

Stewardship Forum

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Stewardship Tools for Fundraisers : Giving Matters

Title: Planning Your Communications Strategy

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“What we have here is a failure to communicate!”

It's a memorable line, from one of my favorite films delivered by the blustery warden of a southern prison camp to a noncompliant prisoner played by Paul Newman in the movie “Cool Hand Luke.” And that line accurately defines one of the major diseases suffered by nonprofit organizations today — A Failure to Communicate.

Whether you are a CEO, a development director, or you are directly responsible for your communications program as an editor or copywriter, failure to communicate in today's hyper-competitive marketing environment can lead to disaster. My intent is to share several keys to help you achieve focused communications — and, thus, more effective communications — with your constituencies. One definition of the term “focus” is a condition in which something can be clearly apprehended or perceived. What better objective for your communications program than for your audience/donors to “clearly perceive” the impact of their involvement with your organization?

But arriving at that point requires understanding of the nature of communications today, as well as harnessing the power of truly effective communications media. Our lives have been enriched — or for some, perhaps, tormented — by an explosion in communications technology. There's been exponential growth in the number of media outlets clamoring for attention — whether in print, on-air or on-line. We're living not only in an information-rich world...we're living in an age of information over-kill. People have an incredible number of options to obtain information and entertainment. That's the good news. Unfortunately, that's also the bad news.

Organizations like yours have never had it so good in terms of communications options. But you've also never faced such incredible competition for the attention of your audiences. It's a huge problem. Because, if yours is like most organizations, you depend upon financial support from various audiences to accomplish the purpose for which you're in existence. And that support undoubtedly comes as a result of communicating with those audiences, convincing them of the worthiness of your cause, and effectively and successfully soliciting their financial support.

So how do you break through the information and entertainment clutter? What can you do to make sure people care about your organization — and continue to support it financially? How can you tell if your communications program is focused for effectiveness? First ask yourself these questions...

- Does my organization have a written marketing and communications plan?

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- Who is responsible for developing and carrying out that plan?
- What are our communications objectives? Is our communications program effectively reaching those objectives?
- How do we measure success?

Lack of focus in many organizations is evident in that there is no cohesive plan for donor communications. It just happens. Unfortunately, such a lack of planning is not only disruptive within the organization, it is also very evident to the organization's constituents.

Focus within a marketing or development communications program is often misdirected. The focus isn't funds. Or telling people what's going on in your organization or sharing what's on the CEO's heart.

Rather, the focus of your communications program — and every component of your program — should be to build and maintain long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with your constituents. Enduring relationships are the very foundation of successful resource development. Thus, every contact with constituents should be aimed at enhancing the relationship that is developing between organization and donor.

There are four critical Functions of Development Communications:

0. To provide information to constituencies, whether groups or individuals;
0. To gather information from people, in other words to inquire;
0. Involving people in you work by providing opportunities.... for investment of time, talent, or their gift support;
0. Finally, to provide inspiration. There's a dearth of genuine excitement in most organizations today. Some of that's due to poor leadership or uncertain vision or direction. But a healthy dose of inspiration can make miracles happen;

Remember "The Four 'I's": Inform, Inquire, Involve, and Inspire. Examine your own communications program and evaluate what you're communicating against the Four-'I's index.

Your Primary Concern in planning and running a communications program is not WHAT you do. . . It's WHO you're communicating with! And as much as you'd like to believe that it's true, you don't really know who you're talking to. "Who are these people?" is an important question to ask. More important is "Who is that person?" Is he, in fact, a donor, board member, new name, inquirer, former customer, served client, and so on?

Let's assume that we're talking about donors, because your communications program should be oriented toward those who financially support your organization.

Just how do you define the Donor Relationship?

- Client?
- Customer?

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- Volunteer?
- Partner?
- Friend?
- Target?

Most importantly, **WHAT DOES THE DONOR THINK?** Tailor your communications to the needs of your donors, because they are the life-blood of your organization.

Recognize that there are definite benefits to a donor-focused communications model. A carefully constructed and managed program:

- Recognizes value of individuals and their inherent differences;
- Focuses on relationships rather than simply dollars;
- Enhances donor bonding;
- Builds enduring, organization-sustaining relationships.

As a communications manager you must constantly ask these questions:

0. "WHO are our constituents?"
0. "WHERE are they in the donor continuum?"
0. "WHAT are their needs and wants?"
0. "WHAT are we doing about it?"

Your Key Objective is simple, but profound: Involve donors to the greatest extent possible in your organization — not just financially, but interpersonally and experientially, as well.

When it comes to developing a Comprehensive Marketing Communications Plan, you should have a number of Strategic Objectives in mind... And those objectives should correspond to the level of relationship you have with all the segments on your file...

- Name Conversion
- Donor Conversion
- Donor Upgrade
- Donor Renewal
- Donor Reactivation
- Event Strategies
- Volunteer Enlistment
- Etc.

Some Tactical Considerations as you plan...

0. Audience
0. Objective
0. Media Options

Pay close attention to defining specific Communications Objectives...

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- 0. Cultivation?
- 0. Solicitation?
- 0. Information?
- 0. Appreciation?

What about Media Selection... You have a plethora of choices!

- Direct Mail
- Newsletters
- Tele-relations/telemarketing
- Events
- Personal Visits
- Others?

Your Communications Tactics need to be designed in order to positively affect the long-term viability of your donor file. That means focusing on tactics that Find new prospects. And making sure you're successfully Winning new donors and Keeping them through retention strategies. Lifting, or upgrading donors level of involvement is also critical. And you can define tactics that will effectively do this.

Defining your Communications Strategy isn't simply a matter of saying we're going to do monthly direct mail appeal and a quarterly newsletter...

Ries and Trout, in Bottom-Up Marketing define Strategy as a "coherent marketing direction" — in other words, a good strategy should be composed of carefully selected tactics designed to work in harmony with each other. And they should be objectives driven. What should your objective be?

Successful organizations focus their energies — and their communications tactics — on developing, nurturing, and keeping relationships. Good communications is one of the very best ways to ensure a healthy donor file. But it all boils down to someone taking responsibility for results.

Someone once said there are four steps to accomplishment... Plan purposefully. Prepare prayerfully. Proceed positively and pursue persistently. I hope you'll consider that a formula for success as you evaluate and plan your communications program.

About the author. Jeff McLinden is a Senior Consultant with McConkey/Johnston, a US based Christian consulting firm. For more than a decade Jeff has served a number of Christian ministries strengthening their marketing strategies, communications and fundraising efforts. For information and resources on fundraising and strategic planning for Christian organizations please visit www.mcconkey-johnston.com