

How to Send Less Mail and Increase Results

Rather than sending more messages, send fewer, more consistent ones.



By Randy W. Brewer

As life becomes more and more complex, the clutter in people's mailboxes multiplies. You can almost hear prospective donors screaming "Uncle!" as they open their mail.

It's not that they don't want to give. Only that they yearn for a way to discern the most deserving organization from a sea of hopefuls.

How will they make that judgment? One criterion will be the integrity of the communications they receive.

A Case Study: What Doesn't Work?

How does a nonprofit organization communicate integrity? Let's begin by looking at what *doesn't* work.

Not long ago, a rescue mission in northern California needed some feedback. Their annual donor response rates had fallen a dangerously low 2%.

Looking at the mailings they'd been sending to donors, it didn't

take a rocket scientist to grasp the gist of their problem. This organization was giving the distinct impression that they were disorganized, inconsistent, and lacking in focus.

Their communications were haphazard, of all different shapes and sizes. There was no consistent look to their logo, image, or mailings. They might send out a postcard inviting donors to a banquet or event. Then there'd be an

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Donors base choices on the integrity of the communications they receive.

appeal letter, but it would have a completely different look to it. Donors had no sense that the organization had a consistent image of itself.

It gets worse. One week a four-color slick would invite prospects to a \$1,000-a-plate dinner. A few weeks later there'd be a xeroxed flyer announcing that the organization was running out of money.

Besides these contradictions, there was inconsistency about the organization's purpose. Each communication stated its purpose differently, raising confusion about exactly what was being accomplished. If you were a prospective donor, wouldn't you want a clear mental image of what your money was going to achieve before you wrote out your check?

What's Your Brand?

It may sound strange — even sacrilegious — to talk about a nonprofit as a brand. When we think of brands we think of McDonald's, Coke, IBM. Commercial enterprises. But the larger definition of "brand" doesn't require that it be a for-profit company. A "brand" is simply an entity whose attributes and personality are consistent and clear to everyone.

Take McDonald's. What does everyone know about them? They're cheap, they're fast, their menu is consistent. They have a certain "personality": They're family-friendly, they give out toys, they have playgrounds, they understand parents' need to relax. Being a brand is all about consistency of attributes.

If you're a rescue mission, what are your attributes? You're Christian. You're faith-based. Always open — 24/7. Absolutely welcoming anyone. You're a safe place. You're caring, trustworthy, warm, and friendly.

So a rescue mission has a brand image, too. And to the extent that it projects that image clearly, it will be trusted — and supported — by the public.

That's why every nonprofit should state, either directly or indirectly, its goals and attributes in all its communications. Every memo and other internal communication should reflect the organization's attributes. That strengthens the brand. Everything the organization says and does should be consistent with its image, purpose, mission, and brand. Otherwise, disjointed communication is likely to result.

Visually there must be consistency, too. You don't see McDonald's written in various ways — it's always the same. The big arches. The same typography every time. There are reasons for that. Every single edge you can possibly gain from making your message and

image consistent will help you be that much more successful.

Charities don't have endless resources. Advertising dollars are hard to come by. Therefore, maximizing your impact with brand consistency is vital for stretching your marketing budget.

Use Your Mission to Focus Your Brand

If the word "brand" seems too anomalous when talking about nonprofits, it may be more comfortable to talk about purpose or mission. What is the purpose of a rescue mission?

To change people's lives. To save souls. To feed the hungry. To house the homeless. To rehabilitate. These goals should be listed and understood by everyone from the board of directors to the janitor. Every communication — from your mailings to the voice of the person who answers your telephone — should reflect these goals.

Every charity should state its goals in all its communications — even internal memos.

Rethink That Voice-Mail System

Speaking of the person who answers the telephone...there's something inappropriate about having a machine answer the phone at a rescue mission. Many of the callers are at their wits' end. The last thing they need is a voice-mail message telling them to call back at another time or a series of prompts, "push one to volunteer, push two to donate, push three..." and so on.

Remember the rescue mission's attributes: welcoming and warm, 24/7. Voice mail is not consistent with those attributes.

Chart Your Communication Stream

Once you've evaluated your brand and purpose, you're ready to collect and categorize your communications.

Start with a blank chart. List each month down the left side of

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the grid and each of your audiences across the top. Beginning with January, make a check mark in each audience box for every time something is mailed, e-mailed, or phoned to them.

For example, January/Active Donors: Say that you have three check marks in this month due to one mailing (a welcome package), one telemarketing call (a thank-you call), and one thank-you/receipt mailing. Repeat this record-keeping process for each month, each audience type. You'll be amazed at how many times messages are being sent out and how different they are in purpose and focus. Clearly, there are different strategies for each audience and message...but are they consistent with your organization's brand and purpose? Are you over-communicating to certain audiences? Could you merge some of the messages?

When our rescue mission in California used such a chart, they discovered they were sending over 32 messages a year to most of their audience groups. In addition, the communications were disjointed, as if they were from completely different organizations. This might have been because one department (PR) wasn't talking to another (fundraising) or because one discipline (planned giving) wasn't communicating with another (annual funds). Whatever the cause, the donors suffered a confusing stream of communications, and results fell off.

How Much Mail Is Just Right?

There is no perfect number of communications that's right for every organization. However, by looking at your chart and analyzing the types, style, and content of your messages, you can put yourself in the prospective donor's place and judge for yourself whether your communications are "integrated." Do they convey "integrity" in the sense of being one-pointed, whole, and of a piece? Do you look like a solid

organization worthy of a donor's trust?

Results will dictate how many communications are right for each of your audience groups. And results will improve if your messages are strong, consistent, and effective. So, rather than worry about the perfect number of communications, why not make the very next communication as perfect as possible?

Less Is More

Wouldn't it be great if just one mailing, e-mail, or telephone call would result in enough funds for you to operate the entire year? Not very likely, you say, but that doesn't mean it's necessary to rush off in the opposite direction. By planning appropriately, you'll be able to decrease the number of communications and increase results. ■

Resources

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

Lauer, Larry, "How to Improve Internal Communications," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 3.

Keller, Thomas, "The Dirty Dozen: 12 Questions Nonprofit Leaders Ask About Direct Mail," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 3.

Warwick, Mal, "When Is the Best Time to Mail Fundraising Letters?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 5.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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