Nonprofit Marketing Communications in a Nanosecond Culture

Published on CharityChannel, Thursday, November 29, 2012

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Don't blink—you might miss something! This is how it feels to live in our nanosecond culture, where it seems that everything is changing at an accelerated pace. It is enough to give nonprofit marketers a headache.

Our nanosecond culture has changed nonprofit marketing communications. The controllable flow of information through easily identified channels is disappearing. Now there is a need for organizations to use online social networks and other digital media along with the more traditional channels that includes print and broadcast media and face-to-face marketing.

What does this mean? According to The Kellogg School of Management, we need to "understand the different value propositions needed to communicate with internal and external segments as they impact your organization across different media and communications channels."

Simply stated, we need to integrate marketing communications to better understand our empowered customers and consumers as they relate to and interact with our nonprofit organizations.

Until recently we all believed that the Baby Boomers, 47 to 64 years of age, made up the largest living generation. In fact, as Beth Kanter and Allison Fine note in *The Networked Nonprofit*, Millennials or Gen Y are larger. These digital natives are changing the landscape. Research shows that Millennials spend on average more than seven hours a day using new media. They are also multitasking and cramming in 11 hours of content. "This presents enormous challenges and opportunities for those in the field of marketing communications, particularly online marketing," said Professor Richard P. Honack, Kellogg School of Management.

To address these changes Convio, a nonprofit software company, and Edge Research published "The Next Generation of American Giving," a study that explores charitable habits and preferences across four generations: Matures (age 65+), Boomers (47-64), Gen X (31-46), and Gen Y (20-30). It noted that mature donors preferred a more traditional engagement, whereas the other three generations were very multi-channel in their engagement.

The study concluded that "you take the umbrella, whatever it is that you're trying to achieve, and you use every channel that is applicable, using the same theme, the same branding, and the same messaging platform throughout those channels." In other words, keep your brand message, tone, and manner consistent so people can tell it's you and know how to respond.

Blending new and traditional media

Now there are a number of approaches to integrated marketing communications. And, there are myriad resources about social media. I have been consumed with books, articles, and blog posts addressing how organizations should approach this changing landscape. What strikes me is that a major difference between social and traditional media is that the new technology helps us communicate with more people at much faster speeds and perhaps more effectively.

I find The POST Method developed by Forrester Research most compelling. Developed in 2007, the POST Method is really simple, yet profound in that it provides a user-friendly system for using traditional and emerging communications channels. Although developed as a for-profit system, it is easily adaptable to nonprofits. The acronym refers to the four-step approach:

P is People. Don't start a social strategy until you know the capabilities of your target audience and know their social behavior.

O is objectives. What are you trying to accomplish? Decide on your objectives before you decide on a technology. State your objectives in SMART terms—Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-based. Then figure out how you will measure them.

S is Strategy. How do you want the relationship to change with your target audience? How do new and traditional media support your objectives with your audience?

T is Technology. What are the appropriate tools and tactics to address your target audience? What do you have the capacity to implement?

AIDS.gov Communication Strategy

The AIDS.gov Team uses Forrester Research's "POST" Method to guide its overall communications approach, and to plan specific initiatives. Its mission and three objectives guide its communications approach and help it meet the needs of its target audiences.

According to its January 2011 internal Working Plan, the AIDS.gov team discusses the following questions before starting a new communications effort or response:

- Who are we trying to reach?
- What information do our audiences need? If we don’t know, how can we find out?
- What is our audience’s use of and comfort level with various communication tools?
- What do we want to accomplish with this particular audience?
- Is someone else already doing this?
- What partnerships do we need to engage to learn more about this audience and plan a response?
- How will marketing help support these objectives?
- What resources (i.e., funding, time, capacity, human resources, etc.) do we have to implement and maintain this strategy?
- What tools are most appropriate for this target audience, objectives, and strategy?

The strategies used by AIDS.gov should resonate with all nonprofit marketing communications plans. They include:

- Share our innovative work and select channels that can reach a critical mass of people in our target audiences and have strong content so people trust us and come back for more.
- Learn from our federal, national, state and local partners and identify opportunities to cross-promote each others’ work.
- Connect people and respond to their information needs for HIV resources, programs, and policies.
- Engage our audiences in a conversation, encourage participation, and make it easy for people to share information.

“Know your audience” is the clarion call of all nonprofit marketers. The POST method provides the guideposts to help us keep our eyes on our target and effectively communicate in our nanosecond culture.