

# Is Your Organization a Pacesetter?

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## It should be.

BY GAYLE L. GIFFORD

Let's face it. It's tough out there searching for dollars. Each time you look around, the majority of grants, members, and corporate honchos still seem to go to that same small number of well-known organizations in your town. Once in a while, a new kid will crop up and suddenly capture the interests and funding of the donors you've been trying to reach.

What can you do to keep up?

It's time to stop waiting for lightning to strike and start generating your own electricity. It's time to develop a strategy to gain recognition as a pacesetter organization.



## Who Are the Pacesetters?

*Webster's New World Dictionary* describes a pacesetter as "a person, group, or thing that leads the way or serves as a model."<sup>1</sup> One secret of pacesetter organizations is that they understand intuitively that their community standing affects their programming success and their attractiveness to givers of all kinds.

As Bruce Kastiff once stated, "It's . . . like dealing with the Ford Foundation. You don't tell them how good you are. You let them read about you in *The New York Times*."<sup>2</sup> In effect, Mr. Kastiff was describing a pacesetter organization.

So what do pacesetter organizations have in common?

## Value quality, and cherish results.

**Pacesetters are recognized leaders.** They are the individuals and organizations to whom others turn to define upcoming issues. You read about them in the newspaper and hear them at conferences. They're the ones invited to participate as partners with foundation staff in developing new grantmaking approaches.

**Pacesetters are not afraid to speak out.** Pacesetting organizations do not fear original thinking. They are bold, honest, and global in what they think and what they do. They stick their necks out to tell the truth.

**Pacesetters think big.** Pacesetters think about large public policy issues even as they work on local problems. They find innovative and mold-breaking ways to solve them. Then, pacesetters consider it their obligation to share their ideas with the broader community.

If this doesn't sound like your organization, then it's time to take a critical look at the program work you do. If it does sound like you but you aren't getting the recognition you deserve, it's time to overhaul your communications program.

This article is designed to tell you how to build a pacesetter reputation through strategic communications. You still have to *earn* that reputation with quality programming.

No communication strategy will paper over poor quality work. Therefore, it's critical that your organization develop a program approach which values quality and cherishes results. And that starts at the top.

The chief executive must think and act like a leader. Does the CEO articulate an original and high-impact vision of what your organization is trying to accomplish? Set the bar high, demanding no less than the highest quality programming with outcome-based, measurable objectives. Organizations that are unwilling to establish desired outcomes and seek to meet them will soon find themselves out of the running for grants and major gifts.

Incorporate theory and expertise into your program approach. Engage experts in your work. Enlist their service as members of your program committee or advisory board. Ensure that your paid and volunteer staff thoroughly understand why you do what you do. Be deliberate but open to innovation.

Above all else, find the truth. Seek out feedback. Value critical analysis, and make it a routine part of your programming. Learn from your successes and your failures.

## Don't Leave Recognition to Chance.

When you feel confident that your programs are of the highest caliber, then you're ready to develop a pacesetter communications strategy. The following five steps are a starting point for building recognition.



## 1. Build strategic networks.

Imagine that your professional colleagues were asked: “What are the best organizations in the field working on these issues?” Would your name be on the list?

Establish working relationships with the organizations which are already perceived as pacesetters in your field. Get yourself invited to participate in existing informal networks of similar organizations.

If no organization exists for your program area, create one. Meet infrequently but regularly. Keep in touch professionally through e-mail, notes, idea swaps, and communication exchanges.

Make sure that you are included in printed or online directories of organizations. Have your staff speak at major conferences in their field. And don’t overlook your development, marketing, and administrative staff. The expertise of all your staff reflects the overall quality of your organization.

At some point, a potential donor will contact your peers to check out your organization. Make sure they can answer who you are and what you are doing.

## 2. Serve on governing boards of strategic institutions.

What committees or organizations influence policy in the areas in which you work? These committees may include the economic development committee of your Chamber of Commerce or the Governor’s Commission on Women. Ensure that your organization is represented on these committees. If you can’t get appointed to these committees, volunteer for subcommittees where membership is

more open. By participating on these committees, you not only make important contacts, but you enrich your program work by learning more about key problems and their possible solutions.

## 3. Create landmark publications.

One of the best ways to build your prestige is to develop publications which illustrate your leadership in your field. “White papers” are good opportunities for engaging key audiences. Circulate a draft of a white paper on a pressing public concern, outlining key issues and your recommended solutions. Ask for feedback from key stakeholders and audiences you are trying to develop. Include public officials, foundation program officers, colleagues, and major supporters in your feedback loop.

A caution here: Don’t just go through the exercise as a public relations opportunity. Use the white paper as a way to generate thoughtful feedback and engage your colleagues in a dialogue about your issues and programs. Seeking input, listening to what you hear, and thoughtfully incorporating those opinions in your planning are some of the best ways to improve your programs *and* cultivate potential supporters.

## 4. Place the right stories with the right media.

Remember Mr. Kastiff’s advice to “let them read about you in *The New York Times*.” You don’t need to aim as high as *The New York Times*—at least not initially—to be a leader in your own constituency.

Do you know what publications your key audiences read? Find out, then find ways to secure

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article placements about your organization in those publications.

Be creative about your use of media. Did key supporters graduate from the same colleges and universities as you or your staff? Then consider placing a story about your work in an alumni newsletter. Are there specialty or trade publications important to your sector? If yours is an environmental group working on marine issues, for example, you may reach important audiences through boating or fishing publications. Consider the business press or weekly newspapers. And don't forget to respond to magazine and newspaper articles related to your work through high-readership "Letters to the Editor."

Start small and work up. The staff at larger, more well-known publications read smaller pubs. By building awareness of your organization, you'll work your way up to *The New York Times*.

## 5. Routinely communicate with your target audiences.

I'm sure that each of us has heard a donor lament: "The only time I hear from the XYZ organization is when it's time to ask for money." Don't let your only contact be a solicitation.

Establish a pacesetter communications calendar and database. Schedule a quarterly contact with your target audiences. You don't need to create a separate newsletter or fancy publication. Has a great article about your organization recently appeared in a newspaper or journal? Send a copy of the clipping to a prospect who shares that interest area. Include a note: "I wasn't sure you saw this. Thought you might be interested." Or send the executive summary of a special report you've just published. Offer to follow up with the complete study. Ask for feedback.

Who should be in your database? Include professional colleagues, public officials, key legislators, business leaders, trade association heads, foundation staff and targeted trustees, board members, honorary board and committee members, media contacts, major donors, and anyone else important to your work. Keep the list manageable.

The goal of your communications is twofold:

- to build your awareness and prestige
- to engage your target audience in meaningful interaction with your organization.

## You Don't Need a Big Budget.

Don't be immobilized by a small budget. None of the ideas in this article carry big price tags. In fact, by building community outreach and feedback into all your work, you'll develop better programs while you increase your standing in the community.

If you do have a substantial budget for communications, then use it wisely. Where will you get the

most impact? A video may be flashy, but will it do more than gather dust? Would you have more impact by hosting an annual conference featuring experts in your areas of concern? Conferences provide you with an opportunity to define an issue, build strategic networks through selection of speakers and panelists, and distribute printed conference proceedings under your name. Carefully consider your objectives and alternatives before you start any expensive undertaking.

So, don't sit around wondering why all the money and resources are flowing to other organizations. Get started right away on building the pacesetter organization you want to be. ■

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce Kastiff, director of the James A. Michener Art Museum, made this statement in comparing James Michener's charitable giving to that of the prestigious Ford Foundation, as quoted in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Vol. IX, No. 6, January 9, 1997, p. 12.

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