



# The Nonprofit Marketing Disability— And How to Overcome It

*Are you suffering from this insidious disease? Even the best nonprofit leaders aren't immune.*

BY PETER C. BRINCKERHOFF

In previous articles, I have emphasized the need for your organization to be more market based. In other words, you need to pay more attention to the many markets your organization serves.

Unfortunately, the very characteristics that make you a good nonprofit leader may be interfering with your ability to follow this advice. I call this problem the nonprofit marketing disability. In this article, I'll show you how to spot the warning signals and take action to improve.

## Focus on Wants, Not Needs.

Let's start at the beginning. Marketing, at its core, is identifying the people you serve, finding out what they want, and meeting those desires. This means that as people's wants change over time, your services and the way you provide them should be changing as well.

The people who receive your services are, like the rest of us, becoming more demanding consumers. They want to be heard. They want their wants met *now*—and met with courtesy and compassion.

That's not an unreasonable expectation. And, in an increasingly competitive arena, nonprofits across the country are having to pay more attention to all their customers, all the time.

This is where your disability becomes a barrier to success. Let me explain the disability: It is your training as a professional, whether you were initially educated as a social worker, minister, teacher, artist, scientist, psychologist, or physical therapist. You are trained to be the expert, interacting with people and deciding (or even diagnosing) what they need and then providing service to meet those needs. You know more than your clientele; thus, they should go along with what you decide they need.

So what's the problem? Where is the disability? Note that all the statements in the previous paragraph focus on people's

*needs*, not their wants. And here is the critical point:

People *have* needs.

People *buy* wants.

You have been trained to focus on needs. All marketing should zero in on wants.

This is not to deprecate your training nor the diagnostic phase inherent to serving your clients. The point is that you must separate your diagnostic skill from the skill of marketing.

## Listen with Marketing Ears.

In marketing, it's essential that you regularly ask your customers what they want. It's also crucial that you listen to what they tell you, not just tolerate their input.

Let's look at a real-world example—a nonprofit mental health center. It received 70% of its income from Medicaid clients, 20% from insurance and EAP contracts, and 10% from donations and private-pay clients. It provided its services at a central location on weekdays from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Unfortunately, client fees were dropping, Medicaid rates were at risk, and counseling visits were off steadily. The board and staff could not figure out what the problem was. So they surveyed their customers to find out. They discovered a number of things.

First, several support groups had been meeting in the basement and were sick of the location. They had asked if they

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could meet at a different place, but the counselor never passed the request on. He viewed it as “just a gripe,” not a marketing issue. So group members came less often, and associated billings dropped accordingly. After the survey, the support groups were told that they could meet elsewhere, at a place of their choice. Membership and attendance soared, as did billings.

Second, the organization had been trying to increase its higher-income, private-pay customers for years. This effort resulted in more (but not many) upper-income people coming to the center for help. It also made some of the Medicaid people uncomfortable—enough so that they missed appointments. They had complained, but counselors, again, had ignored their protests.

Thus, the survey clarified the center’s main problem: Practitioners were listening with counseling ears but not with marketing ears.

When confronted with the results, many staff members denied any responsibility. “I’m a professional psychologist, not an ad man!” was a typical response. It took some education for them to understand that they were part of the organization’s marketing team. They needed to learn how to mix their professional training with their marketing role. Since then, the organization has had much greater success in satisfying its customers.

### Never Stop Asking.

Early in your relationship with service recipients, you undoubtedly ask

them many questions to “diagnose” what they need. But do you continue to ask on a regular basis? Perhaps not, and here is another problem. Marketing requires constant asking to adjust to changes in people’s wants.

For example, suppose you ask your staff what compensation and fringe benefits they want. Some will want dental coverage; some will focus on day care or retirement; others will want more take-home pay. But if you ask them five years from now, their responses will be dramatically different, because they will all be five years older, with different wants.

The same is true for you. Remember the first time you went into a Wal-Mart and were met by the greeter? You felt wonderful and told everyone what a great idea it was. Now? If there isn’t a greeter, you feel a bit abused.

Or look at your office. Five years ago, a mail response was fine. Now it’s “Fax it to me” for nearly everything.

Is the same true for the people you serve? Are their wants changing? Certainly. How are they changing? I don’t know, and neither do you until you ask and listen. It doesn’t matter how

much experience or education you have; you don’t know what people want until you ask.

The lesson for you and your staff is: Don’t ignore what your service recipients are asking for. You need to ask, listen, and ask again. Only then will you overcome your professional training. Only then will you be able to jump from your diagnostic mode to your marketing mode and back again. Without that importance skill, your organization may languish and eventually disappear in the competitive fray for increasingly limited public and private funds. ■

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