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Upfront

Out of the Loop

For nonprofits, communication is often a one-way street

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COMMUNICATIONS

Out of the Loop

For nonprofits, communication is often a one-way street

Communications between a nonprofit and its stakeholders are vital during changes such as the development of a new program or a funding initiative. Yet, according to a new study, nonprofits do a haphazard job of informing clients and the public about plans for program changes, and come up short when soliciting their input as well.

According to the study, board members and paid staff received more and earlier communication, while clients and the community heard not only less, but heard it later. The mission of a nonprofit is typically to serve the needs of the clients, but those clients are often underconsulted in decisions that are most likely to affect them. “Are nonprofit change implementers less concerned with clients and customers, less convinced that clients and customers know what they need or desire, or are they simply limited in communication abilities?” asked University of Texas at Austin researchers Laurie Lewis, Brian Richardson, and Stephanie Hamel.

The lion’s share of communications, they found, is focused at staff and board members. Nonprofits seem to prefer to take counsel from and provide information about organizational plans to insiders. “Nonprofits need to back off of the ‘Who do we need to get on board to make this happen’ – a quid pro quo model of communication – and move to a more participatory model. Even if the stakeholder group (such as clients) doesn’t bring resources,

maybe they need to be involved,” said Lewis.

The researchers based their study on the answers received from a questionnaire submitted to executives, board members, or supervisors from 66 different nonprofit organizations based in Austin. The questionnaire asked the participants to describe how they communicated a change in program, services, or funding campaign to key stakeholders, and to whom. The study was published last July in *Human Communication Research* (vol. 29, no. 3).

“It’s no surprise that many nonprofits, which are typically underfunded, understaffed, and often unprofessionally run, would be a decade behind in marketing,” said Mal Walwick, a nonprofit consultant. “Most businesses haven’t been tuned into their customers until recent years – and many still aren’t. Marketers only ‘discovered’ customer relationship management during the last decade.”

The study also found that the frequency of communication from nonprofits to donors, media, community, and government agencies was “strikingly low.” It isn’t surprising then, suggested the authors, that nonprofits often feel that they are continually battling the public’s ignorance about the goals, missions, services, and benefits of their programs. This pattern represents missed opportunities for nonprofits to shape and project an organizational image.

However, many nonprofits do not agree with this assessment. Safe-

Place, a battered women’s shelter in Austin, said that, if anything, they overcommunicate – sometimes soliciting detailed advice. Client input during the building of the shelter determined, for example, the location of the laundry room. Former clients serve on the board of directors, and donors were invited to take a tour of the shelter when it first opened. “It is very important for any agency to be open and to talk to people,” said Sarah Seaton, manager of public relations at the shelter. “The people you serve are the most important.”

But the data results also portray nonprofits as more focused on the dissemination of information to stakeholders than on listening to them. Across the board, one-way communication seemed to be the norm. Nonprofits tend to give their stakeholders information, but rarely ask for their input or action. This is ironic, said the authors, given that nonprofits often need creative solutions and the participation of stakeholders. For-profit companies solicit input from their customers through a variety of means – market research, polling, focus groups, and comment hotlines, for instance. Nonprofits, Lewis said, ought to consider, “Am I just talking to key members of the board or staff because they’re close to me, or are there good reasons that I’m talking to them?”

–Melissa Fullwood