

TAKE A STAND

USING “ISSUES MANAGEMENT” TO MARKET YOUR ORGANIZATION

Whether you want to change people’s minds, or just let them know where you stand, you must take an organized approach.

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Many nonprofits shy away from the idea of “issues management,” thinking it means lobbying or influencing legislation. But “issues management” simply means being organized in your approach to issues—picking out topics you consider important and taking a stand on them.

Pinpointing important issues is easier for some nonprofits than others, of course. Environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club or Greenpeace automatically address issues in their marketing plans. But nonprofits such as human service agencies, blood banks, and arts organizations may have a harder time zeroing in on issues.

Certainly, a human service agency could concentrate on its services, a blood bank on need, and an arts group on its next show. But building a leadership reputation demands more. It requires tackling concerns in the news and on people’s minds. The human service organization could speak out on the failure of the welfare system, for example. The blood bank could lead a discussion of safety issues. And the arts organization could champion the freedom of expression.

Taking such a pro-active stance is the best way to be seen as a leader in your field. Such an approach can also keep you from getting caught on the defensive. The human service organization can better explain its tight budget if it has publicly discussed the possibility already. The blood bank can deal better with mistakes if it has established itself as an expert on safety. The arts organization will be better prepared for a controversial exhibit if community leaders already understand its commitment to fairness.

Some issues may also relate to a nonprofit’s management practices.

United Ways across the nation are still suffering the aftermath of their national organization’s management crisis. Taking a leadership stand on ethical, accountable management may be their only hope for re-establishing public trust. Their marketing plans will have to include carefully designed mechanisms for doing so.

Clearly, then, issues management should be an important part of your marketing strategy. There are six steps in the process:



Pinpoint Relevant Issues

Identify publications, periodicals, and other sources of information on current issues. Be sure to include the Internet, which has become a valuable issues management tool.

Ask paid and volunteer staff to scan these sources and list issues related to your organization's work. These lists become the fodder for group discussion.



Prioritize Issues

Have everyone bring their lists to a brainstorming session. A facilitator should lead the group in combining everyone's ideas into one list.

The initial list can and should be quite long. It will be interesting for the group to see the wide variety of news stories which relate to your organization's work.

Next, divide the issues into two categories:

Opportunities: Which issues can enhance your organization if you take a stand on them?

Vulnerabilities: Which issues can hurt your organization if you're not prepared to handle them deftly?

Now, put both lists into priority order. You should end up with about five major "vulnerabilities" and five major "opportunities."

For all major "vulnerabilities," develop "what-if" scenarios. As we explained in an article on handling crises (see "Selected References"), it's crucial to have such action plans ready *before* a crisis occurs.

For opportunities, decide how many issues to address and in what order. The best strategy is to focus on one issue for a pre-determined time, then move on to the next issue. Highlighting one issue at a time is more likely to herald your organization as an authority.



Track Selected Issues

Tracking priority issues is a staff responsibility. Some larger organizations have issues management offices with a complete professional staff. Others give a marketing or communication executive responsibility for tracking this information. Another approach is to assign a different senior manager or volunteer to manage each issue based on subject-matter expertise.

In any case, someone must be in charge of keeping up to date on your selected issues. This person should do the following:

Regularly scan predetermined information sources, such as periodicals.

Clip out any item related to the selected issue, and file it.

Make frequent topic searches of the Internet. Print out items related to the selected issue, and file them.

Prepare periodic reports summarizing the information you've found, and circulate these reports to staff and board members.



Take a Stand on Each Issue

For each selected issue, develop a strategic communication plan. As part of this plan, create the following:

A position statement, describing where your organization stands on the issue

A supporting fact sheet, explaining why you have taken this stand

A list of priority audiences, noting the media most likely to convince each one.

How to Change People's Minds

1. Identify the people who disagree with you on an issue.
2. Find out all you can about them, what influence they hold, and the media most likely to influence them.
3. Using their preferred media, including face-to-face communication, give them information which will force them to reconsider their current position. They won't agree with your views until they question their own.
4. Send them material which shows how your position resolves the doubts they are now having about their own beliefs.
5. Repeat the process over time, and don't let up.
6. Don't expect too much too soon. Changing people's minds takes a long time, if it works at all. You may be better off seeking support from people who already agree with you or who are undecided on the issue.

How to Position Your Organization As A Leader

To influence people's thinking, you need to communicate with your priority audiences in an intense, focused way. Use letters, phone calls, articles in magazines, blurbs in your organization's newsletter—whatever media work best with each audience.

Most of all, use the power of face-to-face communication. Plan one-on-one meetings with opinion leaders, appearances in front of groups, visits to media editorial boards, and speeches to critical audiences. As we noted in an earlier article (see "Selected References"), talking face-to-face with your prime audiences is the only way to make a real impact.

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Clarify Your Goals

Decide what you want to achieve with your issues assault. Do you want people to consider your organization a leader? Or do you hope to convert people to your way of thinking? If the latter is your goal, your work will be much harder. Changing people's minds is not easy.

Oddly enough, giving your opinion will usually reinforce your audiences' pre-held views. In other words, delivering a great political speech will make your opposition even more opposed! So conversion will take careful strategic thinking and planning.

First, identify those who agree with you. Give them your basic argument and tell them what to do with it. Ask them for their active support. Rally them to the cause.

Second, pinpoint those who are undecided. Tell them why your position on the issue benefits them. Ask for their support, but don't be too ambitious in what you expect them to do.

Third, identify those who disagree with you. Make a judgment about how many there are and what influence they hold. Changing their minds will involve two separate steps:

Give them information designed to require them to question their current position.

1. Review the media to find issues related to your organization's work.
2. Have staff and board choose issues on which to focus.
3. Keep track of how your selected issues are treated in the media.
4. Take a stand on your selected issues, and communicate that stand to your priority audiences.
5. Decide whether you want to change people's minds or simply persuade them to think of your organization as an authority.
6. Seek feedback on results, and adjust your communications accordingly.

They won't accept yours until they become uncertain of theirs.

Send them material which shows how your position accommodates many of their earlier concerns.

Even so, it's best not to expect too much. Realize that conversion takes time and often fails. Your best strategy is to move your organization forward by rallying your supporters and recruiting those with no previous opposition.

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Evaluate Your Results

Measuring results is always a challenge. But because so much of issues communication is face-to-face, you can design two-way, interactive approaches with built-in feedback. Each time you communicate, you also gather information and evaluate outcomes.

If you follow these steps, you are certain to see results—especially if your goal is to position your organization as a respected leader. Organizational leadership doesn't come easily. But the best way to attain it is

to take a stand, confronting head-on the most critical concerns on people's minds. ■

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