

Using the New Media to Promote Your Mission and Protect Your Reputation

The secret is to blend the new with the tried-and-true.

By Jennifer Mullen

Nonprofit organizations often have limited strategies for promoting themselves. Many executives feel they can't justify spending money on reputation management, believing that the mission should speak for itself.

Whatever your mission, you compete for volunteers, funding, and a good image in a 24/7 communication environment. To maintain a good reputation and champion your cause, you need to use as many channels as possible — not only the new but the tried-and-true. Money spent on a well-planned communication strategy is a wise investment in your organization's future.

Don't Neglect These Three Traditional PR Activities

People sometimes become so enamored with online technology that they stop using the offline strategies that have been successful for decades. Don't make that mistake. Here are three traditional public relations activities that are necessary to manage your organization's reputation:

1. Database Management

You should have a database for volunteers and contributors that includes address, spouse, occupation, and years with the organization. For volunteers, that data should include preferences for volunteering, special skills, prior recognitions, and prior duties. For contributors, data should include contribution history, actual amounts and giving dates, special funding interests, prior recognitions, and personal preferences.

2. Education and Information Pieces

You should have three basic print education tools: the brochure, newsletter, and annual report. Even if you move these pieces online, you'll probably still need print versions, because people like to have something they can carry, give to others, and post on a bulletin board.

3. Issues Management

It's vital that you monitor how your mission is being perceived in the greater society. Public discussion is routinely occurring on topics related to your mission, and the media is either framing the discussion, assessing it for public discourse, or a combination of both.

Add These New Media to Your Communications

If yours is a small nonprofit, is it worthwhile to use the Internet to get your message across? Don't base your answer to this question on your organization's mission, size, or budget. Instead, ask yourself this: Do your audiences use the Internet?

If the answer is no, you may not need a Web site. If your mission is to provide services for senior citizens, for example, you can't expect them to sign up for programs online. (Studies show¹ that less than a third of people over 64 have ever gone online.) And if your organization isn't newsworthy, few journalists will need to access your site.

It's better not to have a site than to build one and then fail to maintain it. Such an incomplete effort sends a negative message. It would be like leaving your building unpainted or a broken door unfixed.

But if your key audiences are Internet users, you'll need to integrate the new media into your communication plan. Here are three ways to do so.

1. Web Site

To create a Web site, you'll need a copywriter, a graphic artist, and a computer programmer who knows HTML code. Dennis Wilcox² suggests some basic criteria to

avoid the pitfalls of having weak sites:

- **Define** the purpose of your site.
- **Design** the site with your target audiences in mind.
- **Don't just use** existing images. Instead, design a new look with strong graphics.
- **Update** the site at least weekly. This is the real cost of a Web site.
- **Don't overdo** graphics, since they take a long time to download.
- **Make the site** interactive: Provide buttons people can click on to explore topics.

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- **Ask** for feedback through an e-mail address to help the site evolve. Before launching your Web site, ask yourself these key questions:
 - **Does the site communicate** key information about your organization?
 - **Does its design reflect** the reputation you want?
 - **Does the site help you reach** your organization's main goals, such as raising dollars, finding volunteers, or creating new programs?
 - **Are the goals** of your key units — program, finance, administration, marketing, facilities, fundraising — aligned so that Web site content is consistent as well as functional?

Transaction-oriented sites offer your audiences another front door to "come in" to your organization. Their Web site visit should mirror the experience of entering your building, flipping through your catalog, or speaking to someone from your organization.

Some audiences prefer a focus on content with user-friendly presentations so they can receive information quickly, not wanting to wade through cute graphics or animated pages. Others like a

focus on design, including video and audio streaming, movable graphics, and exciting downloads. It's best to strike a balance between content and design. Here are some basic design rules to follow:

- **Base the look of your site** on such criteria as your mission, demographic profiles of your audiences, anticipated use by audiences, and budget and technical skills available.
- **Place your organization's name and logo** on every page of your Web site.
- **Provide a "search" tab** if your site has more than 100 pages.
- **Write straightforward copy** and headlines.
- **Structure each page** so it can be viewed easily. Use groupings and subheadings so users can quickly move around the pages.
- **Don't pack everything about your organization** into the home page. Use hypertext, which lets users click on icons to access information on upcoming pages.
- **Use photos**, but keep them current, and be mindful of copyright laws. Don't cram pages with lots of photos.
- **Monitor trends** in Web sites, and keep up with what's new.
- **Test the site** with real users before it goes public.²

Consider putting your newsletter, brochure, and annual report online. Adding such tools to your Web site can be beneficial in many ways. There's no costly printing and postage charge. You can send material out by e-mail to your database or keep it online as a link. You can update information continuously and replace information instantly. Most promotion experts agree that giving people the ability to find information when they want is better than intruding on them with a print piece in the mail. People access your site at their discretion and so are genuinely interested in your message, more likely to retain it, think of it positively, and perhaps respond to a call for action.

Increasing traffic to your Web
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site becomes the next goal. Use these key strategies:

- **Register your site** with major search engines and browsers. The rankings of sites that appear when someone uses a search function are based on the number of hits to each site and time spent at each site. Search engines such as Google offer preferred-site status to those who pay to be at the top of the search list every time.

- **Write with Web copy techniques**, using short sentences and blocks of information. You must have good copy that uses terms your audiences recognize.

- **Explain your organization's mission** clearly and briefly near the top of the home page and on each primary landing page.

- **Integrate your site** with your other promotional tools: Put the Web site address on your letterhead, business cards, brochures, newsletters, and signs. At special events, make sure the Web address is announced.

- **Ask people on your e-mail list** to visit your Web site for a special promotion and a chance to interact. For example, invite them to your site to sign up for a free giveaway related to a fundraising event or to fill out a survey for a chance on a raffle.

- **Share links.** Tell other nonprofits that you'll reciprocate if they put a link from their site to yours. Do the same with businesses that contribute to your organization. Look into community sites, such as local governments, libraries, schools, and universities, which offer free links to nonprofits. Use only the links that add value to your goals.

2. E-Communication

Never view e-mail as a substitute for interpersonal communication. Instead, think of it as one more way to build relationships.

Just as you've always asked people for their mailing address, now ask them to provide their

e-mail address. When you do so, make it clear how you'll use that information. Most people don't want weekly e-mail intrusions, but many will agree to a monthly newsletter or quarterly program update. This approach — in which people agree ahead of time that e-mail correspondence is acceptable — is the opt-in system of e-mail communication. The opt-out approach consists of sending the e-mail without an invitation, then asking if more e-mail communication is acceptable — clearly a more intrusive strategy. Surveys have found that only 30% of people respond favorably to opt-out (sometimes called spam), while 80% respond favorably to an opt-in message.³

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Use e-mail addresses, at least initially, only to send limited information such as brochures, newsletters, or annual reports, unless a specific fundraising campaign or special use of the e-mail address is announced and promoted ahead of time. Sending audiences unsolicited e-mail is considered a high-risk strategy and is open to new regulatory issues in some circumstances. The challenge is to figure out how to develop online relationships with your audiences so that e-mail can become a lucrative communication activity.

Here are some suggestions¹ for sending your messages by e-mail:

- **Use language that falls** between formal writing and conversation. Write in short sentences.

- **Make sure the e-mail is personalized** with the individual's name.

- **Respond as quickly as possible** to any e-mail sent to the organization. If personalized e-mail responses aren't possible for a day or longer, create an automated

response explaining when you will respond.

- **Make sure your organization's name** appears in the message box.

- **Don't make your e-list available** to outside groups. No other organizations should access an e-mail list unless all members of the list have given their permission.

Once you've established relationships, you can look at other ways to use e-mail. For example, you can give your audiences a chance to order tickets for fundraising events online, make online auction bids, or use their credit cards to donate to your organization during the holidays.

3. E-Media Relations

Most journalists say that e-mail is their preferred way to communicate with newsmakers. In fact, faxing is now second to e-mail. Over 75% of journalists report they are online at least once daily. Over 50% are on the Web two or three times a day. Journalists are now on the Internet as much as the telephone.

This means you need an e-mail system that lists the preferences of all the journalists you want to reach. Even if your organization isn't especially newsworthy, it's good insurance to form relationships with reporters. If your organization's mission suddenly hits the news, or if your organization confronts a crisis and faces media scrutiny, journalists will already know you and will be more likely to provide the media coverage you want.

If you have a Web site, you can create a media link with all the information normally found in a media kit — information on your organization's history, financial breakdown of income and expenditures, fundraising details, and biographies of key staff and board members. This information should be easily downloadable and include the e-mail addresses of people in your organization who are the primary sources for publicity. You can place your news releases on this media link, archived and easily accessible. The strengths of

online news releases include the following:

- **They save time and mailing costs** for your organization.
- **They save time for the journalist** because they're ready for electronic editing and typesetting.
- **They can be e-mailed directly** to the journalist, then placed on your site's media link.
- **They can be instantly updated**, corrected, and e-mailed again if necessary.
- **You can e-mail photos** along with your news releases.

Also be aware of the weaknesses and restrictions of online news releases:

- **The Internet is just another medium.** You must still use basic media relations principles, such as developing personal relationships with journalists and inviting them to experience your organization's mission firsthand.
- **Because of problems with spam**, most journalists won't respond to an e-mail unless they have already developed a connection to the sender.
- **Most journalists want news releases** in the actual e-mail, not attached as a separate document, unless they know the organization well.³

Here are strategies to help assure that journalists use your news releases:

- **Put a catchy phrase** in the "topic" line.
- **Start the e-mail** with a strong pitch for why the release is consequential, timely, and unique.
- **Write the release** in traditional inverted pyramid style (start with the conclusion, follow with supporting information, and end with the background). Keep it at around 250 words. It's better to leave journalists wanting more than to push lots of information they don't want.
- **Don't mass distribute** every news release to every address you have. Identify which journalists prefer to receive information by e-mail, print mail, or fax, and abide by their preferences.
- **Use blind copy distribution** that doesn't reveal the entire list getting the news release.
- **Provide** a contact person, including that person's phone number, e-mail address, and fax number.
- **Because e-mail addresses can change frequently**, keep your media list updated.
- **Don't overuse e-mail** for feature-oriented publicity. It works best for news-oriented information.

The technology may be changing, but the need to communicate about your programs, people, and plans will never change. The secret is to integrate the new media into your traditional PR efforts in a well-planned, consistent way. ■

Footnotes

- ¹Report by the Kaiser Family Foundation, <http://kff.org/>.
²Wilcox, Dennis L., *Public Relations Writing and Media Techniques*, Addison Wesley Longman (www.addisonwesleylongman.com).
³Middleberg, Don, *Winning PR in the Wired World*, McGraw-Hill (www.mcgraw-hill.com).

Resources

- Allen, Nick, "Using E-Mail & the Web to Acquire & Cultivate Donors," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 21, No. 1.
Bhagat, Vinay, "Online Advocacy: Mobilize Supporters to Take Action," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 21, No. 6.
Rhoufa, Mike, "Marketing Your Web Site with Search Engines," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 2.
Salzman, Jason, "Let the World Know: Make Your Cause News," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 1.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

Jennifer Mullen (jenn.mullen@colostate-pueblo.edu), professor of Mass Communications at Colorado State University-Pueblo in Pueblo, Colorado, is director of the public relations sequence, with specialty in nonprofit communications. She is advisor for the nonprofit minor and teaches the introductory course in nonprofit administration. She wrote this article with research assistance from students Dan Hargrove, Inge Malone, Ashleigh Wilson, and Afton Rossi.

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