

Need for Communication Strategy

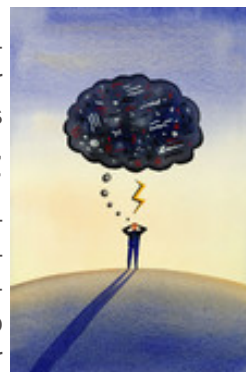
A case for NGOs

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For decades, numerous nonprofit organizations followed the dictum: “Do good, maintain a low profile and others will provide.” “Others” often included clients, public supporters, charitable donors, and even the organization’s staff and board members. It was viewed as self-serving, even taboo, for nonprofit organizations to allocate time and resources to promote understanding, goodwill, and support for their mission and objectives. However, things are changing around...

The Indian head of one of the largest INGO (name withheld), one morning found that the press had attributed the death of four children to the Vitamin A program being run by the INGO. This could have a ripple effect starting from donors being wary of providing funds, the employees on the ground facing hostile beneficiaries to political parties driving political mileage out of the incidence. The head was at a loss on how to respond to the situation as there was no agency, standards or precedence to handle such a crisis. Use of a PR agency, though most logical, was not part of the sanctions provided by the head office. The head spent 10 days to obtain permissions and identify an agency before he could take any corrective action. However, by that time the media had a field day making allegations about the program which resulted in the withdrawal of the program from that region in addition to shutting down of the local office.

A crisis is not the only time when the need for communication arises, however at the time of a crisis the need for communication is felt the most. For decades, numerous nonprofit organizations followed the dictum: “Do good, maintain a low profile and others will provide.” “Others” often included clients, public supporters, charitable donors, and even the organization’s staff and board members. It was viewed as self-serving, even taboo, for nonprofit organizations to allocate time and resources to promote understanding, goodwill, and support for their mission and objectives.



However, things are changing around and we are all impacted by the incredibly rapid transformation in traditional social structures, lifestyles and behaviors, by the advances in computer technology, and the globalization of the economy.

Role of Communication for NGOs

Visibility amongst competition for funds

While the sources of funds are getting restricted and diverse, more and more NGOs are seeking funds. With the free movement of people and availability of information, the difference in terms of programming among these NGOs is becoming less and less.



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HIGHLIGHTS

Role of Communication for NGOs

Competition for funds
Building credibility
Changing stereotypes
Winning issues
Reaching out to Internal Audience
Retaining the donor

Long-term commitment to using communication

Visibility is a critical factor which defines the availability of funds for the projects and for the NGOs. The entire fund raising and disbursement for Tsunami relief in December 2004, has proven the need for media to reach out to the audience for funds. While, TV channels such as Star, Zee, Aak Tak or publications like Times of India and India Today were successful in raising funds from the masses, the funds disbursement to the NGOs was dependent on the visibility of the NGOs apart from issues about the nature of their projects and past activities.

During the Mississippi River floods in the early 1990s, many nonprofit directors were complaining about all the media attention being given to the Red Cross. According to Julie Jakopic of the National Association of Community



Action Agencies, "I asked them, 'Did you try to get attention yourselves?' They said, 'We don't spend our money that way.' It really astounded me that here were executive directors trying to raise money who didn't understand the connection between doing media work, getting media attention and bringing in dollars." A Communication plan needs to be a part of the resource plan irrespective of whether the resource strategy is funding, fund raising or fund generation.

Building credibility

Having a communication strategy reinforces the good work done on the field and gives credibility to the NGO's work not only in the eyes of the donors but also in the eyes of the beneficiaries. Beneficiaries look at media coverage as NGO achievement for their cause leading to a stronger bonding with the NGO. It also raises the NGOs reputation with the beneficiaries as not being fly-by-night operators to an organization that understands its issues and provides solutions for these issues.

Changing stereotypes

All of us will remember the TV campaigns in which a famous Bollywood actress walks into an AIDS ward in a hospital and holds an AIDS patient, conveying to the public that AIDS is not spread by touching people. Communication can be used effectively to change the stereotype image of the beneficiaries which has its impact on the larger part of the society and the cause.

Winning issues

For long, lobbying has been a tool used by corporate and industry associations to influence policy matters. The same can be used by NGOs independently or collectively for bringing policy level changes resulting in strengthening their issues. Besides a policy level change, change in the perception and a recognition of the fact that a problem exists is achieved by using effective and planned communication.

We are all impacted by the incredibly rapid transformation in traditional social structures, lifestyles and behaviors, by the advances in computer technology, and the globalization of the economy.

Communication helps to raise money, build credibility, win issues and change debates.

Reaching out to Internal Audience

Reaching out to the staff and beneficiaries, keeping them motivated and ensuring that they have the success stories with them continuously is an important part of a communication plan. It leads to motivated staff and a low turn over rate of the employees.

Retaining the donor

The cost of acquiring a new donor is much higher than retaining a previous one. Additionally, it helps a NGOs strategy to retain the donor and keep adding new ones. With donors becoming more and more demanding about information, having a communication strategy which retains their faith in the NGO and gives them the feeling of “doing good” stands a long way to retaining the donor. This is true for mass donors as well as institutional donors.

Long term commitment to using communication

A NGO should look at the possibility of using communication on a regular basis with a long term commitment as part of its overall strategy. Some of the basic principles to be adhered by an NGO on communication are:

1. Let communication be a part of overall work plan – communication should not be a stand alone activity but a part of the overall plan. Existence of communication experts (internal and external) and involving them at the planning stage is a key to this.
2. Never plan a “hit”, plan a series of hits – ‘out of sight and out of mind’ is an adage which holds its key in communication. A NGO should not look at one off communication but at a series of continuous communication which should be tied together as part of a comprehensive strategy.
3. Think about media before you start any activity or plan – any plan, short or long, should have a media component to it.
4. Keep a focus on internal and external clientele – most NGOs forget to address their existing clientele, beneficiaries and employees as part of the communication plan. All of them should be addressed to in any communication strategy.



Donor retained is equal to the donor added.

A communication strategy should be part of the overall work plan.

Planning a series of ‘hits’ helps to continuously be present in the minds of the audience.

We believe that a communication strategy is critical to the success of a NGO. Creation of a comprehensive communication strategy for at least three years and having an annual communication plan is integral to strategy and planning of any NGO, big or small.

A communication plan is NOT meant for large NGOs alone. Both small and large NGOs need communication plans. A communication plan need not be an expensive proposition, one needs to use ingenuity to develop a communication plan to minimize expenses and maximize return on investments.

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