't, sort of, immediately resonate in a plain-English way," Krause says. Keep in mind, even if you spell out an acronym on page one, someone might open it in the middle and not see that.

## **Put your data in context.**

When sharing a stat, think about the broader story you can tell about that number to make it more meaningful. “Many folks don’t know enough about any individual ecosystem to understand the difference between 500 or 5,000 or 500,000,” Krause says.

It can help to share stats in the context of progress over time. For example, Philanthropy Together’s report uses numbers and graphics to show how it expanded its training program for giving-circle leaders — from 101 participants in 2020 to more than 800 in 2023, beating its goal a year early. Showing growth against the goal, and using graphics to reinforce that, is more powerful than simply sharing the total number reached, Krause says.

### **Don’t start over every year.**

Philanthropy Together built its impact report on [Readymag](#), a no-code platform, and just makes simple updates to the content each year. Creating a storytelling foundation like this that you can build on saves a lot of time and money over the long term, Krause says. There are many tools that can help you do this easily and keep expenses low, she says, including platforms like Readymag as well as A.I. “And then I think it’s more about the creativity, and creativity is free.”

### **Don’t share only the good news.**

More and more funders want to know about what didn’t work, Piñeiro says, and how you’re responding. “It’s nice to have a shiny, beautiful, very positive, radiant impact report,” she says, but you could also have a small “lessons learned” section focused on what you tried that didn’t work and what you took away from it.

If something happened that wasn’t your fault, such as Covid-19 or a well-known event in your community that affected your work, don’t ignore it and pretend everything was normal, she adds. Talk about the negative effects and how you handled them.

Says Piñeiro: “I think some of that feels a little vulnerable but can be really helpful for the communities that are receiving the report and the funders.”

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