

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR NONPROFITS

*Introducing
a series of
media guides*

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Benton Foundation
and Center for Strategic
Communications

Edited by
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and Karen Menichelli

Talk Radio

Voice Programs

Op-Eds

Using Video

Media Advocacy

Cable Access

Electronic Networking

Strategic Media

Strategic Communications for Nonprofits is a set of nine guides to media and communications techniques and technologies for nonprofit leaders. Containing over 400 pages of case studies, how-to's, and strategic approaches, the guides reflect the successful experiences of many nonprofit organizations.

Everyone appreciates the potential of media to inform, motivate, organize, and empower. But, for many nonprofits, the media marketplace, rich in opportunities, can also be daunting — broad, unfamiliar, expensive — requiring sophistication as well as courage to enter. Too often, we as nonprofit leaders see media as apart from us, acting on us, available only to a fortunate and powerful few.

This series of guides attempts to lower the barriers to participation in the media marketplace. It introduces a toolbox of techniques and technologies that will extend our reach, amplify our voices, express our outrage or support, help us recruit and persuade. Through nontechnical exposition and case studies, it gives nonprofit leaders a sense of the range of choices and payoffs for their organizations and the causes they pursue.

But, this series does more than extol the assets of the media toolbox. Taken as a whole, it encourages an understanding of the strategic role of communications techniques and technologies — knowing how and when to use them, how to play them off one another, how to combine them into a comprehensive media plan.

The purpose of this introductory volume is to provide the readers of the series with a context for incorporating appropriate media and technology into the work of their nonprofit organizations. And the series as a whole provides an introduction to the groups that can help them in that process.

The guides have been developed in collaboration with the growing industry of nonprofit media technical assistance providers. These providers offer low-cost education and training, objective consultation on existing techniques and products, and handholding support for the first steps into media and technology. With the series in hand, nonprofits still need to identify the best tools for their programmatic needs, acquire and refine skills in using these tools, and assess their own capabilities. As a community, such providers are the critical next step for nonprofits in their education about media.

The Benton Foundation and the Center for Strategic Communications have collaborated to publish and promote this series, with the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Ford Foundation. Our shared goal has been encouraging the use of the techniques and technologies of communications to advance the democratic process and to gain an effective voice for social change.

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Appropriate Media for Social Change

By Larry Kirkman

Most nonprofit leaders recognize the need for sophisticated communications tools and media skills to become effective agents of social change — to inform and mobilize the public, shape the policy agenda, and strengthen their organizations. Traditional channels of communications — personal contacts, conferences, reports, newsletters, press releases — are no longer enough. However, to many leaders, the investment in learning new techniques and in using technologies seems uncontrollably expensive and unmanageable.

In addition, many nonprofit leaders see media as the problem not the solution. They feel assaulted by the electronic environment and regard the media as manipulative, monolithic, and impenetrable. It appears that we have more channels, but less meaningful communication. Although two-thirds of our homes have now been wired for cable, and even more have a VCR, the programming is as bottom-line driven as ever. The center of our communities has become a shopping mall where you can't hold a meeting or hand out a leaflet. Every public event is sponsored by products, and advertising relentlessly promotes a culture in which the solution to all our problems is the consumption of something.

This spectre of the marketplace often deflates our anticipation for the powerful use of media in the public interest. It is more comforting to cling to what's familiar, the good old things, than to take on the bad new things — media techniques tainted by commercialism and communications technologies that seem to be delivered before society knows what they are good for. To help overcome this paralysis, the Benton Foundation and the Center for Strategic Communications have collaborated to publish this series of guides for nonprofit leaders.

Each volume of Strategic Communications for Nonprofits reflects the successful experience of nonprofits in using media techniques and communications technologies to advance their work. The authors examine new skills and diverse tools that have become essential for nonprofit organizations — whether for placing issues on the mass media agenda, getting people to attend an event, fundraising, recruiting volunteers, or addressing government policies.

This series illustrates a wide range of options and investment thresholds, including some low-cost, low-tech strategies that can be a wedge into the media marketplace. Together, these bulletins invite even the most resource-stressed nonprofits to reflect on the assumptions they bring to their role as communicators.

An Introduction to a Series of Media Guides

Nonprofits' view of social change possibilities, and of their own leadership potential, can be expanded by a more intense and coordinated involvement with media and communications experts in the process of program development. But, to make media and communications a priority, nonprofits need to reorient staff and budgets.

At the same time, funders of social change efforts need to require — and support — a strategic media plan for their grantees. Many foundations appreciate the value of news coverage, the opportunities of video, and the extensive applications of computers. Many have funded media and communications initiatives, from purchasing fax machines to launching public education campaigns. But support for the crucial planning that coordinates the various elements of strategic communications has too often been missing. It is the integration of phone and computer communications with a skillful use of mass media and targeted media production that can enlarge the role of nonprofits.

New phone and computer communications networks make it possible for people to become activists, to create organizations, and to forge coalitions. The public can be more than the object of an ad, the consumer of a news story, or the respondent to a direct mail pitch. For nonprofits, that means responding to constituents and inviting their participation in new ways.

More and more, we are asking: How can we improve the processes of communications and not just the products? How do we involve staff, volunteers or members? How do we arouse curiosity? What motivates people to speak for themselves? How do we fulfill expectations for flexibility and change?

This emphasis on communications process does not mean that media products are irrelevant. Or, that one-way educational channels are not appropriate. On the contrary, nonprofits need to give more respect to the value of professional message shaping and production. Creative, skilled media production and carefully formulated, research-based messages remain a key component of any campaign, but today they succeed in the context of new forms of interaction.

But, What Is Appropriate Media?

Asking that question should acknowledge a continuum of media initiatives that ranges from influencing prime-time TV or setting up a telephone information service to desktop publishing a brochure or showing a video at a meeting. It means asking: What is the most effective way to reach my audience and to activate them?

Each medium has its own strengths. Each can carry a version of an organization's message to different audiences at different stages of development. Matching the appropriate communications to specific goals should be an explicit task for any organization's planning process. For example, younger people who toss a direct mail piece into the trash without reading it might respond to a TV ad that asks them to phone an action line.

A nonprofit leader's aversion to the simplifications of TV and video formats or advertising techniques should not be an excuse for rejecting these vehicles. In combination with more substantive, traditional print communications and meetings, these media serve an important purpose.

Videos, for example, can educate and motivate activists to become spokespersons, by offering a model of how to talk about a complex subject. Uniting sites across the country through video teleconferencing can launch a campaign and give local leaders the experience of a national movement. Paid advertising can challenge politicians and stimulate debate.

Readers of this series will be encouraged to appreciate the interplay of different tools and skills. For example, an op-ed or talk radio strategy can be organized and extended through fax and computer. A provocative video has a greater impact when it is connected to a 900 number telephone service, which can offer a menu of opportunities for action, such as sending a message to policymakers, participating in a survey, volunteering time, or contributing dollars.

A state-based op-ed strategy can be a first step for any organization. Low-end video documentation can be offered to news programs or used to bolster testimony at hearings. Talk radio can provide a forum to introduce new leadership for highly charged issues, proving that an organization can take on the toughest opposition.

Recent advances in desktop video promise to make the production of videos as accessible and cost-effective as desktop publishing has become. For fundraising, an organization might craft a video for a single funder; for advocacy, a single policy leader. On the other hand, a video can now be used, almost as casually as a leaflet, to leave behind during door-to-door canvassing, or as a membership premium.

Cable access channels and production facilities are a valuable community resource that can be used by nonprofits in many ways, from announcing events to showcasing independent documentaries. Public access relies on recruited viewing, "appointment television," to bring an audience to a program. Access programs do not have to be slavish to broadcast production values. They can set appropriate expectations for their audiences and take many formats, from report or talk show to public meeting or educational workshop.

At the other end of the scale, mass entertainment media — broadcast programming and feature films — also provide opportunities for nonprofits. Many organizations offer themselves as a resource for scriptwriters, supplying real life characters, story lines, background, and facts. They also help producers appreciate how a policy issue can inform and serve their films and television programs. Tune-in promotion, supported by collateral print materials, or group viewing followed by activist-led discussions, can inform and enlarge programming events. Nonprofits also can offer phone numbers on-air for follow-up information and volunteering, or they can use the occasion of the show as a hook for news coverage and op-eds.

For those organizations that are skeptical, cautious, or lack financial resources, there are options that can provide a bridge to more sophisticated applications. Computer networks, for example, face a daunting learning curve, a reluctance to invest in the high set-up costs, and the staff-intensive work of providing a regular reason for a network of neophytes to log on. But, an easily established phone network can provide updates and alerts, a bulletin board, and other

Low-cost Low-tech Media Options

response mechanisms. A phone network can set the stage for a computer network by demonstrating a need and creating a habit that begs for enlarged capabilities to share work and information.

The first step for nonprofits in selecting appropriate media is defining the problem to be solved. Nonprofit leaders often call a media service provider with a solution firmly in mind, saying I need an ad in the *New York Times*, I need a PSA on TV, or I need a video. But, there is no easy solution or set of rules to follow. Each effort deserves a review of the goals of the campaign measured against the resources of the organization, in the context of the media marketplace, examining the full range of communications options.

Three Pillars of Strategic Communications

The volumes in this series can be roughly divided into three pillars of strategic communications that every organization should incorporate into their planning process: media advocacy, networking, and media production and distribution.

Media Advocacy engages mass media with the goal of reordering public policy priorities. It uses a set of techniques drawn from public relations, political campaigns, advertising, investigative journalism, and grassroots lobbying. Through media advocacy, nonprofits can reframe issues and capture the symbols of public debate. Securing access to the mass media requires the skills and flexibility of a political campaign that can respond to attack and make the most of unplanned opportunities.

Networking can broaden, inform, and involve the activist and membership base of organizations. It promotes the formation of coalitions and provides channels for shared work and planning. Phone and computer networks offer the nonprofit world the means to collaborate in shaping messages, to share information resources, and to connect advocates to the mass media.

Media Production and Distribution empowers nonprofits to bypass mass media gatekeepers. Creative media production can complement access to mass media and make up for the limitations of news coverage. As media producers — of documentaries, advertising spots, audiotext messages or TV and radio forums — nonprofits can tell their own story and explain their issues in media they control. Videocassette distribution, paid advertising, or cable access channels provide nonprofits with the means to make their own case with targeted audiences.

Even sophisticated nonprofits with professional media staff tend to compartmentalize areas that should support each other, such as publications, media relations, membership, and advocacy. The reorganization of commercial media operations suggests the value of a coordinated and comprehensive approach. Advertising agencies are being transformed to provide integrated marketing programs. Creative advertising in mass media is only one tool among many for agencies, which now provide a wide range of services from direct mail to media relations and tie-ins with events and causes. Similarly, the trend in entertainment and news programming is toward multiple uses of product and a sequence of play in various media and distribution systems (magazines, books, on-line computer access, film, TV and video).

Technology Is Not

These commercial practices offer lessons for nonprofits beyond the efficiencies of scale or amortization of investments. In order to cut through the clutter of a fragmented media marketplace, nonprofits have to layer and sequence their messages. They must explore diverse formats and a variety of outlets in order to reach decisionmakers, activists, potential members, and the public.

From speeches to flyers, the bulk of information dispensed by nonprofits for public education and advocacy are one-way messages distributed without accountability. What seems like an endless and often redundant clutter of literature is dumped on the desks of activists without knowing if it is useful or even read. But materials and information can be made accessible “on demand,” by integrating libraries, databases, publications, and public outreach initiatives with phone, fax, and computer networks. Organizations can offer activists and the public the knowledge they need when they need it, as participants in a campaign or for on-going work.

Interactive communications suggests new roles for national organizations. It could mean offering position papers in a draft form on an electronic mail network and incorporating feedback into the final document. It might mean inviting the public to propose issue priorities and define their information needs through a phone “agenda line.”

A new media audience can be found between the individualized consumer and the institutional marketplace. It is an audience of participants who will be reached largely in their homes through phone and video. With this audience in mind — motivated, educated, empowered — we can imagine a new popular political arena, enhanced by media techniques and technologies that make citizenship possible.

This nine-volume package asserts the necessity for coordinated and consistent investment in media and communications. The authors present lessons that have been rarely captured or shared. They provide some insights and guidelines, but they admittedly have only scratched the surface. Each sketch begs for more documentation and analysis. Each opportunity demands further examination and more sophisticated strategic planning.

Collectively, these new uses of media techniques and technologies expand our ability to deliver on the goals of traditional forms of communication for which we are so nostalgic: the town-hall meeting, the door-to-door canvass, the report that someone studies, the leaflet that leads to action. While print materials and face-to-face meetings remain central to any public education and organizing efforts, their usefulness must be evaluated as part of a communications strategy and combined with other options that have a greater reach and facilitate greater participation.

A New Audience for Interactive Media

Strategic Communications