



COMMUNICATIONS LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Nonprofit Safety Net

How strategic communications can help you cope with the economic downturn

(Summary of Nov. 18, 2008 presentation
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at the San Francisco Foundation)

“Adversity reveals genius.
Good fortune conceals it.”

-- Horace, Roman poet, 65 b.c.-8 b.c.

Yes, it's a worrisome time. But if we redirect our energy to maintaining and improving the core of our operations, we can survive. Focusing on the core is always necessary, but especially in adverse times. The starting point is good communications. At the Communications Leadership Institute, we preach that good communication is the one element that can elevate every aspect of how a nonprofit operates.

So to begin dealing with the effects of the economic downturn, we all need to revisit our communications plans and how we are using them at this time.

The fundamentals of communications planning apply to this and all operations in a nonprofit organization.

First, tune in to the existing strategic plan, especially communications. Don't have a communications plan? Then draw one up for this rough economic time.

A plan will identify an organization's target audiences. Three broad target audiences are:

- The internal audience includes staff, the board and volunteers.
- The client audience consists of people who use your organization's services.
- The funders category includes foundations, businesses, governmental agencies and individual donors. And don't forget potential funders. We will spend most of our time today talking about communicating with funders.

INTERNAL AUDIENCE: Share the situation with staff and members of the board. Board meetings and staff meetings should include regular discussion and updates.

- A key point about internal communications: If staff reductions have occurred, remaining staff members will be stressed, and steady, regular communications will help reduce it.
- A potential sweet spot in internal communications: board members. If not already involved, get them involved in the fund-raising. And no soft-sell. They are already engaged.

CLIENTS: Client communications must be watched closely as demand for services goes up. Pay attention to client outreach, including how front-line staff communicates with clients. Review collateral materials.

FUNDERS

“We all know it’s harder to get a new donor than it is to hold on to an existing loyal supporter. Once you realize this fact you will want to put more energy into holding onto what you have rather than finding new supporters.”

-- Eric Streif, director of Oculus Direct, a consultant to nonprofits

Reaching existing and past funders is a three-step communications process:

- Know who they are. Use a database to identify top givers, consistent givers, people whose gift level has increased, people who missed the last giving cycle or whose gifts have stayed at the same level or gone down.
- Reach out with distinct messages, individualized when possible.
- Prioritize to determine how to make contact, including in-person calls or appointments for the most loyal and biggest donors.

In doing all of the above, how you communicate is most important. Eric Streif of Oculus Direct offers six steps to good funder communication:

- Acknowledge gifts in a more meaningful and substantial way
- Focus on customer service
- Develop a more comprehensive gift acknowledgement process
- Make the donor feel very important to your organization
- Thank them
- Keep them well informed about your organization’s successes

Don’t cut communications efforts. Rather, in hard times, focus them on key needs:

- Identify a niche. Mass media are expensive and less effective than we think. Better to identify a niche and go for it.
- Mass media still have a place, if you find a way to create newsworthiness through good news hooks – an anniversary, receipt of a big grant, or best of all, success with your program. Tell stories that touch people’s hearts, from the point of view of those benefiting from your services. A child who improved her school work or a homeless person who got a job as a symbol of success tells the story.

Consider recession-resistant businesses. Some for-profit businesses do well in a recession. Look to them for contributions, especially if they are in line with the work you do. Yahoo! HotJobs called these six industries recession proof or at least recession resistant

- Health care
- Education
- Environment
- Energy
- Security and law enforcement
- International business

Identify businesses that fit those categories and seek contributions from them, using good communications skills and techniques. Make it part of the plan.

For information about strategic communications planning, creating communications framing and messaging, media relations, developing skills as a spokesperson, using new media and other aspects of communicating, contact:

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