

Tips for Marketing and Community Involvement



An organization's success depends upon its ability to effectively reach the general public. For nonprofits, marketing and community involvement are two distinctly different activities that lead to the same result—building a public image for the organization. Most organizations start with community involvement activities, such as speaking engagements, and eventually realize that they need an organized marketing plan to ensure their visibility. Often marketing becomes an issue when you discover that your organization's materials have different versions of your logo or that the public is aware of some of your programs but does not realize that your organization sponsors them. Small differences can create confusion for the public. The following will help you to determine how to proceed in marketing your organization.

Board Involvement

A key responsibility for the board of directors is to carry the message of the organization to the public. Recruit board members who have skills or experience in public relations, advertising or marketing to create a Communications Committee. If none of your current members possess this experience, include advisers from outside of the board who will agree to support this committee. They may include media personalities, writers and social media professionals. It is important to develop this kind of internal support and establish guidelines and policies for communicating with the public.

The Communications Committee should start by reviewing all materials and public interaction in which the organization engages and identifying any inconsistencies. Think about the messages that are most important to your organization and prioritize them. Key messages that clearly communicate the organization's priorities should be established and then shared with the board and staff. Interviews or focus groups of various constituencies can clarify the public's perception of the organization's role in the community, its services, and its strengths and weaknesses. This exercise will either confirm that you are on target with your communication or identify the gaps in understanding.

The Communications Committee can also help the executive director determine the appropriate spokesperson for each level of management, starting with the board. Familiarize each person with the plan and

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provide media training. Determine the specific spokespersons for various situations that may occur.

Address crisis management separately. Many organizations have a separate, written document to instruct others on the authority and procedures during a crisis. Most likely, there will be only one spokesperson during an emergency situation. Under normal conditions, you may have several people on staff or on the board who could act as a spokesperson for the agency. Take into account that you may need a spokesperson that speaks other languages fluently.

Marketing is never a one-year project. Plan for three to five years and have tangible results as your goals. Start with a review of the organization's general communications and then examine the specific programs.

Ask the following questions to measure the results of your efforts:

- Has public opinion changed?
- Have clients or revenue increased?
- Has funders' knowledge of your work expanded?

Community Relations

Community relations are the personal contact that you have with the public that results in building your organization's image. This activity involves all staff and your volunteers. Marketing can be effectively controlled through the senior management; however, community relations are impacted by the personal performance of everyone associated with your organization. Establish internal standards for customer service and performance and provide training. Every person connected to your organization should contribute to community relations and be held accountable. Your organization will be judged by your responsiveness and friendliness and the quality of information you provide. Influence how the community views your organization from the first time you answer the telephone to each public appearance.

The executive director should establish rules for handling external complaints regardless of the size of the organization. Put the procedures in writing and handle problems immediately. Be friendly and

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actively listen. Be genuine in your concern and in your management of the complaints.

Documentation

A written communications plan should include:

- Your mission statement
- Your vision statement
- Logos, all of which should include the organization's name
- Logo/name use policy
- Current listing of media and press contacts
- Spokesperson contact information
- Strategy and goals for implementation over the next three years
- Current list of Communications Committee members

You also need a crisis communication manual that includes:

- Organization contact information
- Staff names, titles and contact information
- Board of directors names, titles and contact information
- Key volunteers and staff to contact during emergencies
- Media contacts
- Procedures for the following emergencies:
 - Natural disasters
 - Community disasters
 - Fire procedures
 - Bomb threat procedures
 - Hurricane preparedness

Communications is important in any organization, and communicating successfully with the public is essential. Although it may be difficult to do, collect the volunteer stories that will help everyone to understand your success. Create a budget to support communications and marketing materials and seek funding specifically to support building community awareness.

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