

# The Most Important Question for You to Ask



**No, it's not how to cut costs. It's something else entirely.**

By Scott McKain

Volunteers and contributors aren't disappearing. Instead, they're becoming infinitely more discriminating in how much, and where, they give their time and money. To attract them, you need to use strategies that make your organization stand out from the pack.

Many nonprofits are in financial difficulty not because of the economy but because they've failed to make a case for themselves strong enough to keep their audience engaged. They are unsuccessful in creating a point of distinction so compelling that it separates them from the vast number of nonprofits seeking support.

So, what should your nonprofit do? You can find an excellent example in President Obama's campaign. Barack Obama understood what many leaders neglect – the four cornerstones of distinction:

**Clarity:** While competitors flailed away with mixed and multiple messages, Obama was clear. He was the candidate who represented *hope* and *change*.

You can't differentiate what you

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can't define. Organizations that don't clarify their mission can't distinguish themselves from their competitors. Obama understood this – and separated himself from the crowd.

**Creativity:** Obama transmitted his clear message with an innovative approach. By creatively using social media, Internet fundraising, the social networking service Twitter, and text-messaging contact with supporters, he united his followers in a distinctive manner.

**Communication:** Frequently communicating through compelling stories, rather than reciting facts, Obama recognized anecdotes are more powerful than details. Remember his election night speech to the hundreds of thousands in Grant Park? He concentrated his remarks on the story of a solitary voter, 106-year-old Anne Nixon Cooper. Viewing the monumental events of his election through her eyes presented our nation's history in a personal way.

**Customer focus:** On election night, millions of supporters received a text-message from Obama thanking them for their support,

and crediting them for his success. This electronic contact is a perfect example of how organizations should blend technology, strategy, and intense personalization to connect with people.

The single most important question your organization should be working on right now isn't "How do we cut costs?" but "How can our message be so powerful that it thoroughly engages our current supporters, attracts new ones, and distinguishes us from other nonprofits?" When you clarify your uniqueness through these four cornerstones – while trimming the fat from your organization – your organization will stand out and connect emotionally with your intended audience. ■

## Resources

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

Shenkman, Michael, "Defining Your Leader Brand," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 25, No. 2.

Zimmerman, Joel, "The Nonprofit Branding Exercise," *Nonprofit World*, Vol 26, No. 1.

These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members).

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