

Help Yourself: Seven questions can clarify communications strategies



Helping organizations
communicate effectively

**Published in CharityVillage.com
February 8, 2010**

“What target audiences are most important to your success?”

It was a simple question.

The answer, however, was complicated: “Well, we get about 200 hits on our website every month from interested people. We launched a Facebook page a few months ago to help us get supporters to events. And we started a Twitter feed to connect with youth. We also have our e-newsletter for volunteers and donors.”

When I was speaking with the executive director of a small charitable organization about her communication plans for the coming year, her responses focused on the activities and tools her team was generating. She also expressed frustration that they were doing more but seeing less rewarding results.

In a tough, competitive economy, there’s a tendency for organizations to try more, and more, and more – with the hope that *something* will pay off. They may reduce communications planning and instead, experiment with tactics and tools.

Yet in a challenging and volatile economy, nonprofits need to be strategic when it comes to solidifying support. More than ever, you need to know how the marketplace is shifting, the impact on your organization and its potential and current supporters and how to communicate effectively with these supporters in order to build and strengthen relationships.

Putting your heads together

With time and resources stretched too taut for many small nonprofits to afford a formal communications audit, it may help to know that even a few hours of brainstorming and problem solving among staff and volunteers can add clarity and direction to communication efforts. The following approach can enable your team to “step back,” look at the big picture and enhance the effectiveness of your overall communications.

Begin by selecting a representative group of people to participate. A team of three to six people is an efficient size for effective brainstorming and planning. Ideally, you want to include representatives from each of the organization’s key communication areas.

Consider all of the stakeholder groups with whom your organization communicates: clients, funders, prospects, staff, volunteers, members, the local community, policy-makers, etc. Now consider which staff members and/or volunteers have primary responsibility for communicating with these groups.

Invite these staff members/volunteers to attend a communications planning session. This could be half of a day if your organization's communications are relatively simple or a full day for those that communicate with multiple audiences in multiple ways. While it may appear ambitious to tackle communications planning within only a few hours, a tight timetable establishes a discipline that can help to propel the group toward developing actionable solutions.

This is why it is also important to appoint an experienced facilitator to guide the session. Ideally, this should be an individual with communications experience who can be objective about the process – someone who isn't personally invested in the outcome. This might be a board member, respected volunteer or an external consultant.

Advise participants to come with an open mind. The role of the group is not to critique what is currently being done. Rather, the idea is to open everyone's minds to the big picture and the possibilities.

Following are seven key questions to guide your discussion. These will help the group to focus on specific goals as well as ways to build on successes.

1. What are our goals?

Daily obligations and deadlines rarely allow enough time to think about this question. This is the time to step back and consider the organization's most important goals for the coming year. Do you want to develop new services? Deliver more services? Serve more clients? Attract more funds? Try to be as specific as possible in defining these goals quantitatively and/or qualitatively.

2. What challenges are we currently experiencing in reaching these goals?

Now consider the challenges your nonprofit is experiencing. Following a problem definition process can help the team to be objective and specific in defining the challenges. This involves identifying the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the challenges. For example: What challenges are we experiencing? With whom are we having these challenges? Where are the challenges happening? When are they happening? How are they happening? Why are they happening?

3. Who are the target audiences we need to reach in order to succeed?

Determining the specific challenges the organization is facing also helps to identify the stakeholders who can help you overcome these challenges. Do you need, for example, more volunteers to help you deliver more services? Or do you need to reach certain funder groups with which you haven't yet connected?

Try to identify the main characteristics of these groups. Are the funders you need, for example, located in a particular geographic area? Do they share certain demographic characteristics (such as household income, age etc.) and/or psychographic (opinions, lifestyle preferences, etc.) characteristics?

4. What do these audiences know/think about our organization?

Consider what the target groups you have identified know about your organization. Are most aware of it? What do they know about you? What are their attitudes toward your organization and your services? How do they behave toward you?

Do some have negative opinions about your organization or services? If so, what are they?

5. What do we want these audiences to think/do about our organization?

Consider what you would like the target groups you have identified to know about your organization? Or to feel. Or to do. What actions would you like them to take?

Do you need to reinforce positive attitudes? Or do you need to radically change opinions? Think about the issues that may be impacting negative opinions and actions: preconceptions, allegiances, language. What may be obstructing their responsiveness to your communications?

6. What do we need to communicate to them to encourage the opinions/actions we want?

Now consider what opportunities may be available to modify the attitudes of your target audiences toward your organization. What might motivate them to change their opinions or actions? How can your communications influence their attitudes and actions?

Think about the message you need to communicate to these groups to influence their thinking and behaviour. Why should these audiences support your organization? What should you communicate to encourage the opinions or actions you want?

Now consider how this message compares with the current messages you're communicating. Do you need to make adjustments?

7. How should we communicate with these target audiences?

Next, consider the best ways of communicating these messages to your target audiences. What are the typical preferences of each group for acquiring information? Friends? Business colleagues? Google? TV? Facebook? Radio? Newspapers? Twitter? YouTube?

Compare these information sources with the media you are currently using for your communications. Are there gaps? Are there practical, affordable ways to reach and influence your target audiences that may not be in your current communication mix?

If yours is like many other organizations, you will likely identify adjustments you should make to your existing communication tools and tactics. Keep in mind your goals, target audiences and messages and use this information to guide your decisions.

The marketplace is evolving at an ever-increasing pace. No nonprofit can afford to wait until "we have more time (or money)" to review communication strategies. Even when budgets are tight, tighter, tightest, this type of streamlined strategic approach to communications planning can help your team focus and clarify communications. Perhaps most important, this process may provide you with opportunities to reinforce your relationships with the stakeholders who are vital to your organization's success.

[Corinne LaBossiere](#), ABC, APR, is the founder and principal of [CGL Communications](#). She works with non-profit and for-profit organizations to help them communicate effectively with their target audiences.