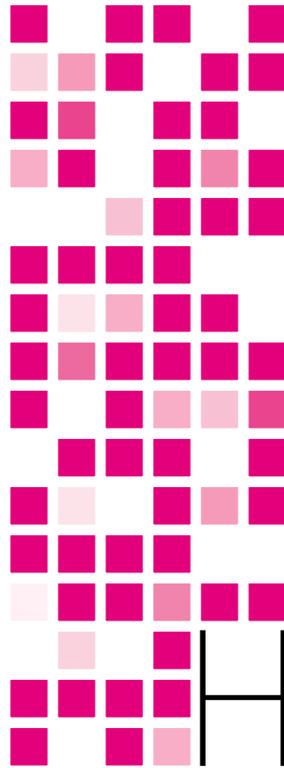


Are Nonprofits Newsworthy?

“You
Bet,”

Say Newspaper Editors

BY TOM MARTENS



How can your nonprofit organization make the news?

It's easy.

Just get a board member to donate \$1 billion to the United Nations or hundreds of millions to the former Soviet Union. Your group will make the headlines—guaranteed.

But what if your board doesn't include a Ted Turner or George Soros? Getting into print is still easy. Just give the editor information that's "newsworthy."

And how do you decide what's newsworthy? Editors and academics have sacrificed many a brain cell in barroom discussions of that question. The definition of news is as illusive today as it was in 1865 when a *New York Tribune* editor uttered those immortal words:

“When dog bites man, that’s not news, but when man bites dog, that’s news.” The old definition just doesn’t help much.

Now nonprofits are closer to a definition of “newsworthy,” following the nation’s most comprehensive study of how newspapers cover nonprofit issues. There are four parts to the study of California’s 130,000 nonprofits:

PART 1-NEWS CONTENT

Funded by the Aspen Institute, the study analyzed the 1996 nonprofit news content in six small, medium, and large California newspapers. The analysis was done by selecting, counting, and sorting the “nonprofit” stories—those that included the keyword or a nonprofit organization’s name in the first five paragraphs. The research answers some important questions, including:

How newsworthy are stories about nonprofits?

Content analysis showed that nonprofit information has a high news value as reflected by the number of stories the papers ran on the front page. The papers placed a higher percentage of nonprofit stories on the front page when compared to other stories. Other conclusions from the content analysis:

1. Small and medium-sized papers are more committed to nonprofit stories as indicated by the number of stories run compared to their size.
2. Newspapers place highest priority on stories that are local to their communities, set precedents, or have a human interest angle.
3. Most nonprofit stories are printed in the main or local-news sections, rather than on the business, community, or editorial pages.
4. Health ranks highest in nonprofit issue coverage, while news coverage of philanthropic foundations is very low.

What are the news-value characteristics of nonprofit stories?

In 1990, a researcher determined that all news stories could be classified by seven “news-value codes.” These codes not only describe the stories but also indicate their relative news value. Here are the codes, which pinpoint the characteristics that make stories newsworthy:

Significance: stories with an emphasis on precedents, extensive changes, magnitudes

Vitality-Conflict: stories about death, violence—crime stories if you will

Human Interest: stories about the sentimental, but also the bizarre

Timeliness: stories that provide the latest update on a continuing story

Prominence: stories about well-known people

Consequences: stories having an impact on a large number of people

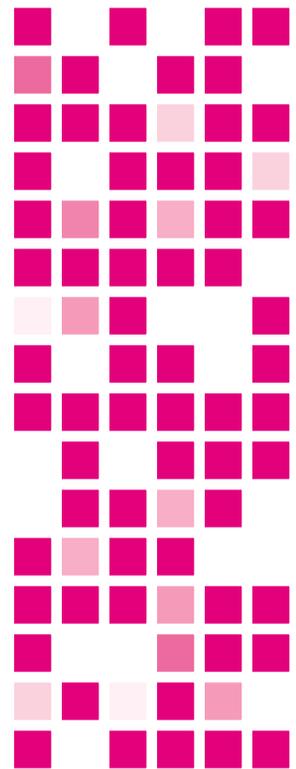
Proximity: stories that emphasize a publication’s home town.

How did the nonprofit stories fare? A study of all the papers produces the following news-value ranking:

1. Proximity
2. Human Interest
3. Significance
4. Vitality-Conflict
5. Timeliness
6. Consequences
7. Prominence

What does this ranking mean? It means that most nonprofit news is local. It means that many of the stories contain a human interest angle and that few involve prominent individuals.

It’s also important to note that stories with more than one news-value code get higher news play as indicated by their frequency on the front page rather than



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inside the papers. So the more of these news-value characteristics you can incorporate into your story, the better.

PART 2-SURVEY OF EDITORS

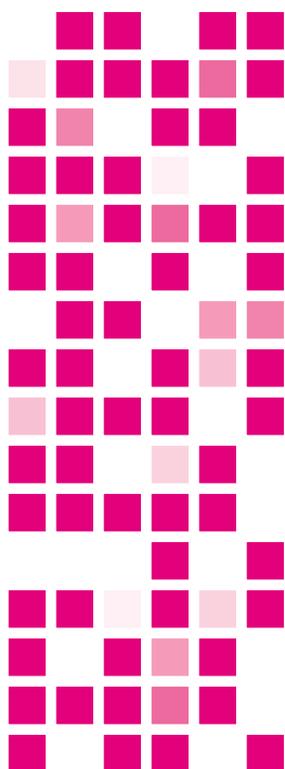
The second part of the survey addressed this question:

How do newspaper editors perceive the news value of information about nonprofits and their issues?

The survey of 650 editors of daily and weekly papers in the

state showed that they consider nonprofits newsworthy. Nearly 80 percent said nonprofit organizations were either “somewhat” or “very” newsworthy. This positive attitude was supported by nearly 80 percent of editors saying their papers ran nonprofit stories “quite often.” Other conclusions from the survey of editors:

1. One third say they publish nonprofit special sections.
2. One-fifth print regular columns about nonprofit issues.



Nonprofit News: What's Hot and What's Not

Newspaper editors get hustled every day by public relations practitioners seeking news coverage for their client's organization or issue. As a result of this daily lobbying barrage by mail, phone, fax, and Internet, busy editors develop strong opinions about what is and isn't newsworthy. In the survey, these editors weren't shy about saying which kinds of nonprofit stories they feel are newsworthy:

HOT STORY THEMES

Problem Solving: stories about how people are involved with nonprofits that solve community problems

Services: unique services that nonprofits provide to communities

Government: changing role of government, particularly nonprofit partnerships providing services

Volunteers: innovative work of volunteers.

NOT-SO-HOT STORY THEMES

Organizational News: nonprofit organizational issues, such as management changes and the impact of state or national policies

Nonprofit Associations: stories about associations of nonprofit groups

Research Results: results of studies, whether done by nonprofits or philanthropic foundations.

HOT ISSUE TOPICS

Here is a ranking of issues the editors considered of most interest to their readers:

1. crime and economic development (tied for first place)
2. children's issues
3. senior citizens' issues
4. health care
5. housing and community development.

If you want to pitch stories that help position nonprofits as helping define a sense of community, here is a ranking of stories that editors think would be of most interest to readers:

1. charitable contributions to nonprofits
2. work of volunteers
3. innovative work of nonprofits
4. successful service delivery examples
5. unique ways nonprofits help solve problems
6. nonprofits working with government
7. community leaders working with nonprofits
8. results of fundraising campaigns.

NOT-SO-HOT ISSUES

Here are issues the editors ranked lowest in reader interest:

1. welfare and social services
2. balancing city and county budgets
3. the arts
4. infrastructure and transportation
5. the environment

3. Nearly 70 percent take part in annual fundraising drives.
4. They are intensely interested in ways of covering or working jointly with nonprofits on community projects.
5. They would like to receive more news about nonprofits, particularly stories about how local residents make charitable contributions in their communities and the problem-solving nature of the work of nonprofits.
6. They think their readers are *most* interested in stories about economic development and public safety and *least* interested in stories about welfare and social services.

The editors' survey also explored the roles of nonprofits and newspapers in defining communities and asked editors this question:

What kinds of nonprofit news stories would be helpful in defining a sense of community for readers?

The answers were enlightening. Here is the ranking of community-defining issues:

1. ways local residents make charitable contributions
2. work of volunteers
3. innovative work of nonprofits in the community
4. unique ways nonprofits are solving community problems
5. success stories of those receiving services from nonprofits
6. ways nonprofits are working with local government
7. involvement of community leaders with nonprofits
8. results of fundraising campaigns, such as United Way.

In addition, the survey proposed creating a newsletter for the editors and asked them this question:

What stories would you most like covered in a newsletter about nonprofits?

Here are the results by ranking:

1. civic or community journalism projects involving nonprofits and newspapers
2. new ways newspapers are covering nonprofits
3. community service projects involving newspapers and nonprofits
4. examples of special news projects involving nonprofits
5. results of reader surveys about nonprofit stories
6. examples of business stories about nonprofit issues
7. reprints of unique local news stories about nonprofits
8. sample fundraising campaigns involving newspapers
9. samples of annual editions of op ed pieces about nonprofit issues
10. samples of columns devoted to nonprofit issues.

PART 3-SURVEY OF NONPROFIT CEOs

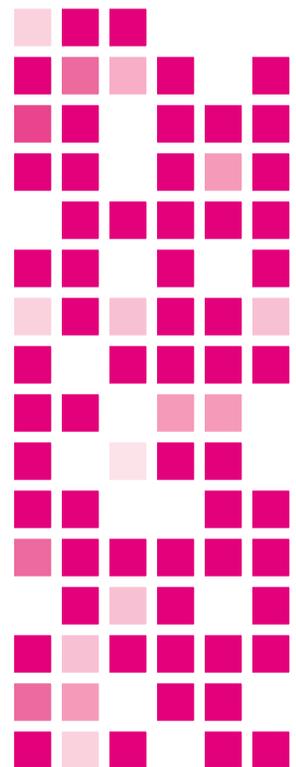
The research included a survey of 220 California nonprofit executives, asking them this question:

What are nonprofits doing to stimulate news coverage of their organizations and their issues?

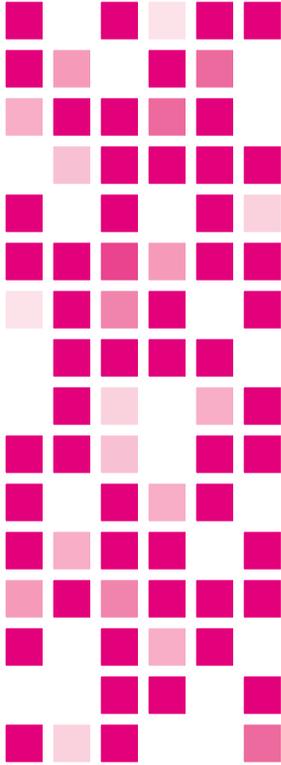
Here's what the nonprofit execs had to say:

1. Over 70 percent say working with the media is "extremely" or "very important" to their organizations.
2. Slightly over 40 percent of the nonprofits have staff members working with the media.
3. Almost 65 percent of nonprofit staffs have not taken a media training course in the past two years.
4. Nonprofit executives rank "help with getting stories and public

Research shows that nonprofit information has a high news value



Busy editors have strong opinions about what is and isn't newsworthy.



service announcements about their organizations into print” as their highest need.

PART 4-RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of the study, a 20-member steering committee looked at this question:

What strategies can nonprofits use to increase the news coverage of their groups and issues?

The committee’s recommendations included the following:

1. Create a nonprofit news service to stimulate coverage.
2. Expand the availability of nonprofit news sources.
3. Urge philanthropic foundations to invest in nonprofit media-generating infrastructure.
4. Under the leadership of an advocacy-oriented statewide nonprofit group, develop strategies to generate repeat news coverage of nonprofits and their issues.
5. Increase communication about models of how the media has successfully covered nonprofits.
6. Encourage community and private foundations to lead media workshops, promote the work of their grantees, and fund capacity-building programs that help nonprofits generate news.
7. Using the model from the National Society of Fundraising Executives, create an association of nonprofit communications executives to coordinate media efforts and improve skills. ■

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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, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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