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The Role of Email in Your Communications Mix

By Heather Gardner-Madras, July 2009

Nonprofits have a lot of choices when it comes to communications - from direct mail, to websites, to social networking sites and more. With Spam on the rise and open rates down, what role should email play in a successful communications strategy - and when should nonprofits choose to use it?

When it comes to getting a message out to an audience, nonprofits have a lot of choices. There's direct mail, email, person-to-person contact, text messages, Web sites and blogs, and any number of social networking sites. All of these methods are useful, but what are the strengths and weaknesses of each?

To find out, we asked a number of people with reputations for making savvy use of technology to help us understand the latest thinking. Is email dead as a useful means of communication? Has it been surpassed by any or all the other methods? What we found was that we were asking the wrong questions.

Rather than deciding whether to use email *or* another method, nonprofits should be using email *and* other methods to communicate with constituents, volunteers, donors and others. Email is likely to be a part of the communications mix for nonprofits for many years to come. But with Spam on the rise and open rates down, what role should email play in a successful communications strategy—and when should nonprofits choose to use it?

To see where the strengths and weaknesses of email as an outreach medium are, we'll take a look at five common communication goals and examine the role of email, along with other media, for each.

1. Maintain a Connection with your Supporters

Organizations must keep in touch with the people who support their work. For nonprofits, Web sites are a primary means of doing so, as are email lists. Many organizations use email newsletters to provide updates, drive traffic to new information posted on the Web site and generally keep people engaged.

There's a good reason email is used so often for this type of communication—it works. It's been shown to drive repeat site visits and connect core supporters with the specific content that will interest them. Because email lists can be segmented and subscriptions can be self-selected, there's a good chance your audience will be receptive to your messages. Quality is important to maintain a positive audience association with communications from your organization, so the effort put into creating and sending content that's both useful and attractive is time well spent.

Used this way, email reminds your supporters of your work and what they like about your organization. But email is not a good place to try to explain complicated issues or engage in interactions, and when it comes to content, shorter is better—to keep both your audience's attention and its good will. Emails should direct readers to your Web site, where regularly updated, current quality content and action items are vital. Understanding this pairing and maintaining well-crafted online communications consumes a lot of time, but the rewards can include committed, long-term supporters and donors, and new visitors who leave with a good first impression.

In general, providing informative updates inexpensively is one of email's strong suits—and one that's particularly relevant when an organization is dealing with an emerging or time-sensitive event or topic. Even if your organization uses other communications channels to stay connected with your audience, don't drop email altogether. Some constituents prefer the control and options it provides.

In addition to email, more traditional news and update vehicles, like direct mail reports and magazines, remain popular. They can create a deep connection with supporters in ways online methods can't match—especially for organizations with access to striking imagery related to their work. Print pieces can be visually compelling and develop deeper relationships with audiences interested in the organization's cause. For example, despite an active online presence, Best Friends Animal Society recognizes that readers treasure their bi-monthly magazine full of news and uplifting stories from the shelter. So the organization works to keep print production values high, even while providing the information elsewhere.

Organizations also continue to explore newer online channels to form an online connection, such as social network profiles and pages, or using separate blogs for regular updates and news items. Genocide Intervention Network finds Twitter to be both popular and effective for on-the-ground situation updates to volunteers and supporters.

Finally, in-person communications and telephone calls remain effective means of establishing and maintaining close relationships with members and supporters.

2. Compel a Response or Action

Another great strength of email is its capacity to provide a relatively low-cost means of reaching a broad swath of supporters almost immediately—and to elicit a response, such as getting them to visit your site, donate or take some other action.

This ability really comes to light when there's a tie-in to breaking news. The sense of urgency and the ability to target core supporters or a specific issue can produce dramatic results for action alerts and crisis-based donation drives. Genocide Intervention Network reports that a call-to-action on their email list can generate 1,000-2,000 calls to policy makers in a single day.

Organizations are getting smarter about using email. Overall list sizes are declining, but response rates are going up as communications become focused at more motivated groups. When aiming to provoke or elicit a response, integration between Web and email is key. Email links to the Web site should be obvious, and the site needs to include prominent ways to act to take advantage of the interest that's generated.

Social network sites and widgets are starting to be useful for more action-oriented communications—they may, in fact, be the first place many supporters look for updates and new actions they can take. The Genocide Intervention Network sends action alerts by email, but it also creates social media campaigns around action items rather than regular communications, so their base audience knows where to check for ways to get involved. By keeping the volume of regular content low on these sites and clearly focusing on action-oriented campaigns, they have successfully sustained responses from core activists and engaged new ones. Dedicated outreach through the pages and profiles of like-minded organizations allows them to promote their action to a receptive audience. Best Friends Animal Society and The Nature Conservancy also use social network sites for supplemental campaigns that target younger, more tech-savvy demographics. Like with many organizations, they're just a small part of their overall communications efforts, and used primarily as testing grounds to seek out new, active audiences with an affinity for their causes.

Many of the people we spoke with agreed that text messages via mobile phones hold real potential for crises or emerging situations. While none of the organizations we spoke to were yet relying on them as a channel, they have promise both as a means of communication and of action, such as donating to flood victims on the spot.

3. Fundraise and Cultivate Donors

Donations are one of the most common ways for proponents to take action and support an organization. But as it turns out, none of the new technologies is the most effective way to solicit this specific type of response. When it comes to fundraising, direct mail still rules.

Why? Many people perceive communications by letter to represent a more authentic voice of a nonprofit organization than those by any other medium, with the possible exception of the telephone. And compelling visuals can make direct mail stand out from competition, with pieces like reports and magazines creating a real bond between organizations and readers. In addition, membership organizations find that the familiarity of writing a check for renewals—just like any other bill—makes it the leading way to handle the business end of philanthropy.

High-quality direct mail requires a committed investment for the organization, both in terms of direct costs and resources allocated to production. Because of this, some organizations with successful online campaigns limit direct mail to previous donor lists and annual campaigns. But others find direct mail to be the best tool for finding new donors—targeted lists, some of which are very sophisticated, can be purchased to put the organization's "ask" in front of a brand new, but sympathetic, audience. Such lists are a competitive advantage over email lists, which are not available for purchase because of Spam laws. But to be successful, direct mail must be opened—good email subject lines and preview panes might reach more people with the initial message. In either case, having strong content and presentation can make all the difference.

Email can be critical to a successful campaign whether or not you send direct mail. Evidence suggests that campaigns are more successful in total amounts raised, both on and offline, when email and direct mail are combined. For online fundraising, email is the prime way to get donations—as long as it's well done and not used so often as to start looking like Spam. Email is also very helpful in donor cultivation, and a great way to say "thank you" to online and offline donors.

Combining email with a Web site is another important integration for fundraising. The "ask" needs to create a continuous flow, with an easy means to donate, or even the most creative email will fail to achieve donations. Even without an email component, your Web site is a crucial fundraising communications tool. More and more donors check out Web sites as part of their decision making process before making their first donations, so an informative, professional site is a must—content and presentation must be first rate when they log on. An investment in electronic media can help prepare for the future—even if you can't accept funds directly online now, you can justify the investment by the number of people who will use the Web, email alerts, e-newsletters and other means as motivation for donation by other channels.

In terms of acquiring new donors, Google Ads are an inexpensive option that is often overlooked. For a small investment, they offer the ability to test messages and focus donations by topic. The Obama campaign is rumored to have used this tactic with great results. Hip, compelling campaigns based on social networks and similar widgets are also worth considering. While the number of people who actually donate this way will be smaller than email or direct mail, use of such media introduces you to an expanding group of donors and cheerleaders—and encourages them to introduce you to their own networks.

Most of the people we interviewed see social networking as an emerging and still-developing area not yet fully understood. Mal Warwick, who has been in nonprofit fundraising for 30 years, cautions that technology can take decades to mature and that people's giving habits change slowly—a particularly important point since the most generous donors tend to be over the age of 50. He says we're too impatient with options that have only been around a few years.

Down the road, mobile phones might become a primary vehicle for donations, too, as U.S. banking catches up with other parts of the world. Where mobile phones are a predominant means for financial transactions and bill paying, it's easy to imagine creating a natural

transition to donations. Phone interactions are personal, and making a donations ask on a mobile phone—especially if timed correctly—might be very compelling. But for now, there's some hesitation to adopt a method that some may consider too invasive for fundraising, and which, if poorly executed, will make a bad and lasting impression of an organization.

4. Change Minds and Influence Issue Debate

If part of your communications outreach consists of actively trying to engage the media and your opponents, email is an important but limited part of the communications mix. Press releases, in-person events and traditional media relations continue to play significant roles in influencing opinion and policy, but online avenues are starting to take hold.

Email contributes value as a means of communicating about your issue with the media and policy makers. It's also a great way to keep your advocates informed, and to call them to action. But your reach is limited to existing supporters. To actively present positions and supporting arguments, organizations rely on Web sites and blogs. These sites can be found by potential supporters and the media, and can establish credibility and a base of operations. Interactivity and educational tools—like a carbon footprint calculator—are great ways to inform and change minds.

Groups entering into the debate find like-minded potential advocates by energetically seeking out their issues online, and commenting on blog posts and social network sites to raise awareness about their organizations' stances. They're also using social network campaigns to fire up activists, organize responses and amplify messages. Anywhere likely allies migrate, whether it's blogs, social networking sites or Second Life, organizations will need to follow.

Blogs in particular play a substantial role in shaping online dialog. It's still necessary to maintain a connection with supporters through email updates, but good RSS feeds provide a natural means of keeping people up to date on the latest news.

5. Reach New People and Raise Awareness about the Organization

The recurring theme is that email has a weakness as an outreach tool—it doesn't reach new people easily or effectively. Very few people actually forward that newsletter or alert to a friend, and if they do, it may be blocked or interpreted as Spam. Email can help existing email members to find out about new topics, but how can you reach new audiences?

Direct mail can introduce an organization to potential advocates and donors. Since people interact with print materials in a more focused way, the content may be more thoroughly read and remembered. Compelling and well-executed visuals and content are crucial in this tactic, and can leave a lasting impression. Production cost and list acquisition makes direct mail expensive, so it's only worth mailing prospects if you have the resources to produce quality materials and find a well-targeted list.

Optimizing a Website to show up highly for keywords on search engines like Google can be a very effective way to get the word out. The Nature Conservancy sees search rankings as a critical long-term element of a good communications strategy because of the opportunity to make a good first impression and create a positive perception. By paying attention to search engine results and carefully guiding users to their first contact with the organization, nonprofits can tell their stories in the most effective ways and protect their brand identities from being confused with similarly named groups.

Paid Google Ads or Google Grants have an impressive ROI at attracting new members due to their low cost, ease of testing and adaptability of messages, and their ability to promote specialized content. Both search listings and ads offer organizations the chance to connect with new audiences interested in related issues.

The Genocide Intervention Network has found that social network sites like Facebook, and sympathetic blogs and Web sites, can be useful recruiting tools for specific campaigns through aggressive outreach and interaction with allied causes. By setting up campaign-specific

pages, they can engage many times their number of permanent "friends" on their base organization page for targeted actions.

While social sites like Facebook, Flickr and You Tube don't yield contact information or the control many organizations have come to rely on when building supporter lists, there is still value in promoting missions and messages via these channels. Generally, their younger audiences will maintain allegiance to the causes they support, and can be passionate cheerleaders for issues both online and elsewhere in their lives.

In Conclusion

New technologies emerge all the time. There's a lot of speculation about convergence, what it will look like, and when it will happen. Channels continue to emerge and evolve, and cross-channel integration will continue to be imperative to successful messaging. But it's clear that email will remain an important player well into the foreseeable future, along with direct mail and Web sites.

The key to deciding *where* to use email in a communications strategy seems to be knowing *when* to use it as a primary channel, *when* to use it in support of another channel and *when* to supplement it with other methods. Email is an economical way to maintain connection with general and core supporters through newsletters, and to get a response to appeals and alerts. It's good in a supporting role for fundraising, promoting Web content and reinforcing messages on other channels. But for recruiting new supporters and donors, your Web site, ads and SEO, social networks and direct mail are better growth and outreach channels—but should be used to help build your email list for future communications.

Whatever your communications mix, the basics still apply, and always will. Have a well-thought-out plan. Create an authentic, wellconstructed

message. Produce the most professional materials you can. And keep your organization's voice consistent. Nearly everyone we spoke with emphasized the importance of having a constant and connected message that can be adapted to the different strengths of each medium. Colin Delany of epolitics.com sums it up this way: "Worry less about the tools you will use in two years and more about the relationships you're building now."

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Heather Gardner-Madras (aka hgm) heads gardner-madras | strategic creative, providing progressive nonprofits and socially responsible businesses with experienced online strategy, design and execution. From her virtual office in the green hills of Oregon, she shares lessons learned the hard way and exciting new ideas with great organizations around the world.

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