CHAPTER 1

Brandraising

During the fall of 2008, right in the middle of the financial market's collapse, I facilitated a panel on branding at an event called "Meet the Grantmakers," organized by the Support Center for Nonprofit Management. Throughout the morning, several officers of large corporate foundations talked about how their foundations' endowments had plummeted, leading to fewer grants and less money awarded to nonprofits. These grantmakers stressed that the competition for available grants was going to be tougher than ever. Organizations applying would have to distinguish themselves by communicating clearly and demonstrating their value distinctively. By the time my afternoon panel on branding began, the big question on everyone's mind seemed to be, *How can we demonstrate our value and uniqueness with our limited staff, budget, and experience in the area of communications?*

Let's face it: nonprofits arrived very late at the marketing party. Back in 1994, when I started working with nonprofits, words like *branding*, *marketing*, and *messaging* were often misunderstood, ignored, or treated as dirty words. Perhaps this was because *marketing* is a term most often associated with selling, and the idea of having to sell a nonprofit's benefits (to donors or clients, for example) felt strange.

Although development is a powerful department in most nonprofit organizations, it often functions independently from the program or advocacy departments. Each department usually produces its own materials, with no coordination or oversight, with the result that a direct-mail appeal, for example, doesn't relate to what's on the organization's Web site or what's in its overview brochure or even what's on the sign posted in the lobby.

In the for-profit world, corporations place a high value on marketing. Branding is a line item in any start-up's budget, and communications-focused staff people (usually with "marketing" titles) are among the first to be hired. In contrast, new nonprofits rarely provide budgeting or staffing for communications. Instead, all resources are invested in launching programs, and communications evolve on an ad hoc basis. Scrappy and hard-working staff members at new nonprofits manage with whatever they've got as they seek out funding, attract clients, and establish other relationships.

But in the past few years the conversation has shifted as nonprofits of all sizes see more and more examples of how branding and marketing build valuable relationships with donors, clients, and other key constituents. Larger

nonprofits (typically those with annual budgets of $5 million or more) invest in communications as a separate department, and fundraisers increasingly embrace the notion that they are marketers. Even the term *branding* is now commonly used.

Whether the economy is good or bad, whether the competition for funding is tough or not, and whether they're small or large, organizations must communicate every day. Staff members send e-mail blasts, hold events, update Web sites, solicit donors, tweet, create newsletters, and more. Most do so with little or no centralization, coordination, time, training, budget, or support. Without realizing it, many organizations end up putting the cart before the horse, usually because they lack a clear framework for communications strategy, decision making, and execution. Nonprofits redo their Web site in the middle of strategic planning, for example. It's like trying to install a window before you've built the wall.

Chapter Two, "Principles of Effective Communications," takes a closer look at the value of communicating more deliberately and at some of the obstacles that make that particularly hard to do in today's workplace.

What "Brandraising" Means

Cattle ranchers branded their livestock with the symbols of their ranch to distinguish them from other ranchers' stock. Many people today still associate the word *brand* with a symbol—usually a logo. Some people think it also includes colors, messaging, and other elements that distinguish an organization. Although those associations are

valuable, they lack a connection to an organization's mission and vision or to its impact, the things that all organizations are ultimately about.

For most nonprofits, raising money and increasing visibility are the primary reasons to communicate. *Brandraising* is the process of developing a clear, cohesive organizational identity and communications system that supports these goals and makes it easier to express the organization's mission effectively and consistently.

In centuries past, communities came together and worked collaboratively to assemble barns, arguably the most important structure on a farm. Working as a well-choreographed team, all the members of the community played a role in planning, directing, constructing, or supporting the assembly of the barn. When the barn was finished, a single cohesive structure stood, providing shelter for the farm's animals, tools, and supplies.

Brandraising, like barn raising, involves everyone in your nonprofit's community—board members and staff leaders, volunteers, program staff, and perhaps donors and funders. Everyone plays a role in the development of effective communications.

Throughout this book the term *brandraising* is used to describe the process of building a strong framework for communicating. The elements involved in brandraising and their connections to each other are outlined at the beginning of Chapter Three, "Overview of Brandraising," and then defined and explored in greater detail in the four chapters that follow.

If you work at a nonprofit and have little or no background in communications, this book should help you

manage any branding or communications-related work more effectively. If you are a more experienced nonprofit professional grappling with the rise of social media and other unexpected changes in the communications landscape, it should help you stay current.

Measuring the Value of Communications

In a business that sells widgets, the ROI (return on investment) is measured by profit.

But in the nonprofit world, the impact of communications is measured in terms of the ability of those communications to support and advance the mission. More specifically, it is measured by

- *Impact on income.* Ask yourself: Did the communications investment help us build successful relationships with the individuals, corporations, foundations, or governmental agencies that support our organization financially? Did it increase donations or attract new donors? This impact is particularly critical during an economic downturn.
- *Impact on programs.* Ask yourself: Did the communications investment help us reach the right people for our programs, keep them engaged, and truly work toward achieving our objectives and mission?
- *Impact on advocacy.* Ask yourself: Did the communications investment help us effectively influence legislation, change perceptions around issues, and position our organization as the leading go-to resource in its field?

Most nonprofits communicate in order to

- Raise money (*fundraising*).
- Reach the right audiences for their programs (sometimes called *outreach*).
- Establish their leadership position around their core issues (*advocacy*).

Some organizations experience significant overlap among their fundraising, program, and advocacy audiences (illustrated in Figure 1.1). For instance, a symphony's donors are also subscribers to its programs and might also be community leaders who help to shape the group's reputation in the area. Conversely, some groups have very disparate audiences, with little overlap. For example, an agency may be reliant on funding from foundations, have
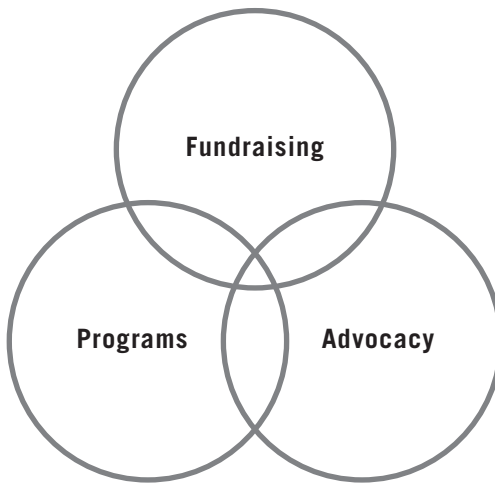

FIGURE 1.1 The Shared Goals of Nonprofit Communications

programs that work with people who are homeless, and lobby politicians for change that will benefit its clients (for instance, affordable housing).

In a for-profit organization, transactions are simpler. A customer buys a product or service and pays for it. Happy customers often lead to a profitable business. But in a nonprofit, this can be far from the case; even an extremely successful program will close its doors if funding dries up.

The true value of communications is measured through income generated, programs that achieve their stated goals, and other tangible results. Branding is certainly not a panacea. If a nonprofit organization is ineffective, corrupt, or has lost its way, good communications might delay but will not stop its collapse. But in my experience, most organizations are full of extremely hard-working people doing exceptionally good work. The principles of effective communications and brandraising strategy covered in the following chapters will maximize such organizations' effectiveness.

In Summary

- Unlike for-profits, nonprofit organizations usually fail to allocate resources for marketing or communications in their early years. Often, staffing and budgeting for communications doesn't happen until years into an organization's existence, which can present challenges.
- Increasingly, nonprofit leaders are seeing the value of marketing, branding, and communications.

- Brandraising is the process of developing a clear and cohesive organizational identity and communications system that supports the organization's mission.
- Nonprofits typically communicate for three purposes: to raise money, to reach audiences for programs (outreach), and to advocate (with legislators, the media, or within a community).