



10 Realities of Nonprofit Marketing

I opened the first edition of this book with a chapter called “10 New Realities for Nonprofits” with an emphasis on “New.” Back in 2010, I was still urging nonprofits to be OK with calling this work “marketing” rather than euphemisms like “outreach,” to take social media seriously, and to convince them that people over 50 really were using the Internet. Thankfully, we’ve moved well beyond those sticking points.

All of the other elements in that original list proved foundational to the work of nonprofit communications. While I have updated this list, what you’ll find here are the assumptions on which all of the other chapters in the book are built. Understanding this list will help you get the most out of this book and to understand the choices I suggest you make.

Many forces beyond your control will affect how you market your nonprofit organization. The economy will go up and down. Friendly elected officials will be in charge, and then they will lose an election. Talented volunteers, staff, and board members will come and go. What people can do from their phones no matter where they are in the world will continue to grow.

But I don’t expect the following 10 realities to change much.

REALITY 1: MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS DEPENDS ON A CONFIDENT, SKILLED PROFESSIONAL

At Nonprofit Marketing Guide, we’ve been researching communication effectiveness at nonprofits for more than a decade. I can tell you with absolute confidence that nonprofits that treat marketing and communications like the specialty profession that it is get better results.

Each of us communicates every day, and as a result, many of us think we are good writers, have good taste and a sense of style, and assume that others like the same things we do. Unfortunately, it's just not true! Successfully marketing a nonprofit organization requires an overly broad set of skills to be applied to a relatively narrow set of priorities. As the work becomes more and more dependent on sophisticated technology, it's even more important to employ staff who understand what they are doing and are committed to their own ongoing professional development.

REALITY 2: MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS DEPENDS ON A SUPPORTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

For maximum effectiveness, your confident and skilled marketing staff need to work within an organizational culture that values marketing and communications.

Too often nonprofits just want communications staff to make all the stuff – the social media and website updates, the newsletters, flyers, and event invitations, etc. The least effective organizations treat their communications staff like fast-food drive-through windows, taking orders and churning out content.

In contrast, supportive organizations understand that you need more than just communications tactics for success. You need real strategy. You need planning. You need adequate resources, including time, talent, and treasure. You need to view marketing and communications as an essential, valued function.

REALITY 3: THERE WILL ALWAYS BE TOO MUCH TO DO

Nonprofit marketing work comes with an overabundance of options and decisions to make. You simply cannot do it all. You have to make choices, and that can be incredibly challenging to do.

Communications staff who don't understand this and don't learn to manage expectations for both themselves and their organizations will find themselves burned out within a few years. I never expected to incorporate the concept of setting personal boundaries into my communications coaching practice, but it's become an essential skill.

REALITY 4: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS THE GENERAL PUBLIC

When I teach nonprofit marketing workshops, 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, from rich to poor, from incarcerated to the jet set. 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 message was too generic and therefore spoke to no one in particular.

All communications should be created with particular groups of people in mind. That’s the only way to create content that people will find relevant.

REALITY 5: YOU NEED TO MANAGE YOUR OWN MEDIA EMPIRE

The multitude of ways to communicate directly with the world has never been more accessible, largely built on the evolution of both social media and mobile technology.

I encourage all nonprofits to think of themselves as media moguls. At a minimum, you are likely managing a website, email, and a couple of social media channels. Most nonprofits go far beyond this list to include print mailing, media relations, in-person and online events, and more.

Do not think of all of these different ways to communicate (we call them “channels”) as separate and independent from each other. At a minimum, use a multichannel approach where you think through how to share your content across several different channels. Your community can interact with you in each channel.

Even better, take an omnichannel approach where you deliver your content across many channels in a way that creates a more consistent, seamless

experience for your community. Where a multichannel approach centers on how your messaging appears in different places, an omnichannel approach centers on how your community members experience your messaging, regardless of channel.

REALITY 6: NONPROFIT MARKETING IS A FORM OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

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.

Consider integrating fundraising, marketing, communications, and information technology into community building or community engagement teams. Incorporate all that is learned through your community of supporters into program design and implementation. Using marketing to facilitate community building is likely the best way to achieve your nonprofit's ultimate mission.

REALITY 7: PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL BRANDS OFTEN BLEND

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 longtime 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 people who highly value their privacy or who hold on to more traditional or dated definitions of what is professional and what is not.

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 8: 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 9: YOU'VE ALREADY LOST CONTROL OF YOUR MESSAGE – STOP PRETENDING OTHERWISE

One of the most frequent concerns we used to hear from nonprofits about using social media and participating in conversations with people online was that they would lose control of their messages. They feared people would say bad things or manipulate their image in some way.

It's questionable whether that kind of control really ever existed, but the reality is that it is 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. Shutting

down your computer or phone won't prevent those conversations from happening. They'll just happen without you there to correct any misconceptions.

Rather than trying to avoid awkward, negative, or challenging conversations online, your better approach is to learn ways to effectively engage in and, where possible, manage the way those conversations play out over time. Try to bring consistency to 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 10: 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 that is one result of successful nonprofit marketing.

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, especially 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. Author and pastor Basil King said, "Be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid." 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.

