

Maintaining Broad Support in Uncertain Times

You may need to do the opposite of what you think.

BY DEAN ZATKOWSKY

Succeeding during difficult times requires making tough choices. We call them “tough” choices because they’re hard to execute. The choices themselves are simple: Do more of what works and less of what doesn’t. Here are the keys:

1. Focus & Simplify

A clear understanding of who you are and what you do unites your donors, members, staff, volunteers, and clients. Distill the most important information about your organization, your mission, and your need into two or three key message points and incorporate these into every communication.

Remember this core marketing concept: If your organization provides real value, then education, through clear communication, is your chief marketing goal. If your organization doesn’t provide real value, then shame on you for even considering marketing your services.

2. Communicate Value & Specific Benefits

Communicating value is fairly straightforward in the for-profit world. Direct benefits to the buyer take center stage: the product saves you time and money, helps you attract a mate, makes

you a better golfer, or whatever. Direct benefits are also effective for membership organizations, which can offer discounts, tickets, and other premiums to members. Prospect self-interest is at the heart of effective marketing, and that poses an interesting challenge for philanthropic enterprises.

Many current donors have a direct personal connection to the causes they support, such as a friend or relative with an illness. But that’s not always the case, and the connection isn’t always so clear for the occasional or prospective donor.

Nonprofits must clearly and frequently communicate the value they provide to their clients, showing the connection between a donation and the good it achieves. You see this in many successful appeals: “Just \$5 a week will get little Jenna the treatment she needs.” Such appeals delve to the heart of powerful human needs: the desire to be useful and part of something larger than ourselves. Filling these needs is a genuine benefit; communicating this benefit is a genuine challenge.

3. Convey Integrated, Consistent Messages

“Mediocre marketing, applied consistently, will outperform brilliant marketing applied inconsistently,” says marketing expert Jay Conrad Levinson.

Consistency refers to the integration of key message points into every organizational communication and to the frequency with which you communicate. We mentioned earlier that education was a marketing goal, and repetition is education’s best friend.

Competition for people’s attention is fierce. Many marketing professionals preach impact, recommending outrageous designs that will “break through the clutter.” But communications with true “impact” are rare and risky. Even those that grab attention don’t often create results. Instead of impact, strive for frequency. Get your key messages out as often, and as regularly, as you can. To build a large and growing base of supporters, slow and steady really do win the race.

Incorporate your key message points, including benefits, into every communication, from your direct mail appeals to your Web site to a volunteer’s fun-run T-shirt. In effect, you will be brand building, and a strong brand is your best defense against tough times. You want your organization well positioned in the minds of the largest possible audience so that, when someone is ready to give, you have an advantage.

Tough times, however, put your marketing plan in danger. Marketing budgets are easy to cut for the same reason that the cuts are so damaging: The results

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aren't immediately apparent. Marketing depends on cumulative effects. The impact of inconsistency reverberates far beyond the timeframe of budget cuts.

4. Use Word-of-Mouth

Paul Orfalea, founder of Kinko's, believes that "happy fingers ring happy cash registers." In other words, take good care of your coworkers and they will take good care of your business. Taking care of people includes educating them about your marketing goals and strategies. In a nonprofit organization, everybody is—or should be—in development. Yet few organizations have a systematic way to generate referrals. Here is a fundamental concept that, ironically, eludes many donor-dependent entities: If you don't ask, you don't get.

Word-of-mouth is still king. Overpriced and overcomplicated ad agencies try to convince clients otherwise, but friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family members influence behavior far more than any marketing campaign. A good, honest marketing campaign is a spark, but word-of-mouth is the wind that fans the flames.

In this era of high-technology communications, word-of-mouth is even more effective than before. For example, Kintera's "Friends Asking Friends" e-mail application turns supporters into active recruiters by making the process easy for everyone. The program's success is based on a simple concept: I'm more likely to open and read an e-mail from my friend James than from someone I don't know. Everyone is in development, and with a few simple tools everyone can be productive.

5. Acquire & Renew

Whether your revenues come from donors, members, or customers, growth requires continuous acquisition, renewal, and upgrading strategies. Acquisition and renewal can't be two separate processes; they should be the same process—a multi-step repeating process that protects the long-term viability of your organization. You can't avoid the first step, however painful; everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. Acquisition is expensive; but you can't work just on renewals.

Too many nonprofits engage in acquisition inconsistently, only "as needed." This reactive approach means that donor numbers are already dropping before you can take action. Thus, the goal becomes recovery rather than growth.

The economics of retention are better than the economics of acquisition. However, you can't realize the benefits of retention unless you have donors to retain. An acquisition mailing is comparable to a "loss-leader" in a retail environment: The goal is to win the customer, not the sale—the donor, not the donation. Thus, many acquisition campaigns lose money. If you know how you're going to nurture and upgrade respondents, you see the "losses" as an investment in future large donors.

Current donors are the greatest source of future revenue and deserve a greater per capita investment than prospects. Strategic database segmentation lets you custom tailor the messages and frequency of your communications, reducing waste and increasing your return on investment.

No matter how good your renewal efforts, you're going to lose some donors

every year, for a wide variety of reasons. Systematic acquisition, renewal, and upgrade tactics will keep your support base growing, despite donor losses, in good times and bad.

6. Focus on Fundamentals, Year After Year

Ask your friends and colleagues what worked for them this year. Take a look at the nonprofits that achieved record results despite hard times. You'll find that such organizations, rather than cutting or delaying marketing tactics, had the discipline to stick with their plans and even increase their efforts, doing more of what works and less of what doesn't. Because when something goes wrong, it's the fundamentals that get you home safely. ■

Resources

Burnham, Katie, "What Skills Will Nonprofit Leaders Need in the Future?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 3.

Bosc, Joyce, "Brands: They Need to Work Just as Hard as You Do!" *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 1.

Lauer, Larry, "How to Use a Total Marketing Approach to Renew Your Organization and Make an Impact," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.

Vanden Berk, Kathryn Collins, "Is Your Organization an Opportunist?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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