More than a few nonprofit professionals find themselves being thrown into marketing responsibilities without being formally trained or having much experience or support. Some are program managers who find themselves responsible for creating their own communications materials. Some are fundraisers who have a sense that better marketing could improve their ability to raise funds; they’re right.

This document identifies some of the most common mistakes made by nonprofits and outlines solutions to avoid them. These mistakes are very common, so don’t be embarrassed if you’ve made them. And don’t feel frustrated with colleagues who may be making them at your agency right now; just pass this helpful summary along to anyone who might benefit from it.

If you’re a fundraiser, you’re already a marketer! Marketing is about clear, directed communication to people most likely to take the action you want them to: to give money to support your mission. You’re already successfully communicating one-on-one with your donors, and this document will help you learn to be just as effective in your communications to larger audiences.
MISTAKE 1:
Assuming that your donors already know everything about you

- Always remind donors of what you do and why it’s important.
- Don’t use jargon, acronyms, or nicknames.
- Realize that your mission statement doesn’t tell your story.
- Use the full names of your programs and describe them each time they come up.
- Treat donors as “special,” yes, but don’t treat them like close family.
- Even organizations with well-known brands, such as YMCA and Red Cross, are often misunderstood.

MISSION STATEMENT
The American Red Cross, a humanitarian organization led by volunteers, guided by its Congressional Charter and the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross Movement, will provide relief to victims of disasters, and help people prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies.

- This mission statement may be accurate, but because it has to be so explicit, and cover so many kinds of services, it feels generic and flat.
- Mission statements don’t usually elicit emotion.
- Emotion is what drives donors to want to give. If what they read inspires them, they’ll find justifiable reason to give.
- Use emotion to describe how your agency makes a difference:

"ELEVATOR PITCH"
The American Red Cross believes that people should be cared for in times of disaster. Every day we prepare, prevent, and respond to help people affected by emergencies, whether it’s a single family or an entire nation. We do this because it is our responsibility as humans to help one another in times of need.

MISTAKE 2:
Sharing statistics instead of stories

- A statistic has never made anyone cry.
- A good story activates the imagination and sparks emotions.
- People remember stories, not statistics.
- A good story has a hero, a villain, a plot, and a moral.
- Tell stories that paint a picture in the listener’s mind. Use details. Make it real.
- A good story is memorable.
- Share stories that show the impact of your organization on your constituents:

AN EMOTIONAL STORY THAT DEMONSTRATES WHAT YOU DO
When Nancy Miller’s Mission District home burned to the ground, homelessness became real. She lost all of her belongings except the clothes she was wearing when she ran from the building.

Nancy turned to the Red Cross for help. Thanks to your generous donations, she received safe, warm shelter and food, clothes, and the assistance she needed to put her life back together.

- Now that tells a story! Sure, this story is about “disaster relief” and “emergency response,” as the mission statement says, but it’s much more compelling than telling a donor, “Last month we helped X number of families recover from local disasters.”
- Find the real-life stories of those your agency helps and tell those stories over and over again.
- Be dramatic and help people see the results of your work and their dollars.
MISTAKE 3:
Confusing features with benefits
• Your agency solves problems; talk about the problems you solve, not the way you solve them.
• Features are what your agency does. Benefits are the solutions your agency provides.
• Benefits motivate donors; features do not.
• People do not donate to support features; they donate to solve problems.

- When you buy a leash for your dog, you’re not buying nylon rope and a metal hook, or the fabrication blueprints. You’re buying control of your dog to ensure safety. The leash is the solution to your canine-safety problem.
- When you buy a telephone you’re buying the ability to speak with a loved one. How that message is transmitted is much less important.
- Show the results of your work by talking about benefits. Avoid talking about the features, or the way you got those results.

TALK BENEFITS, NOT FEATURES
The programs that Western Education Foundation donors supported in 2009 provide a positive influence and help students overcome challenges at every stage of their education, from elementary school to college and beyond. They give students the skills, support and confidence they need to succeed throughout their lives.

MISTAKE 4:
Thinking that “everyone” is your audience
• The way to conserve a small marketing budget is to target your message to the people most likely to respond.
• One-size-fits-all communication materials aren’t as effective as messages tailored for a specific group.

- If budgets allow, separate your donors into categories and develop special communications materials for each group.
- Don’t waste your limited budget sending marketing and fundraising materials to people who have never shown an interest in your agency’s work. Just because everyone SHOULD care—that, say, you help at-risk kids avoid trouble by giving them a wholesome place to go after school—doesn’t mean they DO care. Target your messages to people pre-disposed to care about your mission.
MISTAKE 5:
Confusing your brand with your logo or your mission

Your logo is not your brand.
A logo is a visual representation of your agency. It’s your name and any graphic that appears with the name.

Your mission is not your brand.
Your mission is what you do, for whom, and how.

• Brand is one of the most confusing concepts for nonprofit organizations (and lots of for-profit companies!) to grasp.
• McDonald’s is a company with a strong brand. The name “McDonald’s” usually appears with the Golden Arches graphic, and together those two elements form the McDonald’s logo.
• But the logo is just an image. If you had never seen, heard about, or visited a McDonald’s, the logo would mean nothing to you. It’s only after some experience (receiving messages and/or interacting with a McDonald’s restaurant) that you would come to think of McDonald’s in a particular way. What the marketers at McDonald’s want their brand to stand for in your mind are things like “fun,” “family,” and “good value.”

So, what is brand?
Brand is just another word for “reputation.” It’s what you want to stand for.
• Decide what your agency needs to be in order to fulfill its mission, appeal to donors, and stand out against any organizations doing similar work (your “competition”).
• Consistency, consistency, consistency.

• Every organization, service, product, etc. has a brand.
• Repeating the attributes of your brand with words, action, and images will bring it to life. For example, if you want to be known as “grassroots” and “financially efficient,” don’t publish a glossy annual report (even if the cost was donated) and fill it with photos of wealthy board members attending your black tie gala. Look for ways to reinforce “grassroots” and “financially efficient” at every opportunity, and soon you will be known that way.

Why care about your brand?
A strong brand:
• Creates an affinity for your agency among your target audience
• Ensures loyalty
• Minimizes competitive threats
• Delivers valuable benefits to your audience: confidence, risk-reduction, simple decision-making, time savings
• Enhances the self-image of those who associate with it

• As long as you’re going to have a reputation anyway, why not make it a strong one that will make it irresistible for donors to give to your agency?
• A known and trusted brand makes it easy for the donor to say, “Yes, I will give!”

• A strong brand will help your agency survive negative press or public mistakes.
MISTAKE 6:
Thinking that you can’t afford market research

• Some information is better than none.
• There are two useful approaches to research: qualitative and quantitative.
• Qualitative analysis looks in-depth at the quality of opinions. Examples: one-on-one interviews, focus groups.
• Quantitative analysis looks at a larger quantity of information. Examples: telephone surveys, email questionnaires.

Research on the cheap:

• Conduct in-depth interviews with key donors.
• Use other groups’ research and experience.
• Have volunteers conduct focus groups for you. Ask them to invite 12-14 people to participate (they’ll probably end up with 8-10). Arrange to serve the participants dinner, tape the conversation, and keep all information confidential (ask them to do the same).
• Conduct phone surveys with sample donors (10 minutes, max, and do not solicit them during the survey!).
• Add a survey to your newsletter, annual report, or website. List the top 5 questions you’d like answered (in addition to updated contact information) and make responding easy.
• Offer a modest prize for the randomly drawn completed survey.

MISTAKE 7:
Thinking of your home page as a final destination rather than as a starting point

• Make it easy for people to find the places they want to go—and where you want them to go. Highlight key destinations on your site, like “giving” and “volunteering.”
• Choose navigational words that see the site from your visitor’s point of view.
• Apply for a Google Grant to get free search advertising.

• Put yourself in your visitors’ shoes. What are they looking for and how can you make it easy for them?
• Conduct usability tests to determine what works and what doesn’t.
• Keep sentences short and use bullets. Web visitors skim when they read.
• Sign up for Google Analytics to monitor where people go on your site.
MISTAKE 8: Using boring photos

Show:
• Photos of the people your group helps
• Close-ups and faces
• Action photos

Don’t show:
• Posed group photos
• Donors giving checks
• Speakers standing at a podium
• Fancy benefit balls and dinners.

• Photos (in your newsletter, Web pages, etc.) don’t have to be literal depictions of your agency at work.
• Pictures of your board chair accepting a check from a donor aren’t compelling.
• Don’t be pressured by politics! There are ways to recognize donors, volunteers, and board members without featuring them in your photos.

• Remember, your communication should focus on the benefits of your work, so show the difference you make through the photos you feature.
MISTAKE 9:  
Thinking that people read your newsletter to learn what’s going on inside your agency

• Donors want to see proof that their donations are making a difference out in the world.
• Show WHO was helped and WHY it made a difference.
• Don’t waste newsletter space with details about program administration.

• Newsletters are for motivating donors to continue supporting you.
• Donors (and volunteers, and collaborators) want to know that their support makes a difference.
• Announcing board retreats, staff policy changes, and other administrative issues is simply not interesting; it doesn’t encourage continued support.
• Tell the stories of those you helped and how your agency made a real difference.
• Donors will never tire of reading about your programs and how they help people. Remember, they don’t live with it every day, as you do.

How you spent donor money is only interesting if you translate that expenditure into mission-related results.

• NO: “We invested $500,000 in new computer software.”
• BETTER: “Our new computer software means our phone volunteers can provide instant referrals to clients in need.”
• YES: “Mary Jones was given the name and address of a shelter for battered women the moment she dialed our phones last week, thanks to our new software.”

MISTAKE 10:  
Thinking that your annual report is just a financial reporting tool

Your annual report is also:

• A chance to tell the story of the people you help
• An opportunity to ask for what you need—be sure to include a giving mechanism.

• Follow the rules of good newsletter creation with your annual report.
• Yes, you can and should report detailed financial information in your annual report if you choose to design and print one, but the annual report should really be about the results you achieved, the problems your agency solved, and the people you helped with donor dollars and other resources.

• Consider the annual report another legitimate opportunity to describe your services and why they are important—benefits, versus features.
• Ask for donations directly and include an envelope or other giving mechanism so readers get the message and take action.

BONUS MISTAKE!  
Thinking that social media is free

• Maintaining a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube requires dedicated staff time.
• Social media isn’t one-way. You have to listen, respond, and participate in the conversation.
• Social media helps raise awareness and deepen your relationships, but it’s unlikely to raise large amounts of money.
Glossary

**Benefits** — the tangible impact made through your programs and the reason a donor will give to your agency. Benefits are solutions to problems.

**Brand** — your reputation. The set of feelings, emotions, and associations people have when thinking of your organization. A good brand distinguishes your organization from all the others and creates donor loyalty. Brand doesn’t exist on paper; it exists only in the minds of your audience members.

**Brand Position** — the perception or idea your target audience has about your organization compared to what they think of your competitors. Brand position is often aspirational, something your agency is striving toward.

**Communications** — anything your agency does that intentionally or unintentionally shares information with your target audience about your agency.

**Competitor** — any organization donors perceive as having a mission similar to that of your agency.

**Competitive Advantage** — something your agency does better than other agencies with similar missions.

**Features** — the set of attributes your agency, products, or services have—often confused with benefits.

**Logo** — the graphic representation of your agency that includes the organization name in a special typeface. It may also include a graphic image in a consistent color palette.

**Marketing** — the process or technique of promoting, selling, and distributing a product or service. For nonprofit marketers, the product or service is often distributed to a different audience (service recipients/clients) than those who pay for it (donors).

**Public Relations/Media Relations** — the practice of enlisting the help of news media to communicate with the public about your agency.

**Qualitative Research (think “quality”)** — information gathered through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, etc., that provides deep insight into target audience perceptions. Qualitative research data are not scientific in nature or statistically valid; they’re often more useful for forming or testing hypotheses.

**Quantitative Research (think “quantity”)** — information gathered through such activities as written, web or telephone surveys that provides statistically valid and projectionable results. Reliable quantitative research requires a significant sampling pool and uniform questioning of all respondents.

**Target Audience** — the universe of potential donors to your organization, selected for their affinity for your mission.

**Value** — the benefit donors receive when contributing to your organization, relative to the amount donated.

Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofits.

We believe that nonprofits, foundations, and independent schools only reach their highest potential if people understand the importance of their work—not just what they do, but why it matters.

Every day we partner with clients like San Francisco Opera, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, and the Denver Art Museum to help them determine the brand—or reputation—for which they want to be known. Then we help them bring that brand to life through key messages, logo design, web design, and more. As a result, our clients successfully raise more money and attract the support they need to reach their goals.

Have a question? We’d love to hear from you. Write to Jennie Winton at jennie@mission-minded.com, or give Jennie a call at 415.990.9360.