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4 Myths of Nonprofit Communication That May Be Costing You

By Maryanne Dersch

Some long-held beliefs of nonprofit communicators don't serve nonprofits well and may even be harmful. These myths could be costing you donor dollars, and they make the job of nonprofit communicators harder. Here are four beliefs to cast aside – and what to do instead.

Myth 1: Stay neutral at all costs.

Most organizations have a set of beliefs that run through them like a moral spine. But as a communicator, you may hesitate to take a public stand on an issue that challenges those beliefs because you fear controversy. Many nonprofit executives want to be thought leaders yet are hesitant to speak too boldly about issues affecting those they serve.

Reality: Stand tall for your beliefs.

The most effective nonprofits are confident and secure enough to speak up for what they believe. When they do that, they are letting like-minded people know they are working hard to create change.

For example, Children's Rights, a watchdog group, sued the state of Missouri in 2017 for the overuse of psychotropic medications for kids in foster care. Melanie Scheetz, executive director of the Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition in St. Louis, Missouri, spoke out against the lawsuit. She agreed that overuse was a problem but did not believe a lawsuit was the solution.

"It was not a popular opinion," she said, but Scheetz wanted to work with the state's director of children's services instead of fighting him in court. "I have 19 years' experience, and I have been involved in lawsuits, and they take time. I knew we could do more to help kids working within the system we had. I spoke up because it was the right thing to do for the kids we serve."

Myth 2: Share as many successes as possible and minimize failures.

Nonprofits tend to believe that because they accept donor dollars, they cannot make a mistake, let alone fail. Failures can be perceived as poor stewardship of donors' money. So you broadcast successes and keep quiet about efforts that didn't work.

Reality: Share your failures.

When nonprofits share stories of what went wrong, they show donors they are learning to do better. Imagine producing an annual report of failures. Engineers Without Borders in Canada does this. Those are stories worth sharing because you can explain how you are improving.

Myth 3: Keep a polished image.

Nonprofits carefully craft brochures and heavily edit newsletters to project a professional image. That can come across as inauthentic.

Reality: Be genuine and honest.

A colleague of mine who works with donor-advised funds recently said her job was to get past the gloss on the brochure. Donors don't want slick images; they want to see the real organization.

Myth 4: Appeal to as many people as possible.

Nonprofit marketing involves casting a wide net. The presumption: You can't afford to miss one potential donor. But the "spray and pray" approach, spreading lots of messages with the hope that someone will see or hear and respond, is not efficient or effective.

Reality: Don't be afraid to stand out.

The most successful nonprofits are strong in mission, purpose, and message; this helps them attract like-minded donors. When groups take a stand, they galvanize supporters who believe in their work. The ones who criticize? They weren't your people anyway.

Recently the Animal Protective Association of Missouri ran a dog-adoption campaign asking people to "Adopt a Grown-Ass Adult" dog. The effort touted the benefits of older dogs over puppies.

Now I am certain there were a few sweaty brows around the boardroom table on this. Yet the APA understood its audience and created a message that resonated. With intentional irony, the campaign culminated with an event on National Puppy Day that featured "grown-ass" adult beverages along with adult dogs for adoption.

The campaign was a huge success in terms of the number of dogs adopted, dollars raised, and heightened awareness of the benefits of adopting adult dogs.

The number of complaints? Four. All easily managed by explaining that the campaign helped increase the adoption rate.

Galvanize Like-Minded Supporters

The formula for reaching donors is to go for the heart, then the mind, and then the wallet. People won't give to or get involved with an organization unless they connect emotionally. You can't change what is in people's hearts. Your job is to find like-minded people and bring them into your organization. When they are connected to others who share their passions, they become galvanized to the cause.

Maryanne Dersch helps nonprofits create strong brands so they can connect with like-minded donors and raise more money. She is author of Courageous Communication: How Codependence Is Making Your Nonprofit Brand Boring and What to Do About It. She is also the founder of Courageous Change workshops.

This article is part of:

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