



Nonprofits Can Be Cool

What's your coolness quotient?

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

"Cool" nonprofits are revamping old ideas of what a nonprofit organization should look like. Funders and the public are taking notice. Is yours one of these cool, future-oriented nonprofits? If not, what can turn your run-of-the-mill organization into a cool place that attracts enthusiastic staff, funders, and donors? You may need to do some updating to improve your coolness score.

The Collateral of Cool

You probably spend a good deal of money on collateral materials, such as letterhead, brochures, and annual reports. But how much do you invest in the image-making capability of your most visible asset—your staff and board members?

Many nonprofit staffers suffer from an image problem. Baby boomers, who now dominate nonprofits' leadership ranks, tend to hold onto an anti-corporate style or mimic the dress-for-success look. Some of the up-and-coming young X-ers in our sector maintain a taste for piercings, tattoos, and dyed hair while wanting to be taken seriously by foundation presidents. The truth is that most nonprofit staffs and boards never create a persona that satisfies their need to look

*Inarticulate
ain't cool.*

corporate—without looking *too* corporate. With few exceptions, the image they project is manifestly blah.

Sure, you may have achieved good public recognition with your name and logo. That's certainly cool, but only by half. Ask yourself about your walking collateral, your human PR assets:

- **In their interactions in the community**, do staff and board members express a palpable "attitude" and esprit de corps?
- **Could someone scanning the crowd** at an event or conference readily pick out one of your staff or board?
- **Do your staff and board adopt a style of dress** that conveys neither a stuffed-shirt nor second-class-citizen image?
- **Do people in other nonprofits** think your staff and board are so cool that they wish they were one of you?

Want to figure out what that cool presence would look like? Gather staff and board, and brainstorm ways to convey a community appearance that says: "We're cool. We're competent. We're doing exciting things. Join us, support us, and you can be cool too." Be sure to tie this image directly to your mission, and reward your staff for embodying it.

You must express your image verbally, too. These days, training in public speaking, marketing, sales, media relations, and presentation skills should be mandatory for every nonprofit executive and program manager. Inarticulate ain't cool.

The Coolness of Diversity

Ethnic diversity is so much a white person's thing to fret about. Of course you don't want to be a totally "white-bread" nonprofit. But neither should you practice tokenism.

Look at the demographics. The so-called problem of ethnic diversity is resolving itself. So you're not planning to learn Spanish because you aren't traveling to a Spanish-speaking country? Hello! Learn Spanish because you already live in a Spanish-speaking country. Verdad?

Be cool by getting some *real* diversity in your organization. Recruit and value staff for *cognitive* diversity. Check your staff's diversity with these questions:

- **Do at least some of your staff members** have non-traditional educational backgrounds?
- **Do they practice continuing education**, in and outside of their job fields?
- **Do they have varied backgrounds** in both nonprofit and for-profit organizations?



- **Are they different** from your other staff and from the last people in their positions?

The “Buzz” of Cool

A nonprofit executive was recently overheard saying, “There’s an economic recession on, but we’ve decided not to participate.” That’s the coolness-under-fire attitude you need to embody. Stop holding your begging bowl up to funders. Instead, tell them, “This program is so innovative and so cool! Heck, you’re lucky we got to you with this opportunity in time!”

It’s important to ensure a good attitude internally, too. Here are some ways to keep the buzz going in the workplace:

- **Encourage light-hearted banter** about the trials and tribulations your organization faces.
- **Promote impromptu celebrations** of your staff’s achievements.
- **Keep a “success-is-the-best-revenge” response ready** for times when things don’t go well despite your staff’s best efforts.

The Bottom Line of Cool

For those who connect everything to the bottom line, here are some benefits of being cool:

The cooler you’re perceived as, the “hotter” your funding streams will be.

- **Attracting and retaining human resources** is the single highest expense in many nonprofits. The more your organization is seen as cool, the better able you’ll be to attract quality staff and volunteers. Retention is also improved when the attitude is good and morale is high.
- **Sure, your organization is worthy of funding. So what?** So are many others. What’s your edge? What’s your value-added? It’s your image that differentiates you. The cooler you’re perceived as, the “hotter” your funding streams will be.

We “do-gooders” need to get out of the image slump we’re in. No wonder the public views us as saints in sackcloth who don’t have to be paid well, if barely

at all. That’s how we’ve come off to them. As nonprofit professionals, we need to upgrade our image to compete for funding and human resources. We need to live in the future, not the past. Besides, being cool is a just plain cool thing to be. ■

Resources

Conejo, Carlos, “Managers Must Become Multicultural,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 6.

Lauer, Larry, “When Reality Becomes Image,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 5.

Glasrud, Bruce, “Brave New Workers in a Brave New Workplace,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 6.

Glasrud, Bruce, “Beyond Diversity,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 2.

These resources are available from the Society’s Resource Center, 734-451-3582, www.snpo.org.

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1 Send us your reactions to articles in *Nonprofit World* so that we can be sure we’re tuned in to your needs and concerns.

2 Send us creative ideas which you or others have used to raise funds. We’ll add them to our list of “Creative Fundraising Ideas.”

3 Send us ideas for subjects you’d like covered in *Nonprofit World*.

4 Turn one of your ideas into an article for *Nonprofit World*.

5 Send a color photo, slide, drawing, or other graphic that captures the essence of your organization along with a few paragraphs about your organization and its mission. We’ll feature your organization on the cover of *Nonprofit World*.

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