

## FUNDRAISING AND COMMUNICATIONS

### Turning Strange Bedfellows into Trusted Partners

*With a little effort on both sides, and a desire to do what's best for the organization, fundraisers and communicators can go from being strange bedfellows to trusted partners*

*By Scott Nelson, Senior Consultant*

**A**t a small dinner gathering of professional communicators recently, a colleague fairly new to the field asked me “Which is more important in a nonprofit organization – marketing and communications or fundraising?” It was an interesting question, and one I had not heard posed quite that way before. “You really can’t do one well without the other,” I said. “In that sense, they are both equally important.”

After many years working in mid- to senior-level communications and PR positions for large organizations such as the University of California, Irvine; Rockwell; Yamaha Motor USA; and Experian – and after bringing those skills and experiences to my nonprofit consulting role – I always find the intersection between fundraising and communications an interesting topic of conversation.

The truth is that almost all nonprofit organizations require an effective fundraising function to keep their community relationships strong, their programs running, and the lights on. Without the important philanthropic revenue fundraising generates, most nonprofits – and the societal benefits they provide – would not exist. Also, as important as it is, most fundraisers do more than just raise money. They are constantly out in the community developing and strengthening relationships and serving as ambassadors for the organization. In some cases, they may act as much as business developers and brand champions as fundraisers, per se. Score one for the fundraisers!

At the same time, raising philanthropic support without the benefit of good communication is like driving a car without gas in the tank – you can try it, but you’re not likely to get very far. Today’s savvy donors require effective and frequent communication to understand, engage with, and financially support an organization and its mission. Most nonprofits also have a number of other key constituencies (their Board, government leaders, community partners, clients, the media, etc.) who need clear and continuous communication to maintain a necessary level of understanding and trust in the organization. By its very nature communication is an ongoing process, and in that sense the communicator’s job is never done. Chalk one up for the communicators!

As logical as it may seem that fundraising and communications are equally important and essential in most nonprofits, quite often, especially in larger, more complex organizations that serve multiple constituencies – and even in many smaller nonprofits – there can be tensions or misunderstandings between the fundraising and communications functions and/or individuals within them. Over the years I have observed a number of people in each of these functions express frustration that their counterparts don’t understand or respect what they do, the skill with which they do it, and what they need from the other to be most effective.



Typically, fundraisers want communications to be more fundraising-centric. To heck with those pesky public- and media-relations distractions and social media posts; give me a knock-out case for support and some solid stewardship communications to help me land that major gift! It's a generalization, but there can be a tendency among some, though certainly not all, fundraisers to view communications as somehow less bottom-line oriented than their own function, and therefore less valuable to the organization. Some also view communications as a purely tactical function, to be enlisted as needed (often at the last minute, some communicators might say) to write a press release, develop a brochure, or edit a fundraising appeal letter. In other cases there is the perception, seemingly held by one or two people in every organization, that communications is something almost anyone can do. I call this the "big-C, little-c" dilemma. It occurs when trained, experienced communications professionals – those responsible for formal, strategic (big-C) communications for an organization – must overcome thinking that says "Hey, I'm a good writer and we all communicate interpersonally (little-c) on a daily basis. Doing this for a living must be easy!"

In fact, just as fundraising has become an increasingly professional and specialized field, communications has become an increasingly strategic and results-driven core function in many nonprofits. In particular, there has been increased emphasis on targeted outcomes, measurable results, and return on communications investment. Communications must still produce quality brochures, websites, and other collateral materials, but, especially in this era of social media, the 24/7 news cycle, and perpetual information overload, most nonprofit communicators have long since proved their worth and earned their seat at the table by cutting through the clutter and helping the organization maintain a positive image and trust among its various constituents.

If fundraisers are occasionally critical of their communications colleagues, it is also true that some communicators view fundraisers as the ones always going to lunch meetings, cocktail parties, and fancy dinners. They don't always remember that such activities are work-related – often work-intensive – and are typically performed over and above the fundraiser's daily professional responsibilities. Also, there are still a few communicators who view fundraising as the practice of asking for money or a "hand-out," versus the reality of aligning a potential donor's interests with the often-welcome opportunities their organization provides to improve society and create a better world. Other complaints communicators may have about fundraisers is that their perception of the organization and its priorities is too narrow and fundraising-focused, or that fundraisers don't treat them as a trusted, strategic partner to be engaged early on in a process, before key decisions are made and strategies determined.

So how do these two functions which are both so essential to their nonprofit's success get along and, more importantly, work together to achieve common goals for the organization? The keys are partnership, mutual understanding, respect, and trust. But how does one achieve all that? As with most relationships, it requires recognizing the need for improvement in the first place, a genuine interest by both parties to make it happen, as well as time, effort and diplomacy.

Assuming a gap may exist between fundraising and communications, which is certainly not true in every nonprofit organization, following are three simple suggestions to ensure that the relationship headed in a positive and productive direction:

1. **Get to know each other's function, and one another.** Beyond regular team meetings where both functions are represented, the chief fundraiser and chief communicator should meet for lunch or coffee at least monthly to discuss issues and activities in their areas, and how each might help the other. This concept can apply equally well to teams and individuals throughout the two functions.

2. **Seek out (and really listen to) each other's opinions.** Use each other as a sounding board often and seek input on issues and projects early on. More often than not, different (and timely) perspectives will yield better results.
3. **Recognize how mutually dependent the two functions are – and, more importantly, how dependent the organization is on them working together.** The question of which function is more important becomes irrelevant when the organization's goals and interests are placed above functional or personal interests.

With a little effort on both sides, and a desire to do what's best for the organization, fundraisers and communicators can go from being strange bedfellows to trusted partners. As always, of course, someone has to take the first step.

*To learn more about The Phoenix Philanthropy Group and our fundraising and communications expertise and services, please email us at [info@phoenixphilanthropy.com](mailto:info@phoenixphilanthropy.com) or call 1-877-524-8774.*

---

*Scott Nelson is Senior Consultant - Southern California of The Phoenix Philanthropy Group. He can be reached at 949.395.4322, or by email at [Nelson@PhoenixPhilanthropy.com](mailto:Nelson@PhoenixPhilanthropy.com).*