



Ten New Realities for Nonprofits

Be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid.

—Basil King, author and pastor

This chapter is about . . .

- What nonprofit marketing is and isn't
- The impact of shifting demographics and the Internet on nonprofit marketing
- How the role of a nonprofit communicator is changing
- Understanding nonprofit marketing in 2010 and beyond

Many forces beyond your control affect how you market your nonprofit organization. The economy is up; the economy is down. Friendly lawmakers are in charge; then they lose the next election. Talented volunteers, staff, and board members come and go. What people can do online, and what they expect to find and do on your website, is constantly expanding. These changes have profound effects on how you communicate with your supporters.

To get the most use out of this book and to understand the choices I suggest you make, you should understand the assumptions behind it. Thus, here are ten nonprofit marketing realities I believe are now self-evident.

REALITY 1: MARKETING IS NOT A DIRTY WORD—NOR IS COMMUNICATIONS OR PUBLIC RELATIONS

In a blog post titled “Is Marketing Slimy?” Katya Andresen says, “Asking people what they care about and then relating our cause to their values is respectful. Good marketing is a conversation.”

Marketing gets a bad rap because when it’s done poorly, it can be downright offensive. No one wants to feel like someone, especially a charity, is trying to trick or cheat them. No one likes being yelled at, patronized, or coerced.

So don’t think of your marketing program as a megaphone or a soap box. Think of it as a conversation around the dinner table or on a long walk. It’s true that some communications tactics are naturally more one-way or impersonal than others, so not everything you do will have conversational elements. But your marketing program as a whole should include many opportunities for the back-and-forth dialogue with your supporters over time. You should listen and talk and listen again and respond. That’s conversation. Be genuine, generous, and grateful in your conversations, and you won’t slip into the slime.

It’s also time for us to cast marketing in a completely different way. Now, it’s often seen by budget-crunched nonprofits as an optional, feel-good task that’s not central to the core mission of the organization. In reality, that couldn’t be further from the truth. When you do marketing right, it helps you achieve your core mission in more powerful, effective, and efficient ways. Good marketing is as much about listening as it is about talking, and what you’ll hear when you listen intently can be used to make profound, substantive changes in the way you manage all aspects of your organization, programmatic or otherwise. The content of good marketing communications is not fluff or pabulum, but meaningful substance that matters to you and your supporters.

I’m all for coming up with a better term to describe what it is I’m talking about in this book, if you think “marketing” just doesn’t cut it. I’m not crazy about the terms “target audience” or “best practices” either. But don’t get hung up on the vocabulary. Focus instead on the meaning, which I’ll try to illuminate as we go along.

REALITY 2: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS THE GENERAL PUBLIC

When I teach nonprofit marketing workshops in person, I often make participants chant this with me in unison so they remember it: “There is no such thing as the general public! There is no such thing as the general public!”

The general public includes *everyone*, from newborns to elders, rich and poor, incarcerated and homeless. No matter how much you try, you will not reach everyone. In fact, if that's what you try to do, odds are good that you will reach no one. Instead, you need to focus on specific groups of people and work toward communicating with them in ways that connect with their particular needs and values.

When nonprofit marketing programs fail, organizations too frequently blame the tactics. "We tried an email newsletter, but no one read it." "We sent out a direct mail fundraising letter, but it didn't raise much money." Closer examination of those tactics often reveals that the audience was poorly defined and the message was too generic. If the hammer doesn't hit the nail on the head, take a look at the skills of the carpenter, not the hammer.

REALITY 3: YOU NEED TO BUILD YOUR OWN MEDIA EMPIRE

Don't depend on the mainstream media to get your message out. That sector of our society has its own set of survival problems. Instead, consider media relations as just one of your tactics and build your own media empire using affordable online tools.

I'd much rather see a nonprofit spend a day writing blog posts and uploading photos or videos than writing a press release and blasting it out to a hundred reporters. When you publish your own content, you have it forever and can reuse it however you like. You can send it directly to your supporters—and to reporters too. When you write a press release, it may go nowhere. If the media do cover the story, they may pick an entirely different angle or shortchange what you thought was essential. With the larger outlets, the story may be archived behind a paid subscription wall, severely limiting its long-term usefulness to you.

Media coverage can still be incredibly helpful. I'm not suggesting that you forgo media relations entirely. A well-crafted press release sent to a handful of reporters who you know cover your issues can produce great results. If you have good relationships with reporters or work on a subject that's likely to get coverage, by all means take advantage of that. But in today's media environment, with limited time for creating content, I believe you are better off spending more time publishing your own content and, when seeking media coverage, focusing on a highly targeted list of mainstream media outlets.

REALITY 4: ALL GENERATIONS—INCLUDING SENIORS—ARE ONLINE

Great-grandma has email, and she's thinking about getting on Facebook too. After all, her children are telling her it's the best way to keep up with what her younger family members are doing, especially those who live out of town. Too many nonprofits falsely assume that people over sixty-five—who may be their biggest financial supporters—are not online. Although it's true that older generations are not online in the same proportions as younger generations, the gap is closing quickly.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project's "Generations Online in 2009" report found that although eighteen- to forty-four-year-olds account for 53 percent of the total number of Internet users, the biggest increase in Internet use between 2005 and 2008 was within the seventy- to seventy-five-year-old age group. In 2008, more than half of those age sixty-four to sixty-nine—those considered to be in their prime giving years—were online. Three-quarters of Internet users age sixty-four and older send and receive email, making it that age group's most popular online activity. Older users are also more inclined to use the Internet for research (perhaps checking out your website before writing that check), rather than for entertainment, like their grandchildren.

Although social networking is clearly more popular with younger generations, still, one-quarter of Americans fifty-five and older have a Facebook account, according to an April 2009 Harris Interactive poll. In February 2009, Facebook itself reported that its fastest growing demographic was women fifty-five and older.

What's important to remember is that the gaps in Internet use between younger and older generations will continue to close, until they are essentially level. Some of you reading this book (or perhaps some people you work with) might suppose that your particular supporters are in the other half of older Americans who aren't online, and therefore you don't need an online marketing strategy. It's a thin argument, and the holes in it are spreading fast.

Older people will continue to get online; even more significantly, the younger generations—particularly those in their thirties and forties now who came of age with personal computing—will remain online as they age. Their expectations for communicating online with their favorite charities will likely be extremely high. Prepare to meet those demands by getting through the steepest parts of your learning curve now.

REALITY 5: NONPROFIT COMMUNICATORS ARE TRANSFORMING INTO COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

Although you'll be encouraged in this book to remember that your supporters are real, individual people and to speak to them personally, it's also important to remember the power of your network as a whole and the connections that your supporters have with each other.

Think about when you host events. Isn't it wonderful to see all of those people who care about your work in one place, talking to each other about the good work you are doing, and feeling good about their contributions to something much bigger than themselves?

Smart nonprofit marketers find those people who are enthusiastic about the cause and who also have large networks of their own. You then feed those big fans and help them spread the message to others. They may fundraise for you, but just as important, they also "friendraise" for you.

I believe that the organizations that merge the now separate functions of fundraising, marketing, communications, and information technology into community building or community engagement teams and then incorporate all that is learned through their community of supporters into program design and implementation will ultimately be more successful in the coming years than those who maintain these professional silos.

REALITY 6: PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERSONALITIES, OR BRANDS, ARE BLENDING

What emotions does your nonprofit evoke in people? What is your group known for? This is your organization's brand, image, or personality—and many nonprofits are finding that their organizational brand is closely related to the personalities of their most public staff members. This has always been true for smaller organizations, groups led by a founding or long-time executive director, and nonprofits created in someone else's memory or honor.

But now larger nonprofits must contend with this reality too. Good online marketing, especially in social media, is personal, which means that your staff should present themselves as real human beings in your communications. This mixing of personal and professional can be quite uncomfortable for older generations, but it's a way of life for younger staff members. The personality of the

messenger—you—can affect the message. Think about your own personality and voice—your personal brand—and how it impacts the organization’s brand.

REALITY 7: GOOD NONPROFIT MARKETING TAKES MORE TIME THAN MONEY

Because the Internet has revolutionized communications between organizations and individuals, effective nonprofit marketing programs can be implemented for online pennies on the print dollar. Although you still need a budget to pay for good web hosting; email service providers; some upgraded, professional-level services; and, of course, staff, lack of money is no longer the biggest stumbling block to good nonprofit marketing. Now the sticking point is lack of time.

Engaging supporters in conversations is more time-consuming than blasting messages out to them. Managing profiles on multiple social media sites is more time-consuming than updating your website once a month. Writing a blog with several posts per week is more time-consuming than sending out a print newsletter twice a year. Although all of these tasks do take more time, they are also more effective at building a community of supporters and encouraging them to act on your behalf.

REALITY 8: YOU’VE ALREADY LOST CONTROL OF YOUR MESSAGE—STOP PRETENDING OTHERWISE

Control over the message about your organization or issue is not yours to give up. It’s already gone. What you can control is your response to how others are communicating about your issues and your organization.

One of the most frequent concerns I hear from nonprofits about using social media and participating in conversations with people online is that they fear they will lose control of their messages. They fear people will say bad things or manipulate their image in some way.

It’s questionable whether that kind of control ever existed, and when it comes to the Internet, the reality is that it’s long gone. If someone wants to bad-mouth you online, they can do it right now whether you are there to see it and respond or not. Turning off your modem (or burying your head in the sand) won’t prevent those conversations from happening. They’ll just happen without you there to correct any misconceptions.

The truth is that the overwhelming majority of comments that people make about charities online are positive or neutral. For those that are negative, isn't it better to see them and consciously decide whether or not to respond than to be oblivious to them entirely?

Know your controversial or hot-button issues. Anticipate how foes might manipulate your positions, then prepare your response, so you'll be ready should you need to use it. The sheer volume of pro and con voices online does matter. If you are both responding to and initiating positive conversations about your work online, that will balance out, and perhaps even drown out, any negative conversations. But you can't build that fortress of goodwill around you if you aren't participating in the conversation.

A more reasonable goal is consistency in, rather than control of, your messaging. It's much easier to steer a conversation and to suggest topics for additional discussion than it is to control what people say.

REALITY 9: MARKETING IS NOT FUNDRAISING, BUT IT IS ESSENTIAL TO IT

Good nonprofit marketing has many possible outcomes, and raising dollars is one of them. But nonprofits also use marketing to find and galvanize volunteers; to persuade decision makers; to change public policy; to raise awareness; to encourage behavior changes; to converse with clients, supporters, and partners; to foment social change—and more.

Although you can have successful long-term marketing campaigns that don't involve fundraising, you cannot have successful long-term fundraising campaigns without marketing. Marketing and communications are how you talk to your donors in between those times when you ask for money. They're what pull new people into your pool of potential new donors and what keep current donors happy with your organization so they will give again.

This is not a fundraising guide, but you'll find fundraising-related tips and examples throughout the book, because it is one result of successful nonprofit marketing.

REALITY 10: OLD-FASHIONED BASICS STILL WORK BEST, EVEN ONLINE

"The basics are what most organizations are missing. Obsessing about this is far more effective than managing the latest fad." I didn't say that, but I agree with it

100 percent. Marketing guru Seth Godin said it during a May 2008 online chat about nonprofit marketing hosted by the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

With online marketing in particular, don't fret about Facebook until your website is in good shape. Don't get all twisted up about Twitter and how many followers you have until your email marketing program is effective and your email list is growing steadily. Focus on the basics first, and do them well.

CONCLUSION: TRY BOLDLY, AND TRY AGAIN

There is no one best way to market your nonprofit or your good cause, although some approaches have better odds of working than others, especially given these ten realities. I've tried to include in this book both the strategies and tactics that I believe will have the greatest likelihood of success for smaller organizations, but you won't know what works best for your group and your supporters until you try, gauge the results, and try again.

Don't fear failure in your nonprofit marketing. Fear will make your approaches too conservative, and you'll become just another one of the thousands of really good causes out there that struggle day to day because they don't get the support they deserve.

Instead, be bold. You won't get it right the first time, and maybe not the second either. What's important is that you try new ways to reach out and grab hold of your supporters' hearts and minds. When you do, they will come to your aid.