

10 Nonprofit Buzzwords You'll Hear More of in 2013

By Lucy Bernholz

Philanthropy is well known for its jargon, but a look at the words of the year shows how much numbers and data are influencing the way people in the nonprofit world talk and work.

Here, in ascending order are the 10 words that are becoming ever more a part of the philanthropy conversation.

10. X

In its philanthropic context, X has come to mean “cool,” “community-oriented,” and “open,” as opposed to the meaning in math (where it means multiply or unknown) or in literature, as the spot where treasure lies.

In philanthropy, just think of the X Prize, TEDx, or EdX.

X can also mean eXchange—as in Impact Investment Exchange Asia, which is known as IIX or Nexii, an organization that also focuses on impact investing.

9. MOOCs

The acronym for a massive open online course, or the somewhat bovine sounding name for a class offered through the Internet, usually at no cost to the student.

Classes developed and delivered by college professors are lighting up the airwaves, allowing people anywhere to take classes once open only to enrolled students.

MOOCs have universities and colleges in a fever of disruption. As the Stanford University public-policy scholar Rob Reich notes, MOOCs may send universities down the same path as newspaper publishers.

As the business models shake out and the questions of public purpose get real, MOOCs will force open an important discussion for all nonprofits about “how, for whom, and who pays?”

After religion, education is the biggest area of interest for philanthropic donations—so the question for 2013 is: How will donors get involved in MOOCs?

8. Hackathon

Hackathons are brief and intense events, usually lasting a weekend, in which coders, designers, data geeks, and increasingly artists, nonprofit leaders, philanthropists, and others get together to try to create quick technological solutions to shared social problems.

The geekier hackathons focus on deeply troublesome code problems. The more socially oriented hackathons produce apps and maps and mobile tools for guiding disaster response, job seekers, data seekers, pothole reporters, and others.

Civic Commons, CrisisCommons, Code for America, DataKind, Github, Hacker Helper, Hurricane Hackers, Random Hacks of Kindness, and Tech4Engagement are among the hacking efforts focused on finding solutions to social problems.

7. Fiscal cliff

The combination of automatic budget cuts and tax increases set to take effect on January 2, 2013, has become one of the best-known terms in politics. The phrase describes what our esteemed members of Congress agreed would happen if they couldn't come up with a deficit-cutting plan.

The cliff is a self-imposed, self-exploding deadline of financial decisions that is intended to make politicians work together to avoid it. So far, that hasn't happened.

Philanthropy has a lot riding on the outcome. One of the tax cuts set to expire is the estate tax, so that could cause many wealthy donors to rethink their giving plans. And the charitable deduction could also be limited as part of the negotiations.

Perhaps the most widespread effects, though, could be the spending cuts that would take place immediately if a deal is not made. That could cut off money to many social-service groups and other beneficiaries of government aid.

6. Resilience

This word is quickly replacing sustainability.

In part, that's because Andrew Zolli, executive director of PopTech, and Ann Healey wrote a good book on the topic called *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, giving the word real vitality and application (read it).

Resilience has also become part of the language on climate change because the left and the right find it more suitable than sustainability.

Now people in philanthropy are starting to talk about resilient organizations rather than sustainability strategies. Resilient leaders (and leadership) will be next.

With all the changes affecting nonprofits in the world, and the uncertainty that comes with those changes, focusing on adaptability and bouncing back seems like a good idea. The word might sound like little more than hype, but the idea and capacity are the keys to the evolution and survival of people and organizations.

5. Social-welfare organization

This is the Internal Revenue Service term for groups that are allowed to get involved in politics and therefore can't offer donors a charitable deduction. They are the nonprofits that played a big role in raising and spending money on the 2012 presidential campaign.

Social-welfare groups are classified under Section 501(c)(4) of the tax code, unlike charities, which are governed by Section 501(c)(3).

That role the groups play in politics has a lot of people at charities itching to avoid calling them nonprofits and instead use their formal IRS name.

I don't think this will happen. It's like getting people to stop saying "I'll Google it" when what they mean is "I'll search for it on the Internet."

Don't get me wrong. The distinction matters. C4's and c3's are different beasts. And c4's created mainly to influence political campaigns are different beasts than other c4's, which promote social causes. The rules are different and the practices are different. But to most folks, a nonprofit is a nonprofit.

4. Sense-Making

Sense-making is what you have to do when you are drowning in too much data. And the need for people to make sense of all the numbers is growing more intense as the volume of data easily at our fingertips keeps growing.

3. Data scientist

Data scientists are the people who make sense of data, use graphics to help people visualize them, and reimagine how to use them. Some nonprofits are hiring people with this job title.

2. Flash-mob philanthropy

Just like a "flash mob," in which a crowd of strangers—connected through social media—gather in public to perform a choreographed dance or some other action, people are now organizing flash mobs to raise money or run advocacy campaigns.

Katya Andresen, chief operating officer at Network for Good, notes that at the root of this phenomenon is the rise of the individual activist—or what she calls the change in who is at the center of the cause. It's not nonprofits any longer.

1. Data

Data are now the engines of the most successful companies, the most responsive governments, and some of the most important social breakthroughs of our time.

Nonprofits are using data to improve nonprofit work and inform the public about issues that matter—and show through great visualizations why the numbers matter. In 2013, expect more questions about who owns the data and how it should be shared.

If you don't see your favorite buzzwords on this list, share them in the comments section below.

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