

MARKETING COMMUNICATION FOR
NONPROFITS AND OTHER DO-GOODERS

10 Mistakes

Nonprofit Organizations Make When Creating Communication Materials

(Or 10 simple things you can do to improve your marketing program)

More than a few nonprofit professionals find themselves being thrown into marketing responsibilities without being formally trained or having much experience or support. Some are program managers who find themselves responsible for creating their own communications materials. Some are fundraisers who have a sense that better marketing could improve their ability to raise funds. They're right.

This document identifies some of the most common mistakes made by nonprofits and outlines solutions to avoid them. These mistakes are very common, so don't bother being embarrassed if you've made them. And don't feel frustrated with colleagues who may be making them at your agency right now. Remember, these mistakes are very common. Just pass this helpful summary along to anyone who might benefit from it.

If you're a fundraiser, you're already a marketer! Marketing is about clear, directed communication to people most likely to take the action you want them to—to give money to support your mission. You're already successfully communicating one-on-one with your donors, and this document will help you learn to be as effective in your communications to larger audiences.

MISTAKE 1:

Thinking that your donors already know everything about you

- Always remind donors what you do and why it's important.
- Don't use jargon, acronyms or nicknames.
- Your mission statement doesn't tell your story.

MISSION STATEMENT

The American Red Cross, a humanitarian organization led by volunteers, guided by its Congressional Charter and the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross Movement, will provide relief to victims of disasters, and help people prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies.

- This mission statement may be accurate, but because it has to be so explicit, and cover so many kinds of services, it feels generic and flat.
- Mission statements don't usually elicit emotion.
- Emotion is what drives donors to want to give. If what they read inspires emotion, then they will find the rational reasons necessary to justify their desire to give.
- Use emotion to tell the story of how your agency makes a difference.

SUPPLEMENT THE MISSION STATEMENT WITH AN EMOTIONAL STORY THAT DEMONSTRATES WHAT YOU DO

When Nancy Miller's Mission district home burned down last month, the threat of homelessness became real. She lost all of her belongings except the clothes she was wearing when she had to run from the building.

Nancy turned to the Red Cross for help. Thanks to your generous donations, she received safe, warm shelter, food, clothes and the assistance she needed to put her life back together.

- Now that tells a story! Sure, this story is about "disaster relief," and "emergency response" just like the mission statement says, but it's much more compelling than telling a donor, "Last month we helped x number of families recover from local disasters."
- Find the real life stories of those your agency helps and tell those stories over and over again.
- Be dramatic and make people see the results of your work and their dollars.

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- Just because someone has given money to your agency, don't assume they have a full understanding about everything you do and why it's important.
 - Treat donors like special people, yes, but don't treat them like close family.
 - Even organizations with well-known brands like YMCA and Red Cross are often misunderstood.

- Take every opportunity to give the full story about what your agency is actually doing, not just what your mission is.
- Use the full names of your programs and describe them each time they are mentioned.

MISTAKE 2:

Thinking that people read your newsletters to hear what's going on inside your agency

- Donors want to see proof that their donations are making a difference out in the world.
- Show **WHO** was helped and **WHY** it made a difference.
- Don't waste newsletter space with details about the administration of your agency.

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- Newsletters are for motivating donors to continue supporting you.
 - Donors (and volunteers, and collaborators) want to know that their support makes a difference.
 - Announcing board retreats, staff policy changes, and other administrative issues is simply not interesting, nor does it encourage continued support.
 - How you spent donor money is only interesting if you translate that expenditure into mission-related results.
 - "We invested \$500,000 in new computer software." NO.
 - "Our new computer software means our phone volunteers can provide instant referrals to clients in need." BETTER.
 - "A woman in need was given the name and address of a shelter for battered women the moment she dialed our phones last week, thanks to our new software." YES.
 - Tell the stories of those you helped and how your agency made a real difference.
 - Donors will never tire of reading about your programs and how they help people. Remember, they don't live with it every day like you do.

MISTAKE 3:

Confusing features with benefits

- Your agency solves problems; talk about the problems you solve, not the way you solve them.
- *Features* are what your agency does. *Benefits* are the solutions your agency provides to problems.
- Benefits motivate donors; features do not.
- People do not donate to features; they donate to solve problems.

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- When you buy a leash for your dog you're not buying nylon rope and a metal hook. You're buying control of your dog to ensure safety. The leash is the solution to your canine safety problem.
 - When you buy a telephone you're buying the ability to speak with a loved one. How that message is transmitted is much less important.
 - Show the results of your work by talking about benefits and avoid talking about the features, or the way you got those results.

MISTAKE 4:

Using boring photos

Show:

- Photos of the people your group helps
- Close-ups and faces



Don't show:

- Group photos
- Donors giving checks
- Speakers standing at a podium
- Fancy benefit balls and dinners



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- Photos (in your newsletter, web site, etc.) don't have to be literal depictions of your agency at work.
 - Pictures of your board chairman accepting a check from a donor aren't compelling.
 - Don't be pressured by politics! There are other ways to recognize donors, volunteers and board members without featuring them in your photos.

- Remember, your communication should focus on the benefits of your work so show the difference you make through the photos you feature.
- Use action photos rather than posed photos whenever possible.

MISTAKE 5:

Letting the IT department manage web site content

- Your web site is a marketing and fundraising tool.
 - Clear communication is more important than bells and whistles.
 - Flash animation
 - Video
 - Sound
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- Just because it uses technology, doesn't mean the technology folks should be in charge of your web site. Marketing and fundraising objectives should drive the look, feel, features and functionality of your site.
 - Imagine being a potential donor (or service recipient) when organizing content on your web site. Make things as clear, simple and compelling as possible for the donor.
 - Fancy things like Flash animation can often detract from your message or the action you want site visitors to take.
 - Use the rules of good newsletters from mistake #2 to develop your web content. Although you can and should have more robust and detailed information on your web site than in a newsletter or annual report, your objective is still to show the results of your agency's work and make the ask for support.
 - Give your IT department the specifications you require so they can build and maintain your web site, but be sure that content and functionality authority rests with the marketing and/or fundraising departments.

MISTAKE 6:

Thinking that your annual report is just a financial reporting tool

- Your annual report is also a chance to tell the story of the people you help.
- Make sure to include a giving mechanism.



AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER 2002 ANNUAL REPORT. CONCEPT, WRITING AND DESIGN BY MISSION MINDED.

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- Follow the rules of good newsletter creation with your annual report.
 - Yes, you can and should report detailed financial information in your annual report if you choose to design and print one, but the annual report should really be about the results you achieved, the problems your agency solved and the people you helped with donor dollars and other resources.
 - Consider the annual report another legitimate opportunity to describe your services and why they are important (Remember: features versus benefits.)
 - Ask for donations directly and include an envelope or other giving mechanism so readers get the message and take action.

MISTAKE 7:

Confusing your brand with your logo or your mission

- Your logo isn't your brand

A logo is a visual representation of your agency comprised of your name and any graphical element that appears with the name. (Your logo should always be used in a consistent manner).

- Your mission isn't your brand

Your mission is what you do, for whom and how.

So what is brand?

- Every organization, service, product, etc. has a brand.
- Brand is just another word for "reputation."
- Brand is what you want to stand for.
- Decide what's important for your agency to be in order to fulfill its mission, appeal to donors and stand out against any organizations doing similar work (your "competition.")

A strong brand:

- Creates an affinity for your agency among your target audience;
- Ensures loyalty;
- Minimizes competitive threats;
- Delivers valuable benefits to your audience
 - Confidence, risk-reduction, simplicity in decision-making, time savings;
- Enhances the self-image of those who associate with it.

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- Brand is one of the most confusing concepts for nonprofit organizations to understand and implement.
 - Being consistent in how you portray your agency is important.
 - Repeating, with words, action, and images, the attributes of your brand will bring it to life.
 - For example, if you want to be known as "grass roots" and "financially-efficient", don't publish a glossy annual report (even if it was donated) and fill it with photos of your wealthy board members attending your black tie gala. Look for ways to reinforce "grass roots" and "financially-efficient" at every opportunity and soon you will be known that way.
 - As long as you're going to have a reputation anyway, why not make it a strong one that will make it irresistible to give to your agency?
 - A known and trusted brand makes it easy for the donor to say, "Yes, I will give!"
 - A strong brand will help your agency survive negative press or public mistakes.

MISTAKE 8:

Thinking that public relations ("PR") is a synonym for "marketing"

- Using the media to tell your story is just ONE marketing tool among many.
- PR is a marketing tactic.
- Other marketing tactics include:

—PSAs, web site, direct mail, e-mail, events, newsletters, annual reports, brochures, speakers bureaus, give-aways.

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- Anything that communicates your story is a marketing tactic, and PR/media relations is one of the most effective, if you can control it.
 - The term PR usually refers to media relations or conducting activities that will get the media to tell your story.
 - The word "communications" is used in lots of ways inside nonprofit organizations and often means "PR" which is then wrongly equated with marketing. If you're doing nothing but PR, you're not using marketing to its full potential.

MISTAKE 9:

Thinking that “everyone” is your audience

- The best way to preserve a small marketing budget is to target your message to the people most likely to respond.
- General communication materials aren’t as effective as messages tailored for a specific group.

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- If budgets allow, separate your donors into categories and develop special communications materials for each group.
 - Don’t waste your limited budget sending marketing and fundraising materials to people who have never shown an interest in your agency’s work. Just because everyone

SHOULD care that you help at-risk kids avoid trouble by giving them a wholesome place to go after school doesn’t mean they DO care. Target your messages to people pre-disposed to care about your mission.

MISTAKE 10:

Thinking that you can’t afford market research

- Some information is better than none.
- Two types of research approaches: Qualitative and Quantitative.
- Qualitative analysis looks in-depth at the quality of opinions. Use it to create hypotheses and to test new ideas and materials. Examples: one-on-one interviews, focus groups.
- Quantitative analysis looks at a larger quantity of information. Use it to create projectable theories. Examples: telephone surveys, email questionnaires.

Formal Research Methods:

Qualitative

- One-on-one interviews: trained facilitator, careful listening
- Focus group: professional facility, one-way glass, trained facilitator
- Use focus group data to formulate new ideas or test theories; don’t assume data is projectable.

Quantitative

- Telephone survey: phone-bank facility, targeted lists

Informal Research Methods

Qualitative

- Conduct in-depth interviews with key donors
- Use other groups’ research and experience
- A volunteer can conduct focus groups for you. Invite 12—14 people to participate and you’ll end up with 8—10. Serve them dinner, tape the conversation, and keep all information confidential.

Quantitative

- Conduct telephone surveys of your donors. (Do not solicit them as part of the survey!) Create your telephone survey so it lasts no more than 10 minutes.
- Include a survey in your newsletter or annual report. List the top 5 questions you’d like answered (in addition to updated contact information) and make responding easy.
- Offer a modest prize for the randomly drawn completed survey.

Glossary

Benefits — the tangible impact made through your programs and the reason a donor will give to your agency. Benefits are solutions to problems.

Brand — the set of feelings, emotions and associations people have when thinking of your organization. A good brand differentiates your organization from all the others and creates donor loyalty. Brand doesn't exist on paper; it exists only in the minds of your audience members.

Brand Position — the perception or idea your target audience has about your organization compared to your competitors. Brand position is often aspirational and something your agency is striving toward.

Communications — anything your agency does that intentionally or unintentionally shares information with your target audience about your agency.

Competitor — any organization donors perceive as having a mission similar to that of your agency.

Competitive Advantage — something that your agency does better than other agencies with similar missions.

Features — the set of attributes your agency, products or services have—often confused with benefits.

Logo — the graphic representation of your agency that includes the organization name in a special typeface. It may also include a graphic image that is used to enhance it and uses a consistent palette of colors.

Marketing — The process or technique of promoting, selling and distributing a product or service. For nonprofit marketers the product or service is often distributed to a different audience (service recipients/clients) than those who pay for it (donors.)

Public Relations/Media Relations — the practice of enlisting the help of news media to communicate with the public about your agency.

Qualitative Research — (think “quality”) information gathered through such activities as focus groups and one-on-one interviews that provide in-depth insight into target audience perceptions, but is not scientific in nature or statistically valid. Qualitative research data is often more useful for forming or testing hypotheses and is best followed by quantitative research.

Quantitative Research — (think “quantity”) information gathered through such activities as written, web or telephone surveys that provides statistically valid and projectionable results. Reliable quantitative research requires a significant sampling pool and uniform questioning of all respondents.

Target Audience — The universe of potential donors to your organization.

Value — the benefit donors receive when contributing to your organization relative to the amount donated.

Mission Minded is a marketing communications consulting firm with a client list comprised exclusively of nonprofit organizations and foundations. We help organizations serving the world create and execute the plans that ensure success.

We are a team of experienced marketers passionate about good communication for mission-driven organizations. Because of our commitment to improving the way nonprofits and foundations think and communicate about themselves, we keep our infrastructure low and our creativity high.

There are never any agency overhead costs and the result is consistent agency-quality services at independent consultant rates and service. From high-level research and strategy to marketing plan development and the writing and design of brochures, web sites, fundraising materials and annual reports, Mission Minded delivers effective solutions to the challenges nonprofits and foundations face.



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