

# Chapter 1

# The Basics of Strategic Communications

How can we get people talking about the real problems in our society?

What does it take to get coverage of important issues in newspapers and on the nightly news?

What is the best way to protect and expand our organization's communications budget?

People responsible for communications in nonprofit groups often find themselves asking questions like these, and more:

How can I build relationships with reporters?

What can be done about coverage of political campaigns that focuses on personalities instead of issues?

How can we get coverage of our group and issues that translates into more members and fundraising success?

One way to start answering these questions is to have a sound, well-planned communications strategy. Such a strategy goes far beyond the basics of public relations, which typically have included media lists, regular press releases, and occasional events. You also need to have an understanding of your target audiences, changes in the news industry, and how issues move through the media "food chain." New technologies, the Internet, and trends affecting journalism are dramatically changing the nature of media.

Strategic communications do include media outreach, but not as a stand-alone activity; rather, they must be integrated into other organizational functions, such as fundraising and membership building. Being strategic is

not simply reacting to events, but anticipating and creating them. When successfully integrated into other management functions, strategic communications are tools for organizational leaders to use in both day-to-day operations and long-range planning for the growth and success of the entire operation.

Still, many nonprofit organizations operate as if e-mailing press releases and reaction statements, and holding press conferences now and then were sufficient ways to rally public support. They are not enough by themselves.

Good media coverage is a prized commodity, and it is built on a foundation of strong working relationships with key journalists and pursued through a well thought out plan of action. Such a plan typically includes carefully crafting messages, targeting reporters on a story-by-story basis, and receiving strategic guidance from polls and market research, which can be surprisingly affordable. Other important elements include building teams, framing messages, telling stories that will resonate with target audiences, training spokespeople, developing and marketing appropriate written materials, identifying opportunities to make news, and creating a system for evaluating progress.

## A Built-in Advantage

Perhaps the first strategic insight for nonprofit communications is that there is a built-in advantage simply in being a nonprofit: what you are “pitching” to a reporter is meant to make a better world, not a bigger profit or an enhanced bottom line, and that approach often means a better story for journalists to cover. It is true that a group largely focused on advocacy in the state legislature or Congress may not be in quite the same position as, for example, a local homeless shelter or social service organization that is seen as purely charitable and does not engage in lobbying. But in most cases, nonprofits may have a foot in the door with journalists because of the special role nonprofits play in society.

Nonprofits may also be in a better position to provide personal stories and appeals to conscience and emotion than for-profit businesses. Finding good real-life stories in the ranks of your members, volunteers, or partners is important for a strategic communications plan, whether your work is strictly charitable, wholly directed at policy change, or someplace in between. For many audiences within the general public, and as a general trend in an age of information overload, personal stories are the ones that really matter. Reporters are always looking to “put a face” on their stories.

But as we outline in Chapter Four on developing messages, focusing too intently on a personal story or “portrait” can leave people with the sense that “it’s their problem (and not mine).”

Lori Dorfman of the Berkeley Media Studies Group has compared so-called portrait and landscape stories in the media, observing that often change comes from the “fuller and broader perspective” on a situation.

### **Good Communications Affect Your Whole Organization**

Many of the same stories and appeals that make for good media outreach have equal value in fundraising and membership recruitment activity. For instance, a group might place a newspaper article that focuses on one family as representative of a larger problem or trend. The article could then be posted on the group’s Web site along with a short video interview with the people quoted in the newspaper. That link could also be sent to television reporters and producers, as evidence that the story passed muster with the newspaper and that the subject could do a good television interview. This might lead to a segment on the local television news, which could itself be posted on the Web site. Throughout this process, a savvy communications director is also e-mailing messages to potential members or donors to demonstrate your group’s general impact and media smarts while asking for funds to expand media activities.

### **Working Collaboratively**

Many nonprofits with a goal of changing public policy or raising awareness seek to enhance their clout by engaging in ongoing collaborative relationships or ongoing coalitions that strategize, advertise, and sometimes lobby together. Of course, for-profit businesses also collaborate and work in coalitions, but nonprofits are different in this respect too because they aren’t driven by commercial competitiveness; they tend to collaborate with groups that complement their group’s goals and culture.

With the rise of advocacy activities, strategists working with nonprofits have developed and refined a collaborative model for change-oriented groups that is centered on the development of a communications strategy, but goes far beyond simply planning media outreach. One element of the collaborative model is that groups must find common ground in the message they want to bring to the public, and the process of determining that message can itself build a working team. When partner organizations can weave their resources and perspectives into a collaborative strategy based on shared values, they benefit through better fundraising and constituent recruitment too.

Solid public opinion research and analysis of news trends on complex issues are keys to bringing and keeping such groups together. From a shared knowledge base, groups can work as partners to shape key messages and

to cultivate skilled and credible messengers. Through such collaboration, groups with limited resources can influence the news media, help bring neglected issues forward, and reframe public understanding in ways that lead to better policies.

### **Building Media Skills**

Another positive trend for nonprofits is that grantmakers and the foundation world have begun offering media training and skill building for their grantees. Major foundations, including the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, are trendsetters in this arena. For example, in the Midwest, the Chicago-based Community Media Workshop, a nonprofit brainchild of journalists and media relations experts, is helping community groups connect with media to promote news that matters. This workshop has trained thousands of spokespeople and media strategists on evolving trends, offering practical tips for a modest cost. Others based on this model are springing up across the United States and around the world.

Academia is also responding to the demands for communications strategists. Columbia University in New York City has a master's degree program in strategic communications, and American University in Washington operates the Institute for Strategic Communication for Nonprofits, to name just two. Nearly all schools of communications have courses on strategic communications built on many of the strategies outlined in the following chapters. In addition, cognitive linguists in colleges and universities are providing important insights into how brain research combined with an understanding of language development can guide framing and messaging activities.

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All these trends in journalism, philanthropy, academia, and technology can help identify and enhance channels of believable information, making the case for a larger investment and more sophisticated approach to strategic communications.

## **Organizational Values**

The strategic communications programs that work best are firmly rooted in an organization's values and purpose. Your communications plan should support your organization's goals and mission statement. Communication

is a tool, not an end in itself; neither a tail wagging the dog nor a quick fix for organizational challenges but, rather, one factor in your success.

Our work in the world of nonprofit communications has demonstrated time and again that public awareness of a nonprofit's activities and positions on issues is only one part of the picture. Good communications can also change attitudes both inside and outside an organization and enhance the prospects for success of almost any program or initiative you undertake. That's because a successful communications strategy ensures that ongoing activities are aligned to support the organization's long-term goals, its mission and values.

The funding community understands the importance of values-based messaging. For example, Alan Jenkins, a top executive from the Ford Foundation, founded the Opportunity Agenda based on the lessons from numerous grantees. His group now provides critical insights into the core American values around the concept of "opportunity," which encompasses fairness, equality, freedom, and civil liberties.

Such a strategic approach for nonprofits can lead to significant social change, increase an organization's membership, and move its financial bottom line well into the black, all at the same time. Conversely, nonprofits and public agencies that fail to understand the importance of building media strategies on the foundation of their mission and values make their overall work harder and less believable.

Even a small start-up organization can influence public opinion and public policy with a well-planned, well-executed communications strategy.

- Five years after its founding, the tiny but media-savvy International Campaign to Ban Land Mines won the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.
- In 2007, a group called Numbers USA organized a populist revolt that derailed immigration legislation backed by the White House and top congressional leaders. Part of the group's strategy consisted of organizing the sending of one million faxes to Congress, but numbers don't tell the whole story. The messages contained in those faxes were successful in large part because they focused on policy questions and were scrubbed of all xenophobic language.
- A cover story in *Ms.* magazine, combined with the support of a handful of groups working to end sweatshop factory conditions in the Mariana Islands (a U.S. territory in the South Pacific), was able to turn around a decade of abuse by convincing Congress to apply U.S. labor standards and laws to employers there.

## Why Nonprofits Resist Effective Communications Tools

Not every group will be able or willing, or will even have the need, to conduct a full-blown strategic communications plan. But preparing to operate in the new communications environment is a sound practice for every nonprofit organization. Many recognize this, but fail to use the tools of modern communications for a variety of reasons, which we discuss here.

### Levels of Investment and Resources

Smaller organizations and agencies may not think that they can possibly compete with well-funded, established institutions, so they do not bother to try. Nonprofit groups and public agencies may hesitate to take on additional tasks if they are understaffed and overcommitted.

But with good communications work, small groups can make much more efficient use of their limited resources. Some succeed by pooling resources with other groups that share their goals. Others break the planning process into a series of strategic tasks with goals, timelines, and measurable results. No group is too small or too strapped financially to be media savvy.

### Negative Experiences

Perhaps the only time a group's leaders have been in the spotlight has been during a problem or crisis. That kind of history can convince some leaders to avoid reporters at all costs. A bad image can be reversed with a strategic media plan, but a turnaround requires a forward-looking approach that is proactive in placing stories and that maintains a steady focus on the goal of improving the organization's image. Simply reacting and waiting for reporters to call you won't help the situation. However, with proper preparation, an organization can turn the next crisis into an opportunity. (See Chapter Eight, "Responding to a Media Crisis and Managing Backlash.")

### False Assumptions

Some who are experts in their fields, heads of public agencies, scientists, scholars, researchers, and other professionals resist the notion that they have to go to the news media for attention. They assume that what they do is so important that eventually the media will come to them. Unfortunately, journalists are unlikely to seek out the silent groups when the competition for limited media space is so great.

## **Inexperience**

There are few guides to the culture and protocols of news organizations, and people who have never dealt with reporters before may find navigating the media a frightening concept. This problem, at least, you have already begun to address with the book now in your hands.

## **Building a Communications Team**

The first concrete step in the process of “going strategic” is to build a communications team with the best and the brightest staff, board members, and advisers you can assemble. You should not work in isolation; instead, involve organizational leaders, including top leaders and others who command respect from frontline workers as well. Look for creativity and out-of-the-box thinking among staff, volunteers, and others who can help.

Involve people who love to watch television, follow the blogging world, are regularly on the Internet, listen constantly to the radio, and read several newspapers each day. Include media-savvy people who regularly read several news Web sites, publish their own blogs, or have a presence on Web-based listservs or social networking sites. Reach out to others in the nonprofit community who might be willing to share their experiences and ideas about working with the media.

With your team assembled, you are ready to begin designing your communications strategy.

### **1. Spell Out Your Group’s Mission**

Most people working for a nonprofit have a general sense of what their group is trying to accomplish. But if you ask ten different staffers to write down a sentence explaining their group, you may get several different answers. Some organizations have conquered this first challenge of clarifying their identity by establishing a memorable tag line based on their mission.

Fundamental values can be expressed in a few words or tag line. An environmental group might stress “protecting our planet.” The United Negro College Fund reminds us that “a mind is a terrible thing to waste.” If your nonprofit is committed to working with others in a collaborative manner, then “partnerships for change” might describe your values. Reducing the work of talented and committed people to a bumper sticker may offend some as somehow lessening its importance. But to cut through the clutter of today’s news environment, a highly distilled and memorable slogan that shapes all communications, media oriented or otherwise, will serve your organization well.

## 2. Choose Your Goals

Your communications goals should mirror the overall goals of your organization. These may include some or all of the following.

### **Goal: Enhancing Visibility and Name Recognition**

Visibility and name recognition are critical to new organizations and especially important to those that have deliberately sought low profiles but now find themselves in need of public recognition. Even an established nonprofit may want to change or improve its image with a new name or logo or by highlighting redefined program areas.

The key here is to make repeated reference to your organization, whether by word of mouth, in advertising, or in news coverage. Personal interviews with community leaders, elected officials, reporters, and others can provide important perspectives of outsiders in shaping your current image, mission, and values. An Internet search of local and national news media may tell you how often your group or spokespeople are publicly mentioned.

### **Goal: Increasing Fundraising**

Money follows programs and communications. As veteran fundraiser Roger Craver puts it, “Any group that does not have an effective communications program will raise only a fraction of the money [it] would otherwise attract.”

The messages, symbols, and spokespeople that are effective in media outreach are also critical factors in successful fundraising. If your organization relies on direct mail to targeted audiences or personal letters to large donors, your appeals for donations must communicate your program goals and objectives vividly. If foundation or government grants are your main funding sources, proposals need to articulate clearly the same “who, what, when, where, why, and how” included in your press releases and information kits.

Sometimes events can do double duty. For example, celebrity AIDS walks and Race for the Cure (for breast cancer) were designed to raise money and attract media attention. Local broadcast stations and newspapers can often be persuaded to donate public service airtime and space for the recruitment of participants and to make donations through their local foundations. Major news stories can provide media and fundraising opportunities. The tragic death of Princess Diana in 1997 helped highlight groups working to ban land mines, a cause with which she was closely identified. Advocates were able to translate the massive media coverage and additional funding



support into policy change at the United Nations and in dozens of countries. Natural disasters, emergency situations, and other unexpected tragedies can give your organization the opportunity to be seen in an entirely different light.

Government agencies can also benefit from media efforts, especially during appropriations and budget deliberations at the city, county, state, and federal levels. These efforts may entail rallying the support of people who benefit directly from your agency's work and working to get their stories featured in media coverage.

### **Goal: Reaching Influentials**

Issue-oriented initiatives demand media strategies to reach "influentials," including columnists, pundits, lawmakers, and stakeholders. As a first step, decide whether you are trying to change existing public opinion or to mobilize the majority of people who already support your position. It is much harder, and more expensive, to change people's fixed attitudes than to activate supporters.

If a legislative change is your goal, you might target swing-vote elected officials, often moderates of either major party. An effort directed to editorial writers, columnists, bloggers, and news reporters, especially in the officials' home districts, can have considerable influence, possibly even making or breaking your cause.

A communications strategy for policy change allows you to frame the debate to win. Legislative efforts, by their very nature, don't require organizations to have universal support but rather to have the support of a majority. Remember, however, that media outreach activities by nonprofits that lobby are regulated under IRS rules; it is your responsibility to know which rules apply to your group.

### **Goal: Recruiting More Members and Volunteers**

Public service efforts, paid advertising, and feature articles on your organization can motivate people to make a phone call, return a postcard, join up, renew, or volunteer. Follow-up communication, in person or in writing, is the key to keeping your core supporters active and minimizing turnover.

Whether you want to recruit foster and adoptive parents, who will have to make a major commitment of time and energy, or professionals who can give an hour a week to tutoring or participating in a local environmental cleanup, first impressions are critical. People need to feel that donating their time is as important as giving money.

Local media can be asked to become partners in your recruitment efforts, provided their participation is seen as a noncontroversial public service to the community. Many television stations, for example, run a weekly segment called Wednesday's Child as a public service to local child welfare agencies, featuring foster children who need families and are waiting to be adopted. The success of these segments, as with all recruitment efforts, depends on the agency's follow-up communications.

### **Goal: Reforming Public Institutions**

Media organizations, especially newspapers, can be expected to take positions on issues related to education, immigration, health care, mental health, juvenile justice, or campaign finance, to name a few. From your perspective, this means that their editorial boards will be either partners in change or giant stumbling blocks.

In school districts across the country, for example, media coverage and editorial opinion have had an enormous impact on public education reform. With its crusade against large segments of a local school reform plan, a Philadelphia paper (in what many thought was an attempt to boost declining circulation) brought what one observer called "wholly unjustified charges against Philadelphia's superintendent of schools, a nationally acclaimed education reformer." The paper's attacks greatly complicated the superintendent's effort to implement his innovative, tough reform plan for the city schools. But in the Seattle area, after a northern suburban school district lost a very important bond ballot measure, a carefully devised media strategy turned the tide when the proposal was put before the voters a second time.

### **Goal: Improving and Increasing Service Delivery and Awareness of Public Concerns**

Sometimes a communications strategy conveys a message about public behavior that explicitly tells people what to do: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle," "Be a Designated Driver," "Tobacco-Free Kids," "Immunize Your Child," "Fight Wildfires," "Donate Blood," "Just Say No," or "Get a Mammogram." As they do with recruitment efforts, local media often will join as partners in providing important public health and service information to viewers and readers.

### **Goal: Turning Around Negative Media Coverage**

Backlash and negative publicity demand a strategy beyond saying "No comment." Tragedies, conflicts of interest, illegal activities, and other scandals

can cripple or shut down a nonprofit organization. You need to be in control of events before events control you. Communications, both internal and external, are critical and must be launched in a timely manner and to the right audiences. When dealing with the media, you must be organized, professional, and truthful. False, misleading, or ill-advised statements can do serious damage to your public image. In such times, a crisis communications plan can be your most valuable resource. (See Chapter Eight, “Responding to a Media Crisis and Managing Backlash.”)

### **3. Commit to Being Proactive**

Understand that your entire operation will need to think about the media in relation to the organization’s daily work. For example, it is impossible to overstate the importance of cultivating relationships with reporters. Waiting passively for the media to call you may ensure that your group stays invisible to the outside world. Communications staff should make a regular habit of inquiring about their colleagues’ work for potential story ideas.

### **4. Place Communications High on Your Group’s Priority List**

Where do good visibility and media coverage rank on your organization’s list of priorities? Tensions often develop within nonprofit groups over how leaders and spokespeople spend their valuable time. How much time should managers allocate for meetings with advisers and top policy people? Administrative tasks? Consulting with board members or elected officials? Speeches to outside groups or affiliates? Fundraising? Meetings with reporters? If your group has an understanding of where media coverage fits into your overall objectives and priorities, some problems can be eased from the start.

### **5. Convene a Brainstorming Meeting**

Whether you develop a media plan from scratch or reexamine an existing one, your top decision makers should hold an initial communications strategy session to understand just where media thinking ranks, or should rank, in the organization’s workaday processes.

Have lots of poster paper handy so that ideas can be written down and hung around the room. Go around the table and ask people to outline their departments’ goals. Which people do they want to reach? (In other words, who are their target audiences?) For what purposes? How important do they think communications and media relations are to achieving these goals? Ask participants to rank on a scale from 1 to 10 the value of good

media coverage. If everyone gives it top priority, a 10, then ask if they will add a 0 and put 100 percent of their resources into improved communications and media relations. This usually brings a long pause.

As people rethink their commitment to communications strategies, find out what percentage of the group's overall budget now goes to media and communications. If your organization is like many nonprofits, the figure is likely to range from 10 to 20 percent. If this were a political campaign and the candidate told supporters that the media budget was that low, what do you suppose the response would be? Tell your decision makers that in most circumstances, the candidate would not be taken seriously and would have little chance of victory.

You are likely to find that the people in your group who only occasionally watch television, rarely spend time on the Internet, and only read a newspaper once in a while will give media a low priority. This reflects their limited experience with the world of media. Even people who are enthusiastic about enhanced media outreach may underestimate the resources it requires. Keep the conversation going until consensus emerges on the ranking of communications as an organizational priority. Discuss the benefits that increased visibility and media scrutiny will yield for your group, as well as the trade-offs involved. Review the overall goals of your organization, and brainstorm about the role communications might play in achieving them in such areas as fundraising, changing policy, and increasing membership.

End the session by finalizing communications goals and coming to a firm priority ranking for communications work on the 1-to-10 scale. Ask any skeptics to agree not to be roadblocks. At some point in the process, leaders will need to decide on a final communications plan, budget, and implementation process.

## **6. Commit the Necessary Money and Staff Time**

Communications directors and press secretaries are not magicians. They need staffs, consultants, and resources for the basic activities of an effective press operation. Even if your nonprofit doesn't use paid advertising, it will need funds for enhanced Web sites, audio press conferences, and express mail. It will also need funds to produce graphics, develop and maintain press lists, cultivate relationships with reporters, develop and manage Web site content, and produce printed materials and news feeds.

Moreover, responsibility for developing the communications plan and for cultivating regular press coverage should not rest exclusively with a communications staff or volunteer committee. Your lead spokesperson,

usually the executive director, president, or agency director, must be involved in the planning.

Your media effort may be as simple and inexpensive as regular conversations or meetings with journalists. As Marcy Whitebook, director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment in Berkeley, California, describes her work with reporters, “I make a point of being a reliable source, and we always return phone calls promptly. After beating the bushes for coverage, reporters now regularly call us, in large part because we are always accessible.” She also understands that not all media contacts turn into immediate stories. It takes time to develop good working relationships. And “personal relationships are a must,” Whitebook points out. After years of regular media cultivation, she now has a computer database full of the names of editors and reporters whom she knows personally and who regularly file stories about her center’s work. She also has a stack of good media clips and clippings to show for it.

The more money and resources your organization can devote to media relations, the more coverage you will receive. If your leaders decide that media coverage is a high priority, then they must be prepared to allocate not only financial resources but also their personal energies and time. They need to help plan and implement media strategies, make public appearances, do interviews, and participate in sessions that analyze coverage.

If media coverage is agreed to be relatively important but is seen on a par with other internal concerns of your organization, the communications and media relations staff must be included in overall organizational planning. A creative, energetic communications staff with the ability and commitment to promote the organization can mean the difference between the success and failure of your mission and goals.