

Changing Minds: 4 Ways to Help People See the Good in Nonprofits

As told to Eden Stiffman



Nicholas Ludlum, a senior vice president at Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, specializes in image and reputation- management campaigns

GET SUPPORTERS TO SPREAD THE WORD TO PEOPLE WHO IDENTIFY WITH THEM

How it works: Let's say I am somebody who doesn't have a lot of confidence in the philanthropic community and I see someone else who looks like me and talks like me. And let's say that person used to distrust nonprofits but says, "I took a fresh look and now I examine what a philanthropy did or what the industry is doing, and I changed my mind." That is far more powerful than the industry speaking for itself. Those are the voices that need to be in the media, at events, and on social media.

Real-life examples: After the Gulf oil spill, BP spotlighted the work of BP employees and others working to make it right. That was shown to help restore some of BP's reputation.

We did that with the government of Mexico, which we represented for a number of years during the drug war. The country was starting to be viewed as a failed state. We elevated the voice of tourists from the United States as well as American corporations and business leaders. We got them out there talking about Mexico and why things people were seeing in the news, with all the drug violence, were not an accurate portrayal of Mexico. That led to increased tourism and increased foreign direct investment. The reputation of Mexico really did take a turn for the better.

Why it works: If you see yourself in the person speaking, you're more likely to believe what they're telling you.

Beth Gazley, an associate professor at the Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs who specializes in nonprofit issues



SHOW PEOPLE WHAT NONPROFITS HAVE ALREADY DONE FOR THEM

How it works: There's an exercise I do with my students that I'd do with every member of the public if I could. We take them down a figurative city street and explain how nonprofit activity created the landscape. The church on that corner is a nonprofit. The safe operation of the street lamp over your head, not to mention every other electrical device you can see, was assured by a nonprofit organization in the business of testing for public safety. The accessibility of your sidewalk to a person with a disability was assured by nonprofit advocacy. One out of every 10 people you pass is employed in the nonprofit sector. Two more are volunteering for a charity. The fact that it's Saturday and you're not at work was assured by nonprofit labor unions, which advocated for a 40-hour work week. You stop at your nonprofit credit union's ATM for cash.

Why it works: When people say they don't trust charities, that may be people who don't know enough. They've got a very narrow view of what's happening in the sector, and they have no way of putting it into perspective.

Who does this well and who doesn't: Public-affairs teachers have gotten much better at teaching students about how the nonprofit and governmental sectors intersect. But most of my colleagues in the business school next door, I don't think they have the first idea of how to teach about the nonprofit sector. There's not a lot of education that's going on at the secondary-school level, despite the fact that kids are very active in philanthropic and civic activities.

How to extend the effect even further: Anything that educates legislators and the media about what the charitable sector is good at, and what it really can't accomplish, is good.

Susan McPherson, a communications consultant specializing in corporate responsibility.

'STATE OF THE UNION' REPORTS COULD TOUT WHAT NONPROFITS ACCOMPLISH



How it works: It would be tremendous if charity rating groups came together and, instead of competing, put out a State of the Union about the hundreds of thousands of ways the nonprofit sector enhances our daily lives. There could be an annual conference and an annual report, maybe indexing the number of jobs created, the number of families impacted, the number of homes rebuilt, etc.

Who already does this: Publicly traded companies disclose information under the law. Inevitably, they have become more transparent. Nonprofits don't have any required monthly reporting to the public or to stakeholders.

Why it works: You build trust by sharing. An index across all the different sectors in which nonprofits play an important role could be so powerful, to show average people just how much they are impacted. It would behoove nonprofits to take it on themselves and create an index that they measure as often as they can, whether it's monthly, quarterly, or, at minimum, annually, that is then shared with all of the organization's constituents. Let's take advantage of this transparent world we live in and come out shining.

Tony Foleno, senior vice president for research, planning, and Evaluation at the Advertising Council

COMMUNICATE BETTER WITH DONORS AND DON'T TREAT THEM LIKE AN ATM

How it works: Listen to your prospective donors, those who gave in the past, and others who might not have considered giving. Listen to what they expect of you and what they would like to hear from you. If consortium groups like the Communications Network, Independent Sector, and

Foundation Center can do more to lift up different organizations to train them and inspire them to do a better job in their outreach, we'll all be better for it.

What not to do: Charities need to understand what they're bringing to the table in terms of interaction between the donor and the charity. A part of that is not being incessant with ads asking for money. Donors shouldn't be treated like an ATM.



Why it works: Gaining trust is best done at the individual level. As institutions do a more effective job communicating and proving their impact over all, the perception of the sector will improve. Giving is a highly emotional and personal act, and individuals who give expect to hear something back and understand what their giving is doing.