

The 10

Media Trends that Will Drive Your Future

And How to Get Ready Now.

BY JILL MUEHRCKE

What's the biggest problem you face in your job every day?

Chances are, your answer relates to most, if not all, of the 10 media trends we'll be discussing here. All these trends are interrelated—not only to one another but to the larger trends affecting society. Being on top of these trends is the best way to be effective in your daily work and to strengthen your organization.

Trend #1: Costs—and Competition for Money—Will Increase.

Of course, money crunches and cost increases are nothing new. You've spent a large chunk of your work life juggling costs. But it's going to become even more crucial to cut costs, or your organization won't be able to stay in business.

As Calvin Coolidge once said, "Economy is idealism in its most practical form." *Saving* money is better than *earning* money because what you save is 100 percent available to use however you want.

Cutting costs requires very careful planning, budgeting, and relationship building. It means using community



resources, such as volunteers, PR firms, and interns. An important study of nonprofit communications found that nonprofits aren't taking full advantage of such resources.¹ According to this study, 11 percent of the nonprofits surveyed said they never used volunteers in their communications efforts. Even more shocking, 28 percent said they never use student interns.

Yet interns are one of the most cost-effective resources. There is usually no cash expense at all, and some intern programs will even pay you to accept student interns.

Many other community services, such as ad agencies and graphic-art studios, will cut their costs or arrange to barter with you if you establish ongoing relationships.

Try these cost-cutting ideas:

Consider creative ways—such as outsourcing and job sharing—to leverage people's talents.²

Contact colleges and universities in your area, and let them know you're seeking interns. Explore other ways that university departments can offer valuable services to your organization.³

Keep everyone in your organization up-to-date on what things cost, and encourage them to look for more efficient ways of doing things.

Read up on budgeting (see especially Brinckerhoff in "References.")

Trend #2: Collaboration Will Become Essential.

Collaboration has always been the best way for nonprofits to cut costs and leverage their communication efforts. But now it has become not just *good* to collaborate but absolutely *essential*.

More and more nonprofits are sharing communications services with one another. They are also forming collaborations with groups from other sectors.



But many nonprofits still don't take the time to form contacts with valuable communications resources. Again, survey results show that it's the small nonprofits—those that could most benefit from collaborations—that are least likely to form such partnerships.

Many organizations, especially smaller ones, rely on the board of directors as their prime resource—a practice which may not be in their best interests. Trained volunteers and local professionals can help your communications efforts in ways board members can't.

Here are tips to help you see the world through a collaborative eye:

Seek out organizations similar to yours, and discuss ideas for collaborating.

Learn what resources exist so that you don't reinvent the wheel.

Build relationships with media representatives, communication professionals, college and university communications departments, and local communication groups, firms, clubs, and associations.

Help other nonprofits spread their messages, while they spread yours.

Create visibility for your organization so that other organizations know who you are and where to find you for collaborative efforts.

Become a collaborative communicator. Such communicators respond quickly to trends and promote learning throughout their organizations. They are risktakers, entrepreneurs, and visionaries—not perfectionists. Perfectionism means getting mired in the details instead of taking risks. As Miles Davis once said, "Don't fear mistakes. There are none."

Trend #3: Communications Will Have to Be Strategic.

The direction is away from single media messages to strategic communications campaigns. Because there are so many different messages out there, a single message will never be heard. It has to be part of a carefully crafted campaign.

In the survey mentioned earlier, most of the nonprofits said yes, they did conduct communications campaigns. But it turned out that almost none of what they called campaigns actually fit the accepted definition of campaigning—a planned, goal-oriented effort to obtain measurable results.

Some of the nonprofits weren't even sure what their communication goals were. Others reported such goals as improving media coverage of a special event—which isn't a campaign-related objective. Very few reported having a theme carried out over time to targeted audiences, which is central to an effective campaign.

And nearly half—44 percent—answered "no" when asked if they had any goals that were unmet due to a lack of communications resources. Such a response shows contentment with the status quo and lack of communication initiative.

Be sure you're not in this group. Take an active, strategic role in designing your communications by doing the following:

Develop a strategic communications plan with clear-cut goals and action steps. Be specific about the results you expect, and build in ways to measure results.

Form alliances with PR firms, which have access to the latest theoretical models and research methods.

Use as many different PR techniques as possible. These might include magazine interviews, letters to the editor,



Universities can offer valuable services to your organization at little or no cost.

opinion pieces, special events, and speeches that position your organization's leaders as experts in your field.

Target specific audiences, and use the communications forms that each audience prefers. For example, one audience may prefer getting a newsletter while another prefers e-mail messages.

Trend #4: Sector Advocacy Will Become Imperative.

People don't understand the nonprofit sector. We see examples every day in the press and from the public that show that people undervalue the nonprofit sector. That can be detrimental, even disastrous, to us all.



An example occurred in North Chicago, Illinois, a few years ago.⁴ The City Council planned to pass a law to keep nonprofits out of the city because they didn't pay property tax. These legislators saw nonprofits as a tax burden.

When a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* called us and asked for our opinion, we mentioned all the benefits of having nonprofits in a city:

They bring in jobs. The people in these jobs buy homes, pay property taxes, tend to be stable community members, and make a vital contribution to a town's economy. They are community-minded and often take the lead in community development.

Far from being a liability, nonprofits are a great asset to a community. Clearly, however, the people we spoke to about the proposed law had never looked at it that way and were quite surprised by these insights. And these were media people writing articles about nonprofits and government officials passing legislation about nonprofits—people who should have gotten the message long before this.

The law banning nonprofits was never passed. But the very idea shows how little the public understands the value of the nonprofit sector. It's absolutely our responsibility to bring that message to people.

One recent study finds that newspapers actually find nonprofit news to have a higher news value than most other topics.⁵ Ideas in which newspaper editors are most interested are:

unique ways nonprofits help solve community problems
partnerships between nonprofits and government

stories about volunteers
accounts of community leaders working with nonprofits.

Think of ways to weave your story into these larger stories that herald the worth of the nonprofit sector and the way it enriches communities.

Trend #5: Technology Will Change Everything.

The future belongs to those who embrace technology's possibilities. Again, student interns are an invaluable resource. They are often on the cutting edge of technology.

It was students at the University of Wisconsin, for example, who conceived and created our CD-ROM, which contains every *Nonprofit World* article since the first issue in 1983. The CD-ROM has been incredibly useful for researchers and nonprofit managers, making it possible to search all these articles by author, topic, title, or key word and find specific information in just a few seconds. Best of all, we were able to keep the price low enough for even the smallest nonprofit. We never could have done so if it weren't for the students volunteering their time, as well as their perspectives on creative new ways to use technology.



Here are some other ways to incorporate technology into your organization:

Search for new tools and software that increase speed, add convenience, raise productivity and, most of all, challenge conventional wisdom about what can and can't be done in your area of expertise.

Find partners to help fund your computer use. Talk to funders, high-tech companies, and universities about the possibilities.⁶

Set up a technology group to be in charge of managing your technology needs.

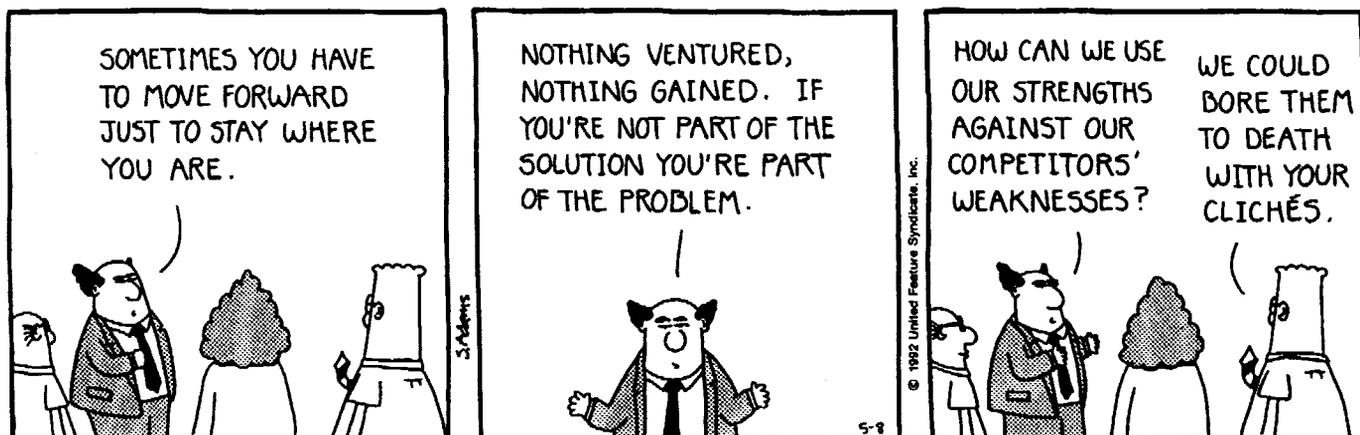
Set technology goals and implement only the technology needed to meet those goals.

Trend #6: People Will Be Overwhelmed.

As a result of the information explosion, people are feeling overwhelmed, harried, pulled in all directions. To be sure they hear your message, you must make things as quick and easy as possible for people.

A good rule is: Write your story. Then cut it in half. Then see if you





can cut it in half again. You'll be surprised to find your story is much better that way, because you've cut out a lot of material that was extraneous—and words you used just because you liked the way they sounded. Besides, people will be more likely to read something that's short, simple, and to the point.

People need more help nowadays understanding things, because issues have become so complex. Everyone is deluged with so many details and so much data, they have trouble sorting through it all.

To get your message across, you need to rise above the details, ferret out what's really important, and reduce complexities to understandable chunks. You need to simplify the words and sentences you use so that the meaning is clear, yet at the same time convey the complexity of today's problems. People desperately need that information to make good decisions, but they need to receive the information in a way that's not overloaded with jargon.

Here are six tips to improve your writing and speaking:

Use short, simple, declarative sentences. Consider, for example, how you might rewrite this sentence: "The decision will have to be made by the members when they meet." You can add action to such sentences by replacing forms of the verb "to be" (*is, was, were, will be*, and so on) with strong verbs. Thus, you might revise the above sentence as: "Members must meet to decide."

Use active rather than passive voice. Active statements tell *who* is doing the acting. For example, rather than say "Trainer behaviors were observed," you might say, "We observed trainers' behavior."

Always use less words rather than more. Get rid of meaningless phrases and words, such as "at this point in time" or "in a manner of speaking." Eliminate redundancies such as "a difficult dilemma" and "a successful triumph." (Did you ever hear of an easy dilemma or an unsuccessful triumph?)

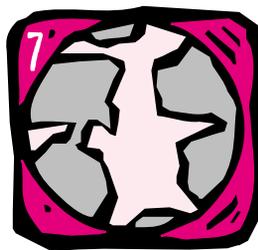
Use short, simple words. Use as few syllables as possible: *staff* rather than *personnel*, *cut* rather than *reduce*, *many* rather than *numerous*, *change* rather than *modification*.

Use specific examples and concrete words which form

images in people's minds. Don't say, for example "Financial considerations negatively impacted our fundraising efforts." Instead, you might say, "We lost 13% of our money when the stock market fell."

Make your language inclusive, free of bias. Find alternatives to sexist words, such as *workforce* rather than *manpower*, *humanity* rather than *mankind*. Use direct, precise language rather than euphemisms to describe people with disabilities. Be especially careful not to convert adjectives into nouns, which result in disparaging labels such as *an amputee*, *the deaf*, *an epileptic*, and especially *the handicapped* (from *hand in cap*, which actually derives from a game of chance but is mistakenly associated with beggary).⁷ Such inclusive language is not just a response to the politically-correct language police. Bias-free language is at the heart of honest, clear writing.

Trend #7: Our Sector Will Become Increasingly Global & Diverse.



You can count on the fact that our society and our sector will continue to become even more global. Your key audiences will include more diverse groups from different backgrounds and cultures.

Communicating in this new environment calls for new skills.⁸ As a global communicator you must:

Understand your own culture and how others view it.

View the world from different perspectives without losing your own cultural moorings.

Include and appreciate people's differences.

Learn all you can about other cultures.

Incorporate globalism and diversity into your mission and vision.

Continually remind yourself that the heart of commu-

nication isn't telling what you know but learning to listen.

Trend #8: Scrutiny of Nonprofits Will Increase.

We've certainly had enough evidence recently that trying to hide from the press is not the best strategy. Instead of dodging public scrutiny, consider it an invitation to communicate your message.

Part of that message should be one of accountability. The survey we discussed earlier uncovered a serious problem: Few nonprofits in the study evaluated the success of their communications efforts. Only *two* of 105 organizations used formal evaluation methods. Yet such research is crucial to effective communications.



The survey found that when nonprofits *do* evaluate their communications, they usually do so by checking to see if there is an increase in contributions, phone calls, or mail. They ignore something far more important: whether there is increased *awareness* or changed *behavior* as a result of their

efforts.

The professor who conducted the survey points to two reasons for such poor follow-up. One is that nonprofits don't understand key communication and evaluation concepts. Another reason may be that a fatalistic climate dominates the organization.

Fatalistic organizations are closed and inward-focused. They keep sending out information with little interest in receiving feedback. Even if they were granted large sums of money, they would probably still direct their efforts toward merely shipping out even more volumes of information.

PR experts warn against such a fatalistic attitude. Interaction between nonprofits and the community is imperative in effective PR. Just as important as giving *out* information is *seeking* information from the outside. Be sure to do the following:

Be open about finances and fundraising practices.

Have an evaluation system in place so that you can show how people's lives have changed because of your work.

Gain input from everyone who uses your services to see how you might improve.

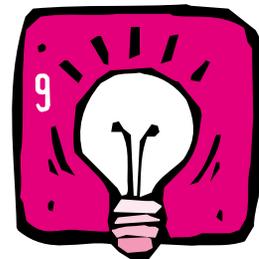
Prepare a crisis plan so that you can respond openly

Generation Xers present countless opportunities for creative communications.

and confidently to any embarrassing questions that may arise.

Take steps to build your organization's reputation for openness and integrity.

Trend #9: People Will Demand High-Quality Customer Service.



By customers, we're talking about funders, donors, clients, and also staff and board members. All these people have so many choices that if you don't offer them good service, they'll go elsewhere.

In fact, as everything becomes more complex, service has become part of the product. You have to stop even thinking about customer service as something separate and build it into everything you do. This is the real frontier where smart communicators will devote creative energy.

Doing so means being responsive to your environment. It means asking your customers—both inside and outside your organization: "Where do you perceive a lack of quality?" It means designing quality into your operations and capitalizing on it in your marketing. It means doing the following:

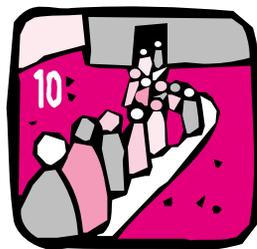
Use surveys and focus groups both inside and outside your organization to be sure you are meeting people's needs.

Give employees input into all issues which affect them.

Devise a set of written communication policies, with the input of all employees.

Set up total quality management (TQM) teams.⁹

Trend #10: Nonprofits Will Have to Position Themselves.



Again, it has always been important for an organization to position itself and carve out a special niche, but it will become increasingly critical to do so. Organizations that are

most visible—and perhaps more important, that are strongly *positioned* as effective leaders—are the ones most likely to find support. Remember that people will support you *not* because yours is a worthwhile organization but because you have positioned your organization to help solve a problem they feel is important.

The Generation Xers and the turning-50 boomers present countless opportunities for creative communications. It's interesting to note that a recent survey by Public Allies found that Generation Xers have a very different vision of leadership than previous generations—one much like that of the collabo-

rative and global communicators we discussed earlier. The qualities they value most are collaborative and interpersonal rather than directive or charismatic.¹⁰

Use these ideas to position your organization as a strong leader:

Pinpoint your five most important audiences, and target your communications efforts to those people only.

Create a clear, focused mission. Continually reassess your mission and change it if necessary to fit the changing times.

Put your mission at the center of all your communications.

Be sure everyone in your organization understands your organization's mission and reinforces it in everything they do.

Someone (obviously a writer) once said that the universe is made up not of atoms but of stories. There is an elemental truth to that statement. It is with stories that we cut through extraneous details to what is unique and essential about our organization.

Larry Lauer put it well: "Talk mission, vision, and goals every chance you get. As a communicator, this is your most important job: to reshape the story of your organization's founders into a vision for the future. Telling and retelling this story is essential. It's the anchor that keeps your communications focused in a cluttered and confusing world. Fashioned into allegory, this tale of where you've been and where you're going is the key to your success."¹¹ ■

Footnotes

¹For details on this survey of 103 nonprofit organizations in Cleveland, see Rouner and Camden in "References."

²For an excellent summary of such options, see "Play to Your Strengths: Using Outsourcing to Manage Human Resources," *Nonprofit World*, January-February 1999. For more ideas on creative ways to cut human resource costs, see *Personnel & Human Resources Development, Leadership Series*, available through the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*.

³For example, see "Teaming Up for Successful Programs" in *Management & Planning, Leadership Series, Vol. II*, which explains how to co-sponsor a pro-

gram with a university department, and "Universities Offer Marketing Research Key" in *Marketing, Leadership Series*, which describes how to arrange with universities to perform research for your organization. Both volumes include many other examples of how to arrange collaborations, and both are available through the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*.

⁴See "The City that Wants to Keep Out Nonprofits," *Nonprofit World*, March-April 1995.

⁵See "Study: Nonprofits Highly Newsworthy," *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1998.

⁶For a case study of a small nonprofit that partnered with a high-tech company (Microsoft), see Gordon in "References."

⁷See *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing* by Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force on Bias-Free Language of the Association of American University Presses (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

⁸For more on communicating globally, see Muehrcke in "References."

⁹For details on TQM and teams, see *Management & Planning, Leadership Series, Vol. II* and *Quality Management in the Nonprofit World*. Both are available through the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*.

¹⁰This survey by Public Allies (1015 18th Street, N.W., Suite 200, Washington, D.C. 20036) is reported in "A New Definition of Leadership," *Nonprofit World*, January-February 1999.

¹¹See Lauer, March-April 1996 in "References."

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. See the *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison,

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