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## the top ten keys to effective communication

Does the public really understand what your organization does? Here's how to get your message across.

**T**HE SECRET TO the San Diego Council on Literacy's success is communication. Now in its 11th year of service to the San Diego community, the Council does not directly tutor the estimated 8,000 new readers it helps every year; instead, it acts as a voice for the 24 literacy programs it represents countywide. How? Through special events, community outreach projects, a speakers bureau, workshops, fundraising, media relations, and overall support of literacy.

"Literacy, or the lack of it, plays a role in many of our social problems," says the Council's director Jose Cruz. "Our communications help us help people who want to help themselves. The importance of our ability to communicate is magnified by the fact that our target population of low-reading individuals has limited access to information."

Here are 10 keys to effective communication which the Council uses to achieve its mission "to make San Diego a more literate community":

### 1 Know Your Target Audiences.

The Council carefully tracks its incoming calls and performs surveys to identify its target audiences. This data-gathering has helped the Council pinpoint three groups it needs to reach: (1) providers of literacy service, (2) the media, and (3) the general public.

#### **Tips on gathering target-group information:**

- Ask for the name, address, and phone number of everyone who calls your organization. People who show their interest by phoning make your best target group. Add them to your database, and follow up often.
- Conduct regular surveys to gain feedback from your target groups.
- Put care into your survey questions. Use specific questions, designed to minimize the chances of misinterpretation.
- Keep the language on your survey simple.
- Be sure respondents understand the purpose (and importance) of the survey.
- Consider doing individual in-depth interviews. Such interviews will yield valuable, detailed information.
- Hold focus groups regularly, choosing people who are knowledgeable and representative of the groups you want to reach.
- Don't overload the focus group with too much material. Each focus group should last no longer than two or three hours.

See "Selected References" for more on surveys and focus groups.

## 2 Set Goals.

The Council uses volunteer committees to set clear goals for the organization. These committees create five-year plans for public relations, marketing, finance, and fundraising.

### **Tips on setting communication goals:**

- Be sure your goals are clear and achievable.
- Keep your target audience in mind when setting goals.
- Welcome ideas from volunteers, staff, and board members.
- Use committee approval to narrow the list of ideas. Decide by committee vote which goals to pursue.
- Be sure to translate goals into concrete action steps. Specify who does what by when and how.
- Follow up in writing and by phone to be sure everyone is clear on what is expected, by when.

## 3 Reach Your External Audiences.

Several times a year, the Council sends direct mail pieces to everyone in its database of supporters locally and nationwide. The Council uses newsletters, memos, brochures, and marketing materials to keep its name in front of its audiences.

### **Tips on reaching your external audiences:**

- Diversify your message. Don't become predictable on how and when you communicate. Use a variety of vehicles (brochures, letters, newsletters, videos) to keep your message fresh and easy to digest.
- Use exciting graphics. Most computer software programs offer excellent graphics as a standard part of the package. You can also use clip art found in art supply stores.
- Be sure your message is simple, relevant, and interesting.

## 4 Keep in Touch with Internal Audiences.

The Council reaches its network of literacy service providers through internal communications such as newsletters, memos, and monthly meetings.

### **Tips on internal communications:**

- Treat your internal audiences the same as your external ones.
- Communicate with your internal audiences at least once a month via newsletter, memo, or special event.
- Be sure your message clearly tells your internal audiences how your work benefits them.
- Get frequent and regular input from your internal audiences through surveys or suggestion boxes asking for ideas on improving your operation and communication.
- Organize monthly meetings with a clear message that it is mandatory for your internal audiences to attend. Provide refreshments.

## 5 Research Volunteer Opportunities.

The Council couldn't reach nearly as many people if not for its volunteers. The Council is constantly seeking new volunteers.

Indeed, the Council's marketing and public relations coordinator, Paul Brencick, joined the staff as a volunteer. Brencick was working as a marketing manager for a private firm in St. Louis when he became dissatisfied with his "materialistic lifestyle." In 1994, he moved to San Diego with a mission to "somehow find a way to help people."

Brencick credits the Corporation for National Service with changing his life. Through its Americorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program, he became the marketing and PR coordinator for the San Diego Council on Literacy.

"I cannot begin to tell you how fulfilling it's been to switch to nonprofit work," says Brencick. "I feel I've made more of a mark on San Diego than all the years I worked in St. Louis."

A big part of Brencick's job at the San Diego Council on Literacy involves recruiting volunteers to help with its activities. "As most nonprofit administrators know, it's truly a challenge to find and keep high-quality, dependable volunteers," he notes. Here are a few tips on locating and retaining top-notch volunteers:

- Always keep your eyes open to new opportunities to recruit volunteers. Tell your current volunteers and paid staff to talk about volunteer jobs to neighbors, co-work-

ers, friends, and family. Volunteer work is a great way for students to gain valuable work experience and for families to spend meaningful time together.

- Use your special events, activities, and communications materials (newsletters, PSAs, brochures, and so on) to advertise for volunteers.
- Keep past volunteers on your mailing list, and contact them regularly about new, one-time volunteer opportunities.
- Reward your volunteers with praise, recognition, and anything else you can afford to give them in return for contributing their time and energy.

## 6 Form Media Connections.

Another key to the Council's success is its strong connection to the media. A solid relationship with local TV, radio, and print reporters is essential to any nonprofit seeking awareness of its cause. Without media support, many good causes and activities go unnoticed. Nonprofits should establish a presence with the media by doing the following:

- Find out the names, titles, and addresses for each major reporter, editor, and broadcast producer in your area. Using these names, create a database of media contacts. Be sure to keep these names updated, since media people change jobs frequently.
- Send out regular news releases and story ideas to your media contacts.
- Invite your media contacts to participate in your events as master of ceremonies, auctioneer, celebrity guest, and so on.
- Create a press kit which includes full details about your organization (mission, history, lists of providers, articles, photos, bios, and so on).
- Attend events where you'll see your media contacts, and get to know them.

## 7 Use Special Events to Raise Awareness.

The Council sponsors several events each year to keep literacy on the minds of San Diegans. Each summer, it helps coordinate the "Union Tribune Dr. Seuss Race for Literacy," featuring an 8K run/walk, health fair, and children's walk. To commemorate International Literacy Day on September 8, it sponsors a "Family Reading Festival," with storytelling, facepainting, and book-making.

### Tips for holding special events:

- Good planning is the key to any successful event. Form a small committee of staff, volunteers, and board members to plan the event at least three months in advance.
- Delegate responsibility for the many tasks required. Welcome new ideas, suggestions, and volunteers. Don't try to do it all yourself!
- Accomplish as many details as possible early in the planning process.
- Involve local businesspeople. You'll be surprised how supportive and enthusiastic they can be about sponsoring charity events in their community.

## Decide to Network

Decide to network

Use every letter you write

Every conversation you have

Every meeting you attend

To express your fundamental beliefs and dreams

Affirm to others the vision of the world you want

Network through thought

Network through action

Network through love

Network through the spirit

You are the center of a network

You are the center of the world

You are a free, immensely powerful source

of life and goodness

Affirm it

Spread it

Radiate it

Think day and night about it

And you will see a miracle happen:

The greatness of your own life.

In a world of big powers, media, and monopolies

But of five billion individuals

Networking is the new freedom

the new democracy

a new form of happiness.

—Robert Muller

## 8 Speak Out about Your Cause.

The Council coordinates a Speakers Bureau, composed of volunteers who speak about the Council at service organizations. Each speaker is joined by an adult learner (an adult enrolled in a literacy program) who talks to the group from the learner's perspective. Speakers use a short video to underline their message.

### Tips on using a speakers bureau:

- Train speakers so that they will all deliver a consistent message, but urge them to speak from the heart when sharing their personal experiences with the audience.
- Create an outline for speakers to follow so that they will relay your organization's message accurately.

- Provide speakers with fact sheets, including frequently asked questions.
- At the end of the speech, be sure each speaker makes a plea for donations, volunteers, or whatever your organization needs at the time.
- Use a video to enhance the presentation. Use it, for instance, to relay statistics about your cause, so that your speakers don't have to memorize or read stats to the audience.
- Be sure your video is professionally produced and narrated. Seek free help from local video production houses, TV stations, and other businesses.
- Keep your video short (five to 10 minutes max).

## 9 Prepare Eye-Catching Support Materials.

To support its events and activities, the Council regularly develops new brochures, stickers, posters, and T-shirts to promote literacy.

### Tips to follow when developing promotional materials:

- Keep the message simple.
- Be sure to include your organization's name, address, and phone number.
- Use bright colors and unique graphics to attract attention.
- Develop a logo and use it consistently.
- Avoid using dates, which will make your materials obsolete. Instead, make your materials as timeless as possible; you can thus save money by printing extras for future use.
- Seek out vendors who offer nonprofit discounts.

## 10 Collaborate.

The Council collaborates with many other nonprofit organizations, who help spread its message. For example, the Council offers free classes for front-line staff in other nonprofits, training them how to get help if they identify someone with literacy problems.

### Tips on forming collaborations:

- Form outreach committees and programs to create awareness of your services among other nonprofits.
- Keep your eyes open to changes in your community that may foster a partnership between your organization and other nonprofits. For example, the Council recently formed an alliance with the local Prevent Blindness program. The two nonprofits created a service called "We Care Eye Care," which provides free eye exams and glasses to people enrolled in literacy programs.
- Seek out organizations similar to your own, and discuss the possibility of merging or collaborating instead of competing for the same market and funding.
- Finally, create awareness and visibility in your community so that other organizations know who you are, what you do, and where to find you for collaborative efforts. ■

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## Most people would give anything ... To learn to read.

For people who can't read, life can be devastating when everyday signs leave them baffled.

You can help.

Your contribution to literacy can make a world of difference in someone's life.

You will be supporting the San Diego Council on Literacy in helping to teach thousands of San Diegans to read and write.

Without your help, by the year 2010, declining reading skills will lead to an elite, literate class of no more than 30% of the U.S. population.  
*(U.S. News & World Report)*

**To reach the public, make your message clear, relevant, and interesting.**

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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