

Strategic Communications for Nonprofits

A Step-by-Step Guide to
Working with the Media

Second Edition

**Kathy Bonk, Emily Tynes,
Henry Griggs, and Phil Sparks**

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Foreword

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IN THIS GUIDE, the Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC) provides the compass points and tools that nonprofits need to strengthen their organizations and become innovative agents of social change—to engage, inform, and persuade their targeted public audiences and to recruit, involve, motivate, and equip their activist constituencies. CCMC’s knowledge is drawn from twenty years of experience advising organizations on their media operations and helping them conduct public education and issue advocacy campaigns. Since 1988, under the sustained leadership of Kathy Bonk, Phil Sparks, and Emily Tynes, CCMC has worked collaboratively with hundreds of nonprofits and scores of coalitions, creating a laboratory of professional practice that has explored the full range of strategic options and tested the payoffs for organizations and the causes they pursue. Their collective intelligence is distilled into best practices, vivid case studies, and proven methods for planning and evaluation. It’s more than a menu of techniques—it’s about how and when to use them, how to play them off one another, how to combine them into a comprehensive media plan. It’s about the integration of sophisticated message research, strategic media relations, powerful media products, targeted advertising, and online communications.

There are wide gaps at the intersection of media, technology, and democracy that nonprofits can fill—in policy debates, issue advocacy, and public education. When politicians fail to address the issues that matter, when news companies cut back on investigative reporting, when media barrage the public with fearsome and unintelligible images of catastrophe, making their audiences feel helpless and hopeless, nonprofits can provide the evidence and testimony that drive public engagement and promote solutions to social problems. They can speak up and talk back to the powers that be—whether

defending human rights abroad and civil liberties at home, closing the gap between economic haves and have-nots, framing global warming, or denying a call to war.

The very first edition of this book, *Strategic Media*, was published in 1992 by the Benton Foundation as part of a package of nine media and technology guides, with the title *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*. I was director of the foundation and coeditor, with Karen Menichelli, of the series. We were on a mission—calling on nonprofit leaders to adopt an integrated and comprehensive approach to media. In the fragmented and cluttered media marketplace, many nonprofit leaders felt overwhelmed and demoralized. This series was a spirited response to the cynics who saw the media as a problem—not a solution.

The Benton series asserted the necessity for coordinated and consistent investment in communications. Major private foundations, including Ford, MacArthur, Carnegie Corporation, and Robert Wood Johnson, bought into the cause and distributed the set of guides to thousands of their grantees.

In 1999, CCMC picked up the banner of the Benton series with the next edition of this book, reviving the title *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*. And now in this edition, it has restated and refreshed their lessons.

It's not news that nonprofits need to rethink their communications strategies for an Internet generation that has abandoned newspapers and national television networks and is tapping into multiple sources of information on demand and using and producing blogs. The digital generation wants trusted sources *and* attitude. It wants to talk back. It wants to have an ongoing conversation that blurs the traditional roles of reader and reporter, professional and amateur, personal and political, volunteer and voter.

The onslaught of the digital age has put us all on a new footing. As the media environment buckles and shifts, as new forms of technology emerge and mutate, the business, ethical, and creative challenges in communications are formidable. How do we connect to audiences who feel there is too much to take in, too much to do anything about, when everyone can have a channel and the tools of production are cheap and relatively easy to use?

Nonprofit organizations have valuable assets to deploy in the digital environment—knowledge and content, trust and brand. They are becoming news and information providers, linking directly to their audiences, building social networks, and partnering with media companies.

There is no easy road map for the emergence of a vigorous and inclusive public culture, but we need to anticipate it and can help shape it by working

across professional disciplines with media strategists, creative storytellers, and investigative journalists. Not doing so is a failure of nerve and imagination. And we have to ask the toughest questions about truth and transparency, credibility and conscience: Who has a voice? Who has access to the social, political, civil rights, and economic benefits of an information society? How do we adapt the standards and values of journalism to the creation of an enabling communications environment that we want to work and live in?

Nonprofits and their funders have a significant role to play. If we continue to get smart together, to reinvent our nonprofit organizations as communicating organizations, each of us, in our own way, can help determine the shape of things to come.