



Your Mission Statement Has a Mission

Your mission statement can do more harm than good if used in the wrong way.

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

“Make no small plans.... for they have not the power to stir men’s blood.”

—Niccolo Machiavelli *The Prince*, 1514

We’ve all been exposed to mission statements that are too vague, too grandiose, too all-encompassing, too word-smithed-to-death, or just not in plain English. A well-written statement about a well-focused mission can be a nonprofit organization’s most useful tool. It can concentrate board and staff efforts, describe funding rationale, invigorate volunteers, catalyze public support, and prepare an organization for the future.

Of course, a poorly fashioned statement about an unfocused mission can do more harm than good. Even the most descriptive and well-written mission statement becomes an Achilles Heel when put to uses to which it isn’t suited. Let’s explore some of these missteps, along with ways to use your mission statement more dynamically.

Mission Statement Impossible?

Far too many nonprofit mission statements read as some version of “We exist to solve the present problem” rather than looking toward the future. Exclusive focus on the present doesn’t stir much passion toward building a better tomorrow.

Passionate missions must reach for high horizons. Reaching high horizons is the work of mission-driven

organizations—with dynamic, organization-shaping mission statements. To focus on your dynamic future, make sure that your mission statement:

- **illuminates** rather than describes
- **guides** rather than decrees
- **motivates** rather than simply states.

Beware Using Your Mission Statement in Marketing.

Be careful about using your mission statement to describe your organization to outsiders. Many experts, especially some strategic planning consultants, will tell you that your mission statement is your major PR tool to market your organization to funders and to the public. It certainly has some PR utility within particular portions of your overall marketing mix. Yet, in practice, too many mission statements don’t contain the compelling messaging needed in today’s competitive marketplace of ideas.

Keep in mind that the human attention span has become a commodity of enormous value. Your marketing message often has only one shot to capture that fickle attention span. A one-size-fits-all advertising strategy is unlikely to work.

A mission statement is often a one-dimensional message designed to

appeal primarily to the board and staff who created it. Whether for fundraising or marketing goals, targeted approaches are increasingly the key to success. Therefore, think hard before using your mission statement verbatim in your marketing efforts.

In strategic planning, you use your mission statement as a baseline from which to create your goals and reach your strategic objectives. Use your mission statement in the same way to reach your marketing and PR objectives:

- **Craft clear, engaging taglines** to use on your letterhead, brochures, and newsletter mastheads.

- **Form talking points** to describe your organization to various audiences. Remember that audiences have different information needs, so target a talking point to each audience you might need to reach. Be careful about using “nonprofit-speak” and insider jargon.

- **Research the insider jargon** and values of your intended audience. Then, craft your talking points in *their* terminology. Many of the civic groups, community organizations, and foundations you need to reach have their own mission statements and their own slang. Find out



what they are. Communicate your mission by translating the values held by your mission into the values held by your audience.

- **Use your mission statement as a baseline** for mapping out your marketing and outreach plans. Just as a good mission statement can help you avoid mission creep, it can also help you avoid marketing myopia.

- **If you still insist** on plastering your mission statement all over every marketing piece you produce, at least don't label it "Mission Statement." How dull and bureaucratic sounding! Use a more powerful header like "Mission," or how about "Our Mission"? Remember that you are trying to engage people's hearts and minds around what you wish to accomplish, not merely describe something. No one will ever aspire to great deeds for a mere "statement." But great sacrifices have always been made for a compelling "Mission."

Many mission statements read like the ingredients list on a box of cereal. They describe in mind-numbing detail what the stuff is made from. Even in today's ingredient-sensitive society, putting all those ingredients in big letters on the front of the box wouldn't be a marketer's swiftest move. Skillful marketers highlight only those ingredients the customer is most interested in. Next, savvy marketers depict the pleasing textures and flavors awaiting customers who buy the product.

Do the same thing with your mission statement. Extract "key ingredients" and "pleasing textures" to grab attention just as marketers make one cereal box stand out from a whole shelf of others.

Don't Confuse Your Mission Statement with Outcome Measurement.

A mission statement can cause a disconnect between an organization's input and its projected outcome. When the mission statement is imagined to be an actual operational out-

come, the measurement metrics can get gummed up. While excellent as a lighthouse beacon, a mission statement is less than efficient when board or staff try to use it as a flashlight.

- **Don't confuse the high-horizon vision** reflected in your mission statement with a concrete, measurable outcome. Achieving your mission isn't calculated in short-term outcomes. Program and service outcomes are the step-functions of serving your mission. The saying "Think globally-act locally" applies in outcome-based measurement. Mission accomplishment is a cumulative process of "local" program outcomes combining over time to produce "global" mission attainment.

- **Check your program inputs and outcome measurements** against the achievement horizon outlined in your mission statement. You'll quickly see whether they're in congruence. If not, either your mission or your program needs realignment. This is your best check against the disease of mission creep.

Make It a Motivating Guide for All.

Nonprofit employees often have trouble integrating the organization's mission into their daily work. There's little buy-in from line staff because the board and executive leadership crafted the mission statement. Even when employees are asked for input, it's still often the organization's upper echelon that drives the wordsmithing of the final product.

Sure, staff may subscribe to the mission statement at an intellectual level. Yet, the trick is to assimilate the mission into diverse personal values, job functions, and work styles.

Most organizations do a credible job of using the mission statement to craft the goals and objectives of their strategic plan. But the day-to-day goals at every staff level should also wrap around the mission statement. Some organizations get at this by crafting a "values statement" that articulates how the staff will live the

mission in terms of attitude, decision-making, and professionalism. Here are some other ideas:

- **Create a values statement** for each department in your organization. This is an especially good idea if there are tensions between, say, program and fundraising staff. A values statement helps people understand and respect how each department contributes to the whole of the mission.

- **Ask all employees** to craft their own values statements to go along with their job. Give each staff member the mission statement and their job description as a guide. Work with them to create their own values around how they serve the mission within the daily parameters of their work. Don't consider this a frivolous exercise. What you will be constructing is a more dynamic and accurate performance evaluation tool. Don't be surprised if your employees hold themselves to a higher standard of performance than with your old industrial-age evaluation methods. After all, they won't just be "doing" a job in support of the mission—they will be owning and "being" the mission.

Effective mission statements aren't declarations apart from staff's daily work. They immerse staff in the mission so that the daily details are strategic. ■

Selected Resources

Glasrud, Bruce, "Being Proactive Means Being Pro-Future," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 5.

Jenson, Donna, "Sharing the Vision: Every Leader's Obligation," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Public Relations and Communications, Leadership Series, Volumes I and II*.

Vogt, Jean, "Demystifying the Mission Statement," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 1.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 608-274-9777, Ext. 221, www.danenet.org/snpo.

Bruce Glasrud is an anthro-futurist and president of Third Sector Horizons (4837 Hanson Road, Shoreview, Minnesota 55126-5919, 651-482-0324, futurer@aol.com), specializing in nonprofit organization futures.