

HELLO my name is

Increase Your Visibility with a Marketing Communications Plan

The third in a 3-part series by Howard Levy, Red Rooster Group

Over the past 30 years, a local nonprofit organization has been going a laudatory job in providing emotional and financial support families who have a child with cancer. However, their fundraising efforts are not achieving the results they want. They would like to have wider recognition in their community, but the staff is stretched thin providing services, so they are always behind in sending out their newsletter and updating the website. Needless to say, they keep putting off making the video they feel they desperately need, and their desire to start with social media has never materialized.

A similar-sized organization in the same county which advocates for special needs students just received another mention in the local newspaper. They know that this will drive some people to their website which shows their video, allows people to sign up for their newsletter, and asks them to donate online. While they are not getting a huge amount of donations through their site, they are steadily increasing the size of their email list, and are increasing their visibility and respect in the community. This makes it easier for them to approach different government services when needed to advocate for students, as well as solicit corporations for sponsorship support.

The second organization isn't making this type of progress by accident. They are working off a marketing plan that spells out the steps they need to achieve success.

A marketing plan provides a comprehensive way of ensuring that all of your marketing methods are getting your story out, representing your brand accurately, and, most importantly, are actually being implemented in a timely manner.

What is a Marketing Plan?

When it comes to communications, most nonprofit organizations are oriented around their donors. It's understandable that fundraising comes first, and most small and medium organizations feel they need to be doing more. How you manage your communications with your donors is critical to your success. However, you don't want to lose sight of your organization's larger communications needs.

A marketing plan provides a comprehensive way of ensuring that all of your marketing methods are getting your story out, representing your brand accurately, and, most importantly, are actually being implemented in a timely manner. This encompasses your website, brochures, email and printed newsletters, direct mail, presentations, videos, social media, event fundraising event promotion, and publicity in local and national media.

A marketing plan describes what you

hope to accomplish, the resources you have to work with, and how best to use them. In short, it's about planning for success.

A well-conceived marketing plan can help:

1. Improve your visibility and reputation among key stakeholders including donors, funders, partner organizations and politicians.
2. Raise the level of professionalism and effectiveness of your website, brochures, and fundraising materials.
3. Ensure a consistent look across all forms of communications to improve recognition of your organization and its programs.
4. Correct misperceptions about your organization and spread your goodwill in the community.
5. Clarify the roles and responsibilities different staff have concerning marketing and fundraising activities.
6. Streamline the production process and reduce costs of your publications, website and other communications.
7. Ensure that marketing and fundraising activities are being executed in a timely manner.
8. Gain control of your budget by knowing how much is being spent on marketing outreach activities.
9. Enhance your brand and get more value from sponsorships and cause-marketing relationships.

Creating Your Marketing Plan: On Your Own or Hiring a Consultant?

You know marketing is important but how do you do it? It's a challenge to ask staff who are already stretched thin to do even more, but consultants cost money and need time to learn your organization. Here are some factors to consider in deciding which route to take.

Consider doing the work yourself if:

- You have someone on staff with expertise in marketing and communications.
- That person has a good understanding of your organization.
- That person has the authority to make marketing decisions.
- That person has the respect and support of leadership and staff.
- That person has the time and resources to get the job done.

Consider outsourcing if your organization:

- Needs expertise in determining the best ways to be more visible.
- Does not have the staff time to implement a marketing plan.
- Is spending staff time on marketing activities, but no one is really qualified to do it well.
- Could benefit from more staff time to do what they do best.
- Feels an outside perspective would add value to your organization.
- Could use someone to foster consensus among staff and board around your marketing.
- Could use help in implementing and staying on track.

10. Provide a foundation for growth and ongoing marketing by strengthening your organizational capacity.

Getting Started with Your Marketing Communications Plan

The main sections of your marketing plan should include: Audiences & Messages, Budget, Tactics & Timeline, and Personnel.

1. Define Your Audiences & Messages:

While your main emphasis may be on reaching donors, your organization likely touches many other groups of people — clients, partner agencies, referral sources, community leaders, news media, bloggers, elected officials, government agencies, suppliers, and potential board members — and these people need to hear from you. Each connection will affect how your organization is viewed and what people think it does. Start by determining which groups you need to reach and what you'd like to tell them, which can be quite different for each group. This will form your key messages to convey during the year.

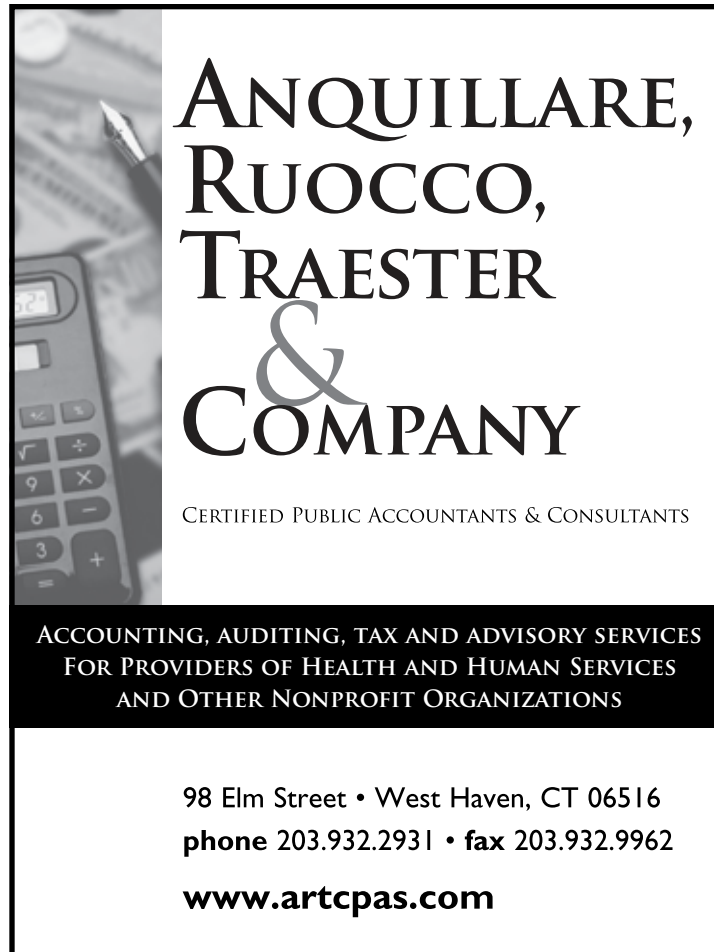
2. Determine Your Budget: This can be difficult. When a nonprofit says that it doesn't have a marketing budget, it usually doesn't mean that they don't do any marketing activities. It means that they

don't track the costs for those activities. A good place to start is to look at the fundraising and communications activities you do (or spent on services such as web design, printing or email services) and get a sense of the total amount in staff time or real dollars that you are spending. From there, you can look at your overall budget, the return on your fundraising efforts, the other results you are getting, and plan what is realistic for your organization.

3. Determine Your Tactics & Timeline:

The number of ways in which to reach your audience have exploded. So how do you know which ones will be best? Start with what the methods you are currently using and consider how effective they have been. Your goal is to reach your audience in the ways that they prefer to be reached — for some, that will be through online social networks, for others, through the mail, and for others, in-person, at events. Your goal is to balance your goals, capacity, and budget with the best tactics that different groups best respond to. From there, you can plot how often each group should hear from you, and you can develop a timeline of how the tactics will be rolled out.

4. Determine Who Does What: Sure, when you started, your staff was small and everyone pitches in. Now a project



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manager is responsible for getting the newsletter out and a board member's nephew is helping out with social media when he has time. While seemingly inexpensive in the short term, it may not be putting the best resources to work for your organization in a way that is likely to build long-term success. It pays to step back and assess who really has the right expertise to do each of these things in a way that will generate the best return. It may pay to re-shift responsibilities to staff who have more expertise, hire a staff person with the right experience, or bring in outside help. (For a list of considerations, see the side bar, "Creating Your Marketing Plan: On Your Own or Hiring a Consultant?").

Measuring Your Marketing for Impact

Your marketing plan, like your own health, needs periodic check-ups to make sure everything is still working as it should. Monitoring is required whether you are using high-tech media or printed newsletters and handouts. You want to know how well they are working so you can make changes, if necessary.

You can look at website stats, online fundraising, keyword-search-result ranking, and event attendance, just for starters. The wealth of instant information allows you to adjust your tactics and budget allocations. You can shift emphasis from non-performing media to those that are more successful. Or you can adjust your marketing in response to changes in your organization, audience, or competition.

But someone has to be looking. That, too, is part of your marketing plan. Who will monitor its effectiveness? A process must be put in place to determine what, if any, changes are needed and to implement those changes.

Developing a marketing plan will help your organization stay on the path toward a solid future and you'll feel good knowing you are making progress toward greater visibility. ■

Howard Adam Levy is principal of Red Rooster Group, a branding agency that creates effective brands, websites and marketing campaigns for nonprofits to increase their visibility, fundraising and effectiveness. For more information visit www.RedRoosterGroup.com or call the agency at 212-673-9353.

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