

MARKETING GUIDE

10 Nonprofit Communications Mistakes How to Avoid Them

INTRODUCTION

More than a few nonprofit professionals find themselves 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 10 Mistakes (and even sometimes have to catch ourselves before 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 take action (likely, giving 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. And, 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 communication mistakes made by nonprofits and outlines solutions so you can 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 organization right now; just pass this helpful summary along 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 is not a particularly provocative statement about why anyone should care. Mission statements are factual, 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's brand. We've asked thousands of people what comes to mind when they think of the iconic company. 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 associated with them: their names, their color palette, their logos, and their actions. But logos don't define the brand; they are 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—creates 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* care. Some people will be more prone to associating with you than others. Therefore, your audiences must be prioritized.

It's not enough, though, to define your audiences in demographic terms like “men ages 18–25.” Rather, bring them to life by developing character personas that help you create communications that will authentically resonate 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, and pastimes?
- 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 a strategic effort on the part of your organization that help you achieve a larger goal. If you find that your goal is to increase awareness, build knowledge, or receive a high number of views, you're not thinking expansively enough about your goal. Your marketing should try to accomplish a truly measurable goal that helps your organization achieve its mission: an increase in volunteers, growth in donations, a change in policy, or a change in attitudes.

One way to make sure that your communications are properly focused is to begin by writing your 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. They're rightfully proud of what they've done. But in order for people to appreciate your efforts, they need context. This means that before you talk about “how,” you talk about “why.”

Flip your usual script on its head, and talk about the challenges you address first and the way you solve them last. Doing so will engage people emotionally and spur them to action. 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 have a full understanding why your work is important and what you do. Take every opportunity to give the full 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 40 volunteers at 8 sites delivering food to 1000 people every week. Maybe this aspect of their program is interesting, but it's not nearly as compelling as the organization that explains, “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 photos

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, 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 photo 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 us evaluate the efficacy of our work, it doesn't help our most important audiences feel connected to what we do. People forget data points, but they're much more likely to remember and repeat narratives.

Leave the data for your program evaluation, and fill your communications with the stories of how you bring your mission to life every day. Stories are more memorable, and more interesting.

“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 their visitors to take action. They don't just help people find information, they help people DO something.

Unlike print, the web isn'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 the features that aren't necessary. Focus on how you'd want to engage people in real life, and then provide them with an interactive experience that brings the best of who you are and what you do to life.

“I want this annual report to look totally different than 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 communication piece sends the message that they are inconsistent. This undermines trust.

While certain communication pieces can provide extra opportunities to shine, everything you put out should be built from the same visual standards.

Learn More

Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofits, independent schools, and foundations. We believe you only reach your highest potential if people understand the importance of your work—not just what you 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 achieve their goals. To find out how Mission Minded can help your organization, call us today at 415.990.9360.