

# 10 Nonprofit Communications Mistakes How to Avoid Them

## INTRODUCTION

More than a few nonprofit professionals are 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—and they're right. We've also seen seasoned communications professionals make these ten mistakes (and sometimes even catch ourselves making them).

If you're a fundraiser, you're already a communications pro! Because you know how to be clear and direct as you try to get people to act (most likely to give money to support your mission). You're already successfully communicating one-on-one with your donors, and this guide will help you learn to be just as effective in your communications to larger audiences. Or if you work in education, school admissions, volunteer recruitment, or any other role requiring you to convince people to choose you, read on.

This list identifies some of the most common communications mistakes made by nonprofits and outlines solutions so you can avoid them. Don't be embarrassed if you've made them—you're not alone. And don't feel frustrated with colleagues who may be making them at your organization right now; just pass along this helpful summary to anyone who might benefit from it.

## “Our mission statement says it all.”

### Mistake 1: Confusing Brand with Mission

Your mission statement is an important factual statement about what you do and your purpose is an organization, but it's not a particularly provocative one about why anyone should care. Mission statements are accurate, but they don't usually elicit emotion. And emotions are what drive donors to give.

Your organization needs both: a clear statement of its purpose **and** a clear statement of how it wants to be perceived in the world.

Think of brand as a synonym for reputation. It's the sum of the thoughts and feelings that come to mind when someone thinks about your organization. All organizations have a reputation. What are you doing to craft yours?

Consider Apple. We've asked thousands of people what comes to mind when they think of this iconic brand. Despite the complexity of its various products, almost everyone responds with the same ideas: innovation, great design, and ease of use. Can your brand be expressed with such simplicity?

## “Our logo is our brand.”

### Mistake 2: Confusing Brand with Your Name, Logo, or Tagline

Your logo is not your brand. Your logo is a visual icon that represents a larger idea.

Over time, we come to recognize brands by the elements we associate with them: their names, their color schemes, their logos, and their actions. But a logo doesn't define a brand; it is simply one of the signals used to bring the brand to life.

Brands are defined by what makes them unique, what their personality attributes are, and the inherent promise of an experience yet to come.

At Mission Minded, we're brand strategists who know that great brands are built over time. A powerful brand is more than a pretty logo, an evocative name, or a pithy tagline. Every single signal you send—including how you look, how you sound, how you act, and what you do—helps create the brand you'll have in the minds of those you want to attract.

## “We want everyone to know about our work.”

### Mistake 3: Thinking That “Everyone” Is Your Audience

Your audience is made up of various groups of people likely to care about your mission and your work. Though everyone *should* care about what you do, not everyone will. Some people will be more apt to align with you than others. So choose your audiences carefully, focusing on those without whom you cannot fulfill your mission.

It's not enough, though, to define your audiences in demographic terms, like “men ages 18–25.” Rather, you need to bring them to life by developing character personas that help you create communications that will resonate authentically with them. What matters to each persona? What motivates them? Take the time to answer those questions and your communications will be spot-on.

Some questions you can ask to create better personas include:

- What are their names, ages, genders, ethnicities, occupations, family details?
- What are their interests, habits, hobbies?
- Who influences them?
- Where do they go for information?
- What do they care about?
- What keeps them up at night?
- How do they dress?
- What do they love about your organization?

## “Communication is our goal.”

### Mistake 4: Marketing for Marketing's Sake

Marketing communications are strategic efforts by your organization to help you achieve a larger goal. If your goals are simply to increase awareness, build knowledge, or receive a high number of views, you need to think bigger. Your marketing should try to accomplish a truly measurable goal that helps your organization move toward it, like an increase in volunteers or donations or a change in policy or attitudes.

One way to make sure that your communications are properly focused is to write a call to action. What are you asking people to do? Does it help your organization succeed? If so, you're on the right track.

Compare these two options:

*Did you know that The National Care Group supports over 40,000 children every day?* (Builds awareness, but there's no call to action.)

*Shane needs more than a meal; he needs a mentor. **Become a National Care mentor now.*** (Offers a specific call to action in support of a larger organizational need.)

## “Let me tell you about our programs and services instead of why we do what we do.”

### Mistake 5: Talking About the “How” Instead of the “Why”

Many organizations are most comfortable talking about how they do their work. After all, they've worked hard to develop innovative solutions to complex problems and they're rightfully proud of what they've done. But for people to appreciate your efforts, they need context. This means that you talk about “how” before you talk about “why.”

Flip your usual script, and talk about the challenges you address first and the way you solve them last. This will engage people emotionally and spur them to act. Then, once you've activated their emotions, you can help them see the wisdom of your approach.

Similarly, don't assume that your audiences know everything about you. Just because someone has donated to your organization does not mean that they fully understand why your work is important and what you do. Take every opportunity to give the whole story about the challenges your organization addresses.

## “Donors get excited about the details of our work.”

### Mistake 6: Confusing Features with Benefits

Consider an organization that tells you they have forty volunteers at eight sites delivering food to 1,000 people every week. Maybe this aspect of their program is interesting, but it's not nearly as compelling as this: “Because our volunteers meet people where they are, we're better at connecting with communities and making sure that fewer children go to bed hungry.”

The first example only shares features of the work. The second demonstrates the benefits. Link your features to a benefit, and you'll link more people to your organization's great work.

## “Group photos are good because we can show everyone!”

### Mistake 7: Using Boring Photographs

If a picture is worth a thousand words, what are your photos saying about you? Do they show engagement, emotion, and action, or are they flat, boring, and lifeless? If your photo isn't telling a story about your impact, it's not helping you.

When choosing photos, less is more. Focus on faces, tell a single story with your photo, and make sure you're bringing your brand to life with the one you choose.

“83% of donors really want to hear about this piece of data.”

### **Mistake 8: Sharing Statistics Instead of Stories**

While data plays an important role in helping you evaluate the efficacy of your work, it doesn't help your most important audiences feel connected to what you do. People forget data points, but they're much more likely to remember and repeat narratives.

Leave the data for your program evaluations, and fill your communications with stories of how you bring your mission to life every day. Whoever said “A pie chart never made anyone march on Washington.” had it right. Replace your pie charts, graphs, and statistics with stories filled with vivid imagery.

“We updated our website two years ago. It's fine.”

### **Mistake 9: Thinking of Your Website as a Brochure, Instead of a Point of Engagement**

Great websites lead visitors to act. They don't just help people find information, they help people *do* something.

Unlike print, websites aren't static. You should constantly evaluate and re-evaluate what's working and what isn't. Update content that isn't leading people to take action, and remove unnecessary features. Focus on how you'd want to engage people in real life, and then provide them with an interactive experience that brings to life the best of who you are and what you do.

“I want this annual report to look totally different from anything else we've ever done.”

### **Mistake 10: Missing the Opportunity to Reinforce Your Visual Identity**

Great brands are built on consistent visual identities. You want your organization's materials to show up like a familiar friend. An organization whose identity changes with every piece of communication sends the message that they are inconsistent. This undermines trust.

While certain communications pieces can provide extra opportunities to shine, everything you put out should be based on the same visual standards.

## **Learn More**

Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofit organizations.

We believe that a brand that sets you apart is essential to a nonprofit's success. Every day we guide nonprofits to uncover the big, bold idea that will attract more people to their work. Because in today's world, a worthy mission is not enough. You've got to communicate what makes you unique at every opportunity.

Our clients successfully raise more money and attract the support they need to achieve their goals. To find out how Mission Minded can help your organization, call us today at 415-990-9360.