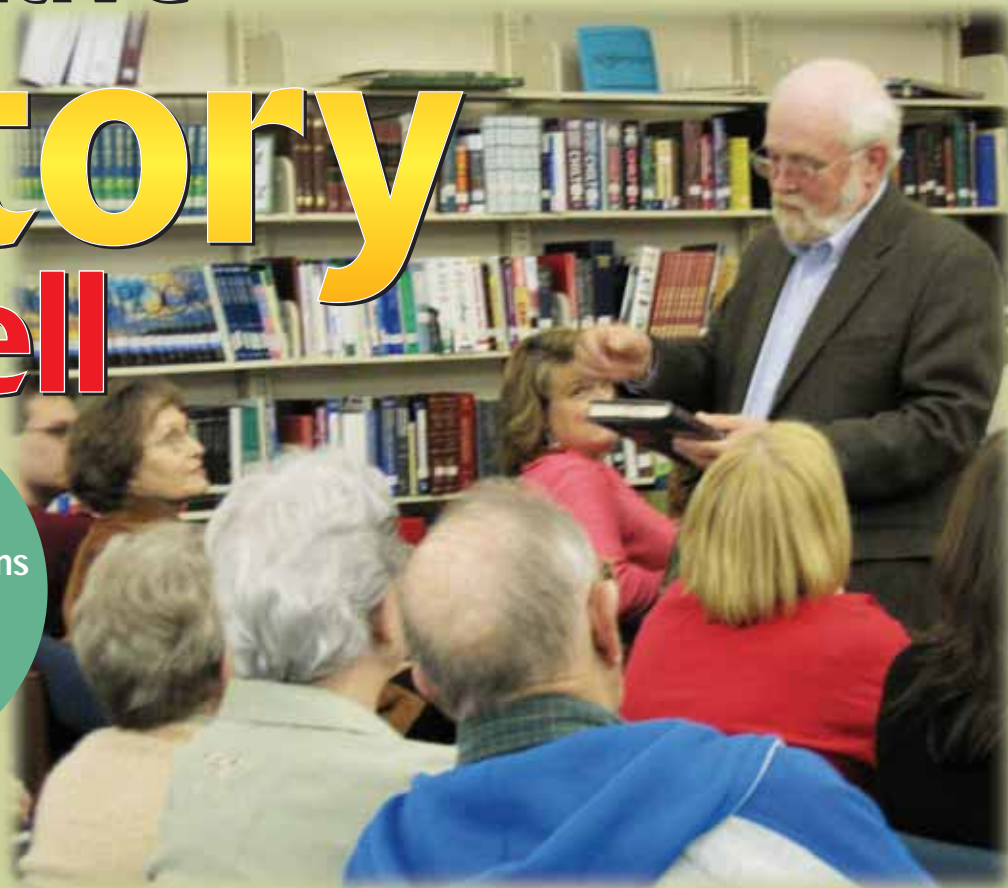


You Have A Story To Tell

Take a fresh look at your communications plan, publicity program, and press releases.

Author Terry Kay discusses his novel at the Oconee River LitFest's opening event in Jefferson, Georgia.



By Malcolm R. Campbell

Considering all the demands on your time, your communications plan probably isn't at the top of your to-do list. Yet, your ability to tell your organization's story may determine whether you can meet your core demands at all.

The Storytelling Landscape

Press releases announce events, new programs and services, upgraded facilities, staff changes, research initiatives, fundraising drives and capital campaigns, grants and honors received, and your organization's latest success in meeting its constituencies' needs. While press releases always have a news focus and frequently include marketing components, their primary intent is developing favorable public attitudes about your nonprofit and its work. These favorable attitudes are your organization's lifeblood.

Like the case statement created for a capital campaign, your evolving story requires a consistent theme: It describes the problems you address, the solutions you propose, and the track record and credibility you bring to the table. In a sense, your communications plan is an ongoing grant application directed at new and potential stakeholders. It must, as Stanley Weinstein writes in *Capital Campaigns from the Ground Up*, "begin with the premise that your most important tasks focus on making the organization worthy of support."

In his introduction to the American Association of Museums (AAM) communications kit, *America's Museum's — Building Community*, AAM board chair Richard West writes that "some of the most important people to your future don't understand the value

of what you are doing." As you fight to maintain your nonprofit's presence in the public's consciousness, perhaps you've discovered that the stakeholder support you need isn't always available.

If validated presence — public awareness of an organization and confidence in its ability to deliver vital services — is a key to a nonprofit's success, then why aren't communications plans a top priority for nonprofits? Why aren't more stories being told?

Lisa Rowan-Gillis, vice president of communications and community affairs for the Home for Little Wanderers (www.thehome.org) in Boston, believes that, as a group, nonprofits don't do well attracting media attention because they don't know what the media wants and don't have the funds to hire either a PR agency or in-house specialist.

"In smaller nonprofits, public relations is an 'add on,'" she says. "In essence, staff put together press releases as an afterthought, in addition to the many other tasks and responsibilities already on their plates."

Paul D. O'Rourke, who serves as director of public relations for Scott Pipitone Design in Pittsburgh, believes that while nonprofits must focus on their primary missions first, they must also develop a commitment to public relations. They need to realize there's more to it than just sending out a press release. "If a nonprofit falls in this forest, and nobody's there — or aware — to hear it," he says, "it doesn't make a sound."

Creating a Communications Plan

Your organization's communications plan must be grown from the ground up and nurtured like a championship rose. Every decision you make impacts your image, and every interaction with clients and visitors conveys part of your story. As Weinstein notes, "Who we are accounts for 1,000 times more than who we say we are." *Who you are*, as expressed by your staff members, board, and volunteers, should sound like it originates from the same mission statement.

According to Kathryn Kempf, vice president of B & Y Communications in Montclair, New Jersey, "How an organization communicates internally and presents itself externally reflects its vision and values." Vision and values are at the heart of your story, and communication is at the heart of your mission. Developing a communications plan will be a great benefit, even if your budget won't support a public relations firm to polish the words and send them out the door.

Create your communications plan by analyzing the following:

Goals. What are your organization's goals?

Objectives. How will communications help you reach those goals?

Audiences. Who needs to know, internally and externally?

Messages. What key points do you want to communicate?

Strategies. How will you communicate those messages?

This analysis will help you tell your story with unity, coherence, and focus.

Getting Help

Rowan-Gillis believes that the Home for Little Wanderers has been well served by establishing an in-house public relations function. She notes that there has been a measurable correlation between the organization's PR efforts and fundraising response. "The number-one benefit to having someone in-house is cost," she says. It costs less to have someone inside, who can move quickly to get reporters information.

Ned Barnett, principal of Barnett Marketing Communications in Las Vegas, believes that — budget permitting — it's best to pair an in-house professional with an external public relations counsel. "In-house

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nonprofit public relations folks are torn in dozens of different ways, juggling a myriad of internal and external priorities. It's hard to remain focused. But an outside public relations counsel has only to deal with external PR, and that's a real asset," he says.

Barnett notes that if your budget won't support either in-house or external PR staffing, you can establish a professional "advisory panel" to provide communications advice and support. Panel members — and the firms they represent — may donate public relations services, including media lists, contacts, and access to wire services. "In short, leverage what you can afford, and co-opt the resources of supporters," Barnett says.

You may also find a wealth of communications expertise on your board of directors, in an affiliated "friends of" group, or within your core group of volunteers. Vickie Jones, a senior consultant at Reingold, Inc., a Washington, D.C.,

communications firm that focuses on nonprofit clients says, "The most important step to initiate a publicity program is to seek out volunteers." Her list of possibilities includes:

College journalism and PR students interested in gaining experience through internships or part-time positions.

Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) chapters and student chapters (PRSSA) that may provide advice. Ask them to "adopt" your organization for pro bono services.

Volunteer programs that you can use to recruit people with public relations backgrounds.

Reaching Out

As your nonprofit reaches out to news organizations, you'll generate more opportunities to tell your story. Once journalists get to know you, they'll start calling you for articles. Building long-term relationships with media people will pay off ten-fold in the end.

Position your organization as a news source. Since reporters work on short deadlines, be sure the person answering your phone knows how to direct media inquiries to a spokesperson for an immediate response. Don't miss out on opportunities. Prepare fact sheets that describe your organization, contact people (with phone numbers), your services and the needs they meet, the magnitude (including statistics) of those needs, and your organization's impact on the community. When issues that impact your constituencies arise, prepare written statements for attribution to your executive or board chair.

Preparing Press Releases

After serving 20 years as a TV reporter, Karen Friedman is convinced that nonprofits aren't taking the time to understand what reporters need to tell the story. Friedman, principal of Karen Friedman Enterprises in Bluebell, Pennsylvania, feels that too many nonprofit staffs are focused simply on getting publicity.

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“News organizations are not there to promote you,” she says. “Stories are about people, by people, for people, and with people. Our audiences are filled with people. We want to know how what you say or do affects those people and impacts readers.”

“It is not enough that you do good work,” says O’Rourke. “For reporters to be interested in your story, you have to make it interesting for their readers, listeners, viewers, surfers. It’s not about your organization. It’s about the audience.”

The focus of your story must be the audience, who will ask, “What’s in it for me?” Are you telling them about an exciting event, a service they can use, information that will change their lives, or an issue they’re concerned about? If not, your story’s primary purpose — influencing attitudes — will be lost.

As you create each press release, remember the advice Horace Greeley, founder of the *New York Tribune*, once gave a friend who planned to start a newspaper: “Begin with the clear conception that the subject of deepest interest to the average human being is himself.” Provide your readers with the information they demand to know, the facts they can’t do without, the tears and laughter that will capture their attention, and you’ll have clients, visitors, supporters, donors, believers, and life-long friends. Here are a few basics to help you get your press release out the door and into your readers’ hearts:

Sell your story with a good headline. Use the headline to summarize your story and catch the editor’s attention.

Make your story newsworthy. Your press release should look like news, not a marketing brochure or a sales pitch.

Provide well-focused quotes. Quotes personalize your news, add immediacy, and validate the information.

Remember that less is more.

Busy editors are looking for information they can scan quickly and use easily. Keep it short. You’ll seldom need more than two pages.

Explain who you are. Write a boilerplate statement at the end of your release that includes your organization’s full name, phone number, address, Web site URL, mission, and primary services. Four or five lines are enough.

Tell reporters whom to call. Place the release date, city, state, and contact person’s name and phone number at the top of the page above the headline. Select a contact person who has more information or knows how to find a spokesperson when the phone rings.

Do your homework. Do your media outlets prefer faxes, e-mails, or hard copies? Do they want your press release included in the body of your e-mail or as an attachment? Do they require formatting to match a press release template? How long are their lead times? Do they want stories directed to specific editors?

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Distribute your story creatively. Post press releases on your Web site, include them in press kits, hand them out to reporters who attend events, place them on your receptionist’s desk, send them to key opinion leaders and other friends of your organization, and rewrite them for use in printed and e-mail newsletters.

Your story combines your message with the reader’s needs on the journalist’s highway. For maximum success, think like an editor thinks.

Sandra Beckwith of Beckwith Communications in Fairport, New York, emphasizes headlines and beginnings. “Do agonize over your headline so that it is attention getting. Many editors and reporters won’t read beyond a headline that doesn’t grab them,” she says. “And work to get the *five Ws and the H* — who, what, why, when, where, and how — into the first two paragraphs.”

After looking at a press release’s news value, Kempf checks the story’s *angle*. Does the information reflect a trend? Is there a human interest story you can include to make the information more compelling? (Be sure to get people’s permission before you tell their story.)

Ask yourself what the journalist is looking for, Rowan-Gillis advises. Is your story “new, innovative, different? Does it pull at your heartstrings? Does it affect huge numbers of people?”

Your story is your motivation. It’s what drives you to run that daily marathon from endless tasks to other endless tasks. But your story demands more of you. It demands to be told, told in a style that makes its readers want to read more. Then, members of your community will understand that what you’re doing is all about them. They might just ask to run a mile in your shoes. ■

Resources

Beckwith, Sandra L., *Streetwise Complete Publicity Plans: How to Create Publicity That Will Spark Media Exposure and Excitement*, Avon, MA: Adams Media Corporation.

Cutlip, Scott M., Center, Allen H., and Broom, Glen M., *Effective Public Relations*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Neal, Kathleen A., *A Primer on Nonprofit PR: If Charity Begins at Home*, Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press.

*Muehrcke, Jill, “Top 10 Keys to Effective Communication,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 4.

*Ott, Christine, “Nonprofit Communications on a Shoestring,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 2.

*Starred resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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