Hearing the Call of the Wild

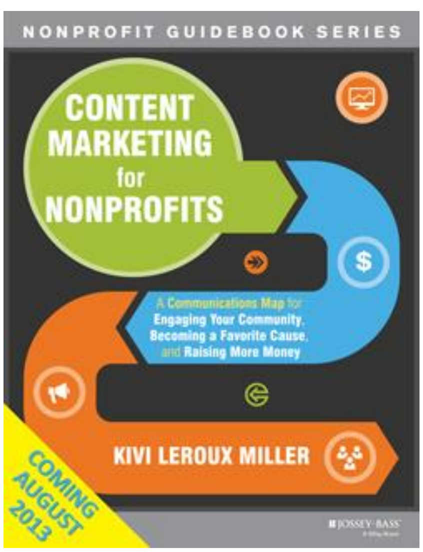
The Case for Changing Your Communications Approach

Excerpt from ***Content Marketing for Nonprofits: A Communications Map for Engaging Your Community, Becoming a Favorite Cause, and Raising More Money***

by Kivi Leroux Miller

It's a new, wild world out there, and yet many nonprofits are communicating as if they were still living in the '80s or '90s. It's time to throw out your excess baggage, full of illusions that you are fully in control of your communications and outdated notions that you should do the same things as before just because "we've always done it that way." The journey you'll take in this book requires you to be lighter on your feet, so while you'll still carry a big backpack, you need to be smarter about the communications tools you put in it.

Before you start walking down this new path, let me give you a bird's-eye view of the territory you are venturing into.



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The End of the Target Audience

Target audience is a common marketing term for the people you are trying to reach with your communications. I've used it regularly since I started working in nonprofit marketing and communications, including in my first book, *The Nonprofit Marketing Guide: High-Impact, Low-Cost Ways to Build Support for Your Good Cause* . But I'm trying to banish it from my lexicon, and I suggest you do the same. This term embodies the old way of looking at nonprofit marketing and communications, an approach that I hope you'll transition away from as you progress through this book.

While the concept of focusing on specific groups of people—via list segmenting, for example—is still very valuable, thinking of this focus as *targeting* is troublesome because it conjures the image of you blasting your content toward the target, rather than an image of you creating content that naturally attracts specific types of people to you. The term *audience* presents a similar problem because it implies people sitting passively and quietly while you present to them.

Today, your goal is engagement with people who care about the same things your organization does. While some people will still sit and silently consume what you produce, the goal for most nonprofit communicators is to get people to take some sort of action in response to that content, even if it is as simple as raising a hand and clicking "like" on Facebook or sharing a story they read in your newsletter over coffee with a friend.

Engagement means getting people to interact with your organization in ways that help build a relationship between them and your organization, so they are more likely to follow through on actions that help you achieve your mission (from advocacy, to donating funds, to participating in your programs.) Engagement is sometimes measured in one-time actions, like sharing a piece of your content with their friends on Facebook, which over time, you hope will cumulate into your organization becoming one of their favorite causes.

For many nonprofits, engaging their community also means actively embracing members of it as not just consumers of content but coproducers of content as well. Communications do not flow in a single, irreversible, targeted direction any longer, but back and forth between a nonprofit and its community members.

Oftentimes the community members themselves become the spokespersons for the cause—an idea that still frightens many nonprofit leaders (maybe you?) but that should ultimately excite you because of the potential to reach and connect with so many more people.

So if you don't call those people out there on the receiving end of your communications the *target audience*, then what should you call them?

Participants, Supporters, and Influencers: Your PSIs

I'm not one for making up brand-new words, so I've been using a trio of existing terms instead: *participants*, *supporters*, and *influencers*, who are collectively your PSIs. I'll use this terminology throughout this book. I think the abbreviation is apropos, because it reminds me of how important it is to keep a car s tires inflated to the right PSI (pressure per square inch in this case). Too much PSI in either case leads to an uncontrolled explosion, and too little leads to terrible performance. There's a PSI sweet spot for your car's tires, and there's a PSI sweet spot for your nonprofit too: the right number of participants, supporters, and influencers to help you accomplish your mission without overtaxing your organization.

When I say *participants*, I am referring to the people your organization serves, as well as those who have actively embraced your mission and are helping you directly to implement your programming, such as volunteers and advocates. When I use *supporters*, I am talking about financial donors, individuals and groups who endorse your work, and volunteers and advocates who help to build your community without directly implementing programs and services. When I use *influencer*, I am talking about people who are typically more disinterested or objective about your particular organization than either supporters or participants, but who can still have a big impact on how others perceive you, such as journalists, elected officials, and some of your professional peers.

There's often some overlap among these groups, especially between participants and supporters and between supporters and influencers, and that's fine. It's less important to categorize someone as a participant, a supporter, or an influencer and more important to view him as part of the community that is making good things happen, rather than as a passive bystander. In addition to referring to these people as your PSIs, I also refer to them collectively as your community. You may call them your network, your family of support, your members, or whatever you like—just try to get away from the term *target audience* as much as possible.

Segment Your List to Be More Relevant

Segmenting a list means pulling out smaller groups of names from a mailing list based on certain criteria. You might sort or segment recent donors from those who haven't given in the last 24 months, or by zip code, or by who attended your last event, or by who opened your last e-newsletter. Segmenting allows you to provide more customized and relevant content to those on your mailing list, e.g. you don't remind people to register for an event if you can see they have already registered.

"We found that the single most predictive factor in whether someone will open an email from us is whether they have opened one in the past," says Brett Meyer, of his experience as communications director at the Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN).
For various email messages, NTEN will segment based on whether someone has

- Opened two emails in the last 60 days
- Opened an email in the last 180 day
- Opened an email in the last year
- Hasn't opened an email in the last year

"We want to keep the email openers engaged, and we want to re-engage the others," says Meyer. NTEN messages fairly heavily – 2 to 3 times a week – for those who are engaged, but will only send the best content or notices about free webinars or new downloads on hot topics to those who are less engaged.

If you haven't opened a message in the first week, they will often send a reminder message. "We have found that people who haven't been very engaged are much more likely to read the content when they get that reminder message then from the first message," says Meyer.

Seismic Shifts Affecting Your Marketing Strategy

What's brought about this shift away from target audience thinking and toward more inclusive community engagement? Just as tectonic plates far underground create lots of little tremors and sometimes shocking jolts at the surface, big and small shifts are rumbling under the foundations of nonprofit marketing and fundraising too.

All your communications should be rooted in the answers to three questions:

1. Who are you communicating with?
2. What is your message to them?
3. How will you deliver that message?

The answers to the who and how questions are being affected by two major societal shifts, in media and in demographics, that are raising great debates among and within nonprofits about how they should approach their marketing and fundraising. Your answer to the question of who you are communicating with needs to take into account the changing demographics of the people who support nonprofits. The growth in communications channels, especially social media, is changing the way you will answer the question about how you will deliver your message.

These two shifts are combining to produce a third powerful shift in who is in control of information and who has the power to share it and discuss it. In other words, you alone no longer decide what's relevant about your work; your participants, supporters, and influencers have a say too. This naturally affects how you will answer the question about the content of your message.

Let's look more closely at these trends.

Media Shifts: More Channels, More Choices, More Power to Decide

If they want to learn more about your organization, participants, supporters, and influencers can go to more sources of information—more channels—than ever before. Some of that information will be created and shared by you, but your PSIs will likely come across content about you created or shared by others too.

Communications channels are the different tools, tactics, or services you use to deliver your message. Common nonprofit channels include direct mail, e-newsletters, Facebook, websites, media relations, etc.

In 2012, most donors—83 percent—said that prior to making giving decisions, they conducted some level of research, at least occasionally, on nonprofits they were considering for support, according to Penelope Burk (2012) of Cygnus Donor Research. This is up from 65 percent just five years earlier, in part because such research is now so much easier to do. Potential donors do look to third parties, including friends and family (word of mouth), charity rating agencies, and the media, but these sources pale in comparison to the information sources your nonprofit controls: your websites; your publications, like newsletters; and social media.

Moreover, where donors get their information and where they act on it are not necessarily the same. According to Burk (2012), one in three donors who decided to give after visiting a charity website did so offline. Conversely, about a third of donors who were asked by mail to give went online to make the gift.

Social Media Has Changed Everything: Or Has It?

One of my favorite ways to kick off a marketing workshop with a room full of nonprofit executives and staff is to ask this question: "Social media has changed everything about nonprofit marketing and fundraising. True or false?"

The same thing happens every time. About half of the participants will raise their hands for "true," ready to argue that social media has indeed changed everything. The statement is true because social media is about back-and-forth conversations, where previously most communications were one way. People can also start conversations with nonprofits in very public ways. Someone who is excited—or upset—about something happening at your nonprofit doesn't need to spend time finding a specific staff person to call on the phone or trying to convince a reporter to broadcast her feelings to the world. Instead, that person can use Facebook or Twitter to let you, and her friends and family and the rest of the world, know how she feels, right then and there. People do not need your permission to speak out publicly about you and your work, which means that everyone is a potential spokesperson about your organization.

The other half of the participants will put their hands up for "false." While they will concede the points just made by the "changed everything" crowd, they point out that even though the specific tools of communications have changed, the fundamentals of successful nonprofit marketing and fundraising are the same: these basics are still about making personal connections with those individuals who will be good spokespeople for your cause. They point out that having thousands of fans or followers in social media is of no more value than having thousands of people on a print or email list—unless those people are motivated to act on your behalf in some way. How you tap into that human spirit and get people inspired and motivated to act ultimately has little to do with what communications channels you use.

Think of it this way: building your lists of social media fans and followers is like fi ling a football stadium with people who say, "We like you enough to show up." But only a small percentage of these people will wear the team colors, and an even smaller percentage will paint their faces or bodies, wear goofy hats or costumes, and cheer every play from the sidelines.

Social media offers powerful new tools that may help you fill your stadium more quickly, but it's still up to you to use those tools to build rapport, one by one, with the people who will watch every game or buy the season tickets, identifying themselves as real supporters, ready to donate, advocate, or volunteer for you.

So, as with most trick questions, both possible answers are right. Yet if I were forced to pick an answer myself, I would say that, yes, social media has changed everything, but not for the reason you might expect.

Letting Go of the Illusion of Control

What I rarely hear in these conversations—and what I think is one of the most important lessons I want to share in this book—is how profoundly social media has altered the way nonprofits need to communicate with their communities. It's about much more than just adding another communications channel or two to your to-do list. It's about giving up the illusion of control and being better off for it.

Your brand, your talking points, and your story are no longer yours alone to construct and discuss. Your participants, supporters, and influencers have a very public say now in how others perceive you. Because people know they can speak and be heard quickly and easily now, that ability affects all your communications with them. You may decide to communicate something to a small select group in a private meeting or via a printed and mailed letter. But there's nothing to stop one of those people from talking about it publicly on Facebook, should he decide to do so. In these same marketing workshops, I often ask another question: "Is this idea that you no longer control the message, and that everyone is a potential spokesperson, terrifying or exciting?” Those who believe it is terrifying picture a number of scenarios in their heads, most of which involve someone saying the wrong thing with headache-inducing if not downright disastrous results. Those who are excited acknowledge that they may occasionally need to address misconceptions spread via less than perfect talking points but also say that the benefits of having more people talking about the nonprofit’s work and advocating that their friends and family get involved far outweigh the downside.

Over the last few years I have seen a clear, encouraging shift from more people saying this idea is terrifying to more people saying it’s exciting. I suspect that’s because more people are accepting what have become the new facts of life for nonprofit communicators.

Stop, Think, and Discuss

- How has social media changed the way your organization approaches communications?
- Is social media just another way to get your message out, or are you using it to build two-way communications?
- Is the idea that everyone is a potential spokesperson scary for your organization? What would it take to increase your comfort level with this idea?

Always On, Always with Us

Mobile technology is further reinforcing these new norms. Just like the 100-calorie snack packs of our favorite foods in the grocery store, we like our information in fast, timely, and convenient chunks too, as we are often reading them on a small screen in the palms of our hands. The first iPhone, which sparked the mobile revolution, was released in 2007, and the pace of change has been incredibly fast.

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Brenner, 2013), as of December 2012, 87 percent of American adults had a cell phone, and 47 percent had a smartphone. More than half, 55 percent, use their mobile phones to access the Internet, with 17 percent going to the Internet mostly through their phones, rather than by using a desktop or laptop computer. And we have these phones with us all the time. Sixty-five percent of US adults sleep with a cell phone beside them at night, and according to Ericsson ConsumerLab (2011), more than a third check the phone for email or social media updates before they even get out of bed in the morning!

Tablet and e-reader ownership is also growing rapidly. According to another Pew survey (Rainie, 2012), in September 2010, just 4 percent of American adults owned tablets. As of January 2013, 26 percent of American adults owned an e-reader and 31 percent owned a tablet computer (Brenner, 2013).

Compare mobile technology as a communications channel to the snail mail box. Mine is at the end of my driveway, and mail comes only once a day and not even every day. Connect with me in a way that’s mobile friendly, and you can reach me during most of my waking hours—even in those first groggy-eyed minutes in the morning—every day, no matter where I am.

The nonprofit sector is struggling to keep pace with these changes. According to *2012 State of the Nonprofit Industry* , a report by the fundraising software company Blackbaud (2012), about 30 percent of US nonprofits have enabled their websites and emails for mobile viewing, while about 50 percent of donors in the study reported using their mobile phones to access nonprofit websites and emails.

The Pace Is Fast But It's No Excuse to Fall Behind

If you feel blindsided by these changes, it's understandable. It's all happening very quickly. The online companies and tools that we are coming to rely on for news and information from around the world and around the block are, in most cases, still juveniles. Google was founded in 1998, making it easy to find information, as well as the people and organizations behind that information. In the late 1990s, blogging software also became more readily available, making it easier for individuals to share their own opinions and insights. Then came YouTube in 2005 and Twitter in 2006. Facebook was founded in 2004 and opened to the public in 2006 (it was previously open only to those with certain email addresses from domains such as universities, high schools, and a few major corporations).

These social media sites made it easy for people to not only find information but also to find each other, and to connect and converse about anything and everything, cutting the former middleman—the mass media—out entirely. The way we share information has changed forever and will continue to do so at a relentless pace that is likely to continue for some time. We as a nation are no longer turning to the same handful of TV networks and newspaper wire services that we once did for news. If we all see the same story, it's likely because it went viral on Facebook or YouTube, and then the mainstream media picked it up.

We also expect to find answers to our questions immediately. If we want to know what's happening in some conflict halfway around the world, we expect to easily find the latest updates either on twenty-four-hour cable news or through a few quick searches online. Twitter is the place that many people now go first ("Was that an earthquake? Was that an explosion?") because Twitter users discuss what they are seeing and experiencing as it happens, before news agencies can even draft a story.

Because of this access to real-time information, we've become intolerant of outdated information. If you ask someone what she thinks when she sees outdated information on a nonprofit's website, she doesn't say, "Oh, I bet they're just too busy to update the website." She says, "I guess they've gone out of business." Outdated and irrelevant information is now a sign of your demise—and that's why you can't use the pace of change as an excuse to drag your feet in responding to change.

Your success as a nonprofit depends on your ability to stay in the conversation, week after week, with the members of your community, on their level. Engaging your community requires that you mix and mingle and be seen as one of the community members, rather than as some authority somehow above and removed from everyone else, who decides to speak only on a limited and predetermined schedule. You keep your feet on the floor at the cocktail party, drawing others to you by being interesting or entertaining and by having relevant things to say, rather than by dancing on the bar, yelling, "Look at me!" When you build a community around you, you create opportunities to build rapport with many of its members as individuals. And when they truly become friends to your cause, they will spread the word for you, friendraising and fundraising as they go.

Demographic Shifts: The Four Generations of Your PSIs

Another major shift making the target audience mentality less effective is that we now have a much more demographically diverse society, with four adult generations interacting with nonprofits: Generation Y, Generation X, the Baby Boomers, and the Matures (who are also called the Silent Generation).

Because the Boomers are the largest generation, representing 44 percent of the US population and controlling 70 percent of US disposable income (MarketingCharts, 2012), it's often helpful to split that generation in half, into younger Boomers and older Boomers, to better understand them. There are some significant cultural and economic differences between younger and older Boomers, as younger Boomers are now typically in their peak earning years, while older Boomers are approaching retirement age.

Because younger Boomers are still very much active in the workplace, they have adopted technology as a necessity for staying relevant at work and staying in touch with family and friends. Older Boomers are more likely to have a case of *senioritis* —as they approach retirement and age sixty-five (the cultural definition of a senior citizen)—they may feel less urgency to stay current. Therefore, they may see new technology such as social media as irrelevant to their needs and experiences (Wolfe, 2012).

Demographers will argue about the exact edges of the four generations, but they generally fall into the groups shown in table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Generation by Birth Year

Generation	Birth Years	Age in 2013
Matures or Silent	1945 and earlier	68 and older
Boomers	1946 – 1964	49 – 67
Older Boomers	1946 - 1955	58 - 67
Younger Boomers	1956 - 1964	49 - 57
Generation X	1965 - 1980	33 - 48
Generation Y	1981 - 1991	22 - 32

In terms of sheer size, Generation Y (Gen Y) is almost as big as the Baby Boomer generation, and Generation X is about two-thirds the size of the Boomer generation or Gen Y. However, that doesn't take immigration into account, and by some estimates, immigrants are bringing Generation X up to parity with Gen Y and the Boomers.

How Each Generation Views Philanthropy

Lumping millions of people into categories always creates stereotypes. But for purposes of understanding some of the macro shifts that are taking place, I have boiled down into just one word how each of the four generations approaches philanthropy (table 1.2).

Matures are more likely than others to give out of a sense of responsibility and *duty*. That's what good people do. Giving back is important. Giving to charity is what's right.

Table 1.2 How Each Generation Relates to Nonprofits

Generation	Age in 2013	One Word Describing How They Relate to Nonprofits
Matures or Silent	68 and older	Duty
Boomers	49 – 67	Identity
Generation X	33 - 48	Entrepreneurial
Generation Y	22 - 32	Community

Boomers are more likely to give because it fits with their personal sense of *identity*, who they are. They want to make a difference and believe that they are change makers, and they see themselves as having a role to play with the charities they support.

Generation Xers are more likely to give when they can see a problem being solved. In other words, they are *entrepreneurial* about their philanthropy. It's less personal and more about getting things done.

Generation Yers are more likely to give when they feel they are part of a *community* of change. They see themselves as connected global citizens and are confident that together they can correct injustices of the past and make the world a better place.

Of course there is some overlap. Generation Yers share a sense of civic duty with the Matures, are politically savvy like the Boomers, and value worklife balance as Gen Xers do. And these group trends will apply unevenly or not at all to many individuals (you can certainly find twenty-year-olds who have more in common with their own great-grandmas than with their college roommates).

But it's undeniable that the way people approach philanthropy is changing. Take a look again at just the four relationship words, in age group order:

Duty
Identity
Entrepreneurial
Community

What kinds of change or progression do you see in these words? How does this progression affect your nonprofit's communications?

Here's one way to look at the changes. When people are giving primarily out of a sense of duty, then at some level, it really doesn't matter how good your communications to them are. If you can present a need reasonably well, these people will feel that sense of duty to respond to that need.

I've heard many a fundraiser with thirty years of experience or more talk about how much easier it used to be to raise money. Now those same fundraisers talk about how much more competition there is, both from other charities and for people's attention. They also talk about how donors' expectations have changed.

That the rise of *donor-centered fundraising* over the last decade is no coincidence becomes apparent when you look at the second word in the list: *identity*. Boomers in particular respond to communications that are about them and their role in solving a problem. Donors also say, in numerous surveys, that they want to hear about results and success stories from the charities they support, which sounds like *entrepreneurial* thinking. And largely thanks to social media, donors can feel they are part of many different *communities* with whom they can share their various passions, including the causes they believe in and the charities that they support.

Donor-centered fundraising is a phrase coined by Penelope Burk in her 2003 book by the same name, *Donor Centered Fundraising: How to Hold on to Your Donors and Raise Much More Money*. She defines it as an approach to raising money and interacting with donors that acknowledges what donors really need and puts those needs first.

Suddenly, those way-we've-always-done-it communications aren't enough anymore. That doesn't mean you need to drop everything you've always done and replace it with something new. But it does mean you need to take a hard look at what you are doing now, adjust what's worth keeping, get rid of what's not, and add in what's missing.

Stop, Think, and Discuss

Take one of your major programs or services. How would you describe it to reach a *duty* donor in contrast to an *identity* donor? How about an *entrepreneurial* donor in contrast to a *community* donor?

Let's say you wanted your newsletter to reflect all four donor descriptions (duty, identity, entrepreneurial, and community). How does your current newsletter match up, and what changes would you make to better reflect these four concepts?

How Media and Demographic Shifts Affect Communications Choices

How much do these media and generational differences really matter to your organization? If your nonprofit has limited marketing and fundraising energy and resources, how quickly do you need to respond?

The nature of your nonprofit's work, the size and age of your organization, and the demographics of your particular community will determine just how these media and generational dynamics come into play. You may not be forced to make the decision about whether to focus on those under or over fifty-five, or your mission may make that choice more clear.

If your nonprofit is a larger, older organization with a well-established direct mail fundraising operation, its perspective will be quite different from that of a younger nonprofit that's always operated primarily online. If your nonprofit advocates for early childhood education and its program participants are families with young children, the ways in which it will communicate with those participants will likely be different from the approaches taken by organizations like land trusts, whose participants are mostly family matriarchs and patriarchs who own large parcels of land they want to protect from development.

But communications choices are not always this clear, and the debate can get complicated, fast.

Reaching out to new people is infinitely easier now because of the wide variety of online tools available to nonprofit marketers, including email and social media. It's true that the younger a person is, the more likely he is to prefer online communications, but all generations use the Internet. The year 2012 marked the first time when more than half of US adults sixty-five and over (54 percent) reported using the Internet. Of these older Internet users, 48 percent reported using email daily, and 18 percent reported using social media daily (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012).

What's more, 69 percent of donors of all ages now say they prefer electronic communications, according to the *2012 Cygnus Donor Survey* (Burk, 2012). For many of these donors, email and social media are simply more comfortable and convenient, but some of those who are less comfortable with online communications still say they prefer that charities use them because online materials are more cost efficient than print materials.

Multichannel marketing, or ***integrated marketing***, means that you are sharing the same content, message, or call to action by means of several different communications channels (for example, printed information, online materials, and in-person events) in order to reach all of your PSIs in the way they prefer.

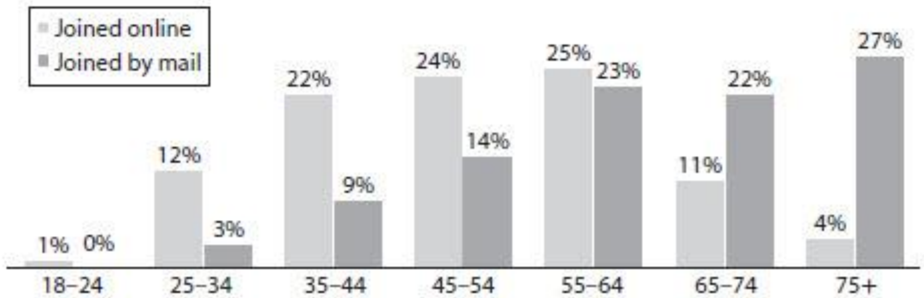
All of this might lead you to conclude that the trend is toward online communications and print is a thing of the past. But I think the statistics actually point to a more complex outcome. What I believe you should take from the information in this chapter is that the trend is toward multichannel communications. You can't drop print communications, but print alone is not enough anymore either. (And yes, this does seem to imply more work for you, since you have more communications channels to feed now, but I talk more in Content Marketing for Nonprofits about how it doesn't really have to mean more work.)

When we look at how people are choosing to donate to charities, we see an interesting, but not surprising, dynamic: Baby Boomers are the transition generation, falling between those who prefer to give through traditional direct mail and those who prefer to give online. The *2011 donorCentrics Internet and Multichannel Giving Benchmarking Report* (Flannery and Harris, 2011) found that, in 2010, Gen Yers, Gen Xers, and younger Boomers were more likely to make a first gift to a charity online, while older Boomers and Matures were more likely to use direct mail (figure 1.1).

So, if you wanted to take your best shot at raising money from new Boomer donors to your organization, you'd need a strategy that was part direct mail and part online. It's important to remember that the overwhelming majority of individual fundraising is still done through snail mail. This same report points out that the typical organization studied received more than three quarters of its total gifts through direct mail and only 10 percent of its gifts online. Direct mail acquisition is also responsible for three-quarters of all new donors.

FIGURE 1.1

Distribution of New Donors by Age in Two Origin Channels: 2010 Medians



Medians will not always add to exactly 100% across each channel.

Source: Helen Flannery and Rob Harris, *2011 donorCentrics Internet and Multichannel Giving Benchmarking Report*, 2011, www.blackbaud.com/targetananalytics/multi-channel-report.

Why You Need to Respond to These Shifts

If donor retention rates are any indication, nonprofits are failing to adequately respond to the shifts described here and are not delivering what their supporters are looking for. Various national surveys calculate a donor attrition rate of between 60 and 65 percent—and getting worse (Association of Fundraising Professionals and The Urban Institute, 2012; Burk, 2012). That means for every one hundred people who give you a first-time gift, only thirty-five to forty give a second gift, with the numbers trending in the wrong direction.

Nonprofits may capture people's attention, but then they fail to keep it. They fail to remain relevant. I believe this trend is directly related to the target audience mentality and everything connected with it that's now so outdated. As nonprofit communicators we are simply failing to connect with our communities in ways that are relevant to them today and that would keep them engaged in the good work. That lack of connection exists largely because what nonprofits think is important is not what donors feel is important.

The things that motivate donors and that they say they want from nonprofits have little to do with the detailed grind of the day-to-day work of a nonprofit organization. Yet that daily output is what many nonprofits emphasize in their communications, producing a narrative built on their to-do lists and transactions. To be relevant to donors, you need to connect on a more relational level. The level at which donors get and stay involved depends on how they feel about their altruism and, to varying degrees, also on how effective they feel that altruism is and on how much they trust and like your organization—regardless of their generation. Given these different donor interests, communicating to donors in a relevant manner raises what I call the inner angel–inner bookkeeper problem.

The Inner Angel–Inner Bookkeeper Problem

When you write your communications, are you speaking to your supporters' inner angels or to their inner bookkeepers?

The inner angel is the part of your nonprofit's supporter who decides to give you a donation or to volunteer with you because you have touched the supporter in some way, and that angel wants to touch you back. Angels are all heart, and they are in charge of decision making. You need to keep the angel on your side.

The inner bookkeeper is the part of your supporter that needs a receipt for the donation for taxes or the directions to your event or some other logistical or factual information. Bookkeepers are all head. We like to think our bookkeepers are in charge most of the time, but they really aren't. You can certainly annoy a person's inner bookkeeper if you don't supply the data (like that tax receipt) when the bookkeeper really needs it, but the truth is, if the person's angel is on your side, it doesn't really matter whether the bookkeeper is irritated or not.

It's hard, if not impossible, to speak to both equally at the same time.

For example, I argue that a good thank-you letter should be much less a receipt for the bookkeeper and much more a greeting card (or even a love letter) to the angel. Make the body of the letter all about the angel, and put the receipt info, including that awful IRS disclaimer language when it's needed, at the very bottom, maybe in italics or in a smaller typeface, after any PS, and fully apart from the letter.

Using a content marketing approach in your communications—one that produces relevant and valuable communications—gets you much closer to the inner angel and much closer to becoming a favorite organization of your participants, supporters, and influencers. We keep our favorite things close and don't let go of them easily.

Stop, Think, and Discuss

Take a look at the donor communications you sent out over the last month or two. What percentage spoke to your donors' inner angels and what percentage spoke to their inner bookkeepers?

What would your communications look like if you spent 80 percent of your time speaking to your donors' angels and 20 percent speaking to their bookkeepers?

Why It Matters: Your PSIs Decide Relevance, Not You

What you and the others who work in your organization believe should be communicated does matter. But what your participants, supporters, and influencers want to hear matters too, and that needs to carry much more weight than it currently does in many nonprofit organizations.

One-way, traditional nonprofit communications aren’t enough anymore. They don’t provide the relevance and engagement that many people now expect. Can you listen to your participants, supporters, and influencers and learn what they really want from their relationships with your cause and your nonprofit? Can you shift your communications to respond to their values and needs, to build more of a two-way relationship, one in which your nonprofit is clearly relevant in their lives? A content marketing strategy will help you do that.