# Communicating the Nonprofit Story: Challenges, Tales, and Strategies for Success

This paper identifies three primary factors that make it particularly hard for nonprofit organizations to communicate their message. The author also discusses three strategies utilized by nonprofit leaders and experts to help them successfully develop and articulate their story.

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Table of Contents

In my seven years of teaching a nonprofit course, I have had the good fortune to work with dozens of nonprofit organizations and the many brilliant and passionate individuals within these organizations. Overwhelmingly, one of the most common challenges these organizations face is how they can do a better job telling their story.

Raising awareness and messaging (branding) are common marketing issues. What is curious is why getting the message out seems to be more of a struggle for nonprofits than other organizations.

Based on my experience and many conversations with nonprofit experts and leaders in our community, I have identified three recurring challenge themes:

## Challenge I: Implementation Trumps Communication

It seems that within nonprofit organizations, 'doing' takes significant priority over 'talking about doing.' While most would agree action speaks louder than words, this focus seems to be taken to an extreme within nonprofit organizations. This implementation orientation is driven by two underlying causes: limited resources and the motivations and focus of the individuals drawn to and employed by nonprofit organizations.

### *The Limited Resources Available go toward 'Getting the Job Done'*

As Penny McPhee, President of The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation points out, one reason why nonprofits struggle to tell their story is that they are "usually under-capitalized and devoting all of their capital and human capital to 'getting the job done.' They rarely have the resources of time or talent to focus on their communications needs."

Paul Towne, Senior Director of Corporate Partnerships and Alliances at CARE USA, agrees, pointing out that for-profit "companies often have multiple (web)sites – for example The Coca-Cola Company has the coca-colacompany.com for investors, business partners, etc. and coca-cola.com for consumers. In this way they can tell their story with a different focus/ perspective on each site. Most nonprofits do not have the resources to build and maintain two different sites." Additionally, "nonprofits often lack the technical know how to make the impact of their service come alive through video and interactive elements that have become commonplace on corporate sites."

Indeed, this notion of limited resources as the crux of the problem is supported through the findings of a 2005 Guidestar newsletter reader poll (Figure 1) where 46% of respondents indicated that finding the money to accomplish their mission was the greatest challenge.[2]
Figure 1: Greatest Challenges Nonprofit Organizations Face[3]

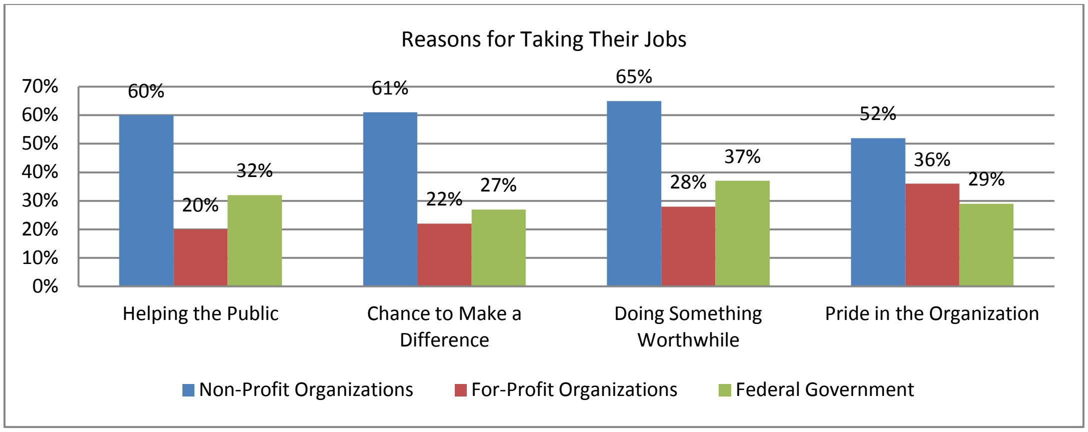
[2] Source: Coffman, Suzanne E. (April, 2005), "Nonprofits' Three Greatest Challenges," ©2005, Philanthropic Research, Inc. (GuideStar), http://www2.guidestar.org/rxa/news/articles/2005/nonprotis-three-greatest-challenges.aspx?articleId=780 accessed 6/15/2011.


Howard Lalli, Communications Director at the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership challenges this limited resource rationale and argues that resource constraints should not be used as an excuse for nonprofits to not tell their story. After all, many for-profit organizations are faced with similar constraints. Rather, to be successful, marketing (including communication) plans should be treated as a necessary tool along with implementation plans to enable an organization reach its strategic goals and objectives.

***Passion for the 'Doing'***

The motivating factor for many who have chosen to work or volunteer within the nonprofit sector is a passion for doing.

Figure 2: What Drives Nonprofit Employees[3]

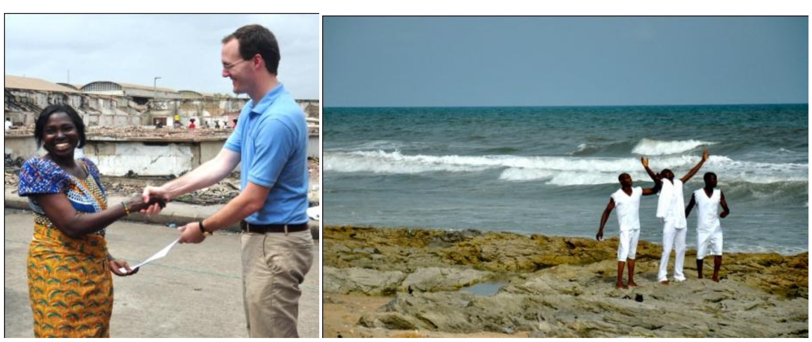



Thus, building the mindset that 'telling' needs to be incorporated into the organization's activities even if it means limiting the 'doing' - at least in the short term - is not an easy battle. Especially when often the direct 'doing' aspect has a more immediate and observable outcome.

### *A Tale from the Trenches: MicroEnsure Ghana*

Peter Gross, Country Manager for MicroEnsure Ghana, has dealt first hand with trying to tell his organization's story with limited resources, while also having to effectively manage the organizational tension arising from a decision to focus on communication at the expense of field operations. As Peter elaborates, while one the one hand, his team understands that "data doesn't drive donations - individual stories do,"...."Getting high-quality cameras and public relations people into resource-deprived environments can be a logistical nightmare as well as a major expense....The local staff, which is regularly stretched for capacity, often resents that expense because they know one marketing trip from the West could pay for one more implementing staff for a year, which they would value more than a well-produced video."

Figures 3 & 4: Claim Cheque (Market Fire) Handoff[4] and Ghana Coast[5]



[3] Source: Joslyn, Heather (October, 2002), "Driven by Mission," Chronicle of Philanthropy, 1040676x, 10/17/2002, Volume 15, Issue 1. (Survey Data Collected: Oct. 2001 - Jan. 2002, by Brookings Institute & Princeton Survey Research Associations)

[4] Source: Peter Gross, Country Manager, MicroEnsure Ghana (received 07/06/2011.)

[5] Source: http://www.peter-and-jessica.blogspot.com (accessed 07/08/2011.)

Peter goes on to note that "resolving these types of conflicts is not easy, which is why local buy-in and understanding about marketing activities is crucial. We are transparent: we tell our staff... that we will spend x on marketing; which should generate y outcome for our business. This way, everyone can see that spending money on marketing now is better for us in the long run."

**Challenge II: Many Audiences**

While many organizations attempt to meet the needs of more than one target audience, what makes this issue more complicated for nonprofit organizations is the separation of the user and payer roles, as well as the expectation that the nonprofit also provide and demonstrate a societal benefit.

***Separation of User and Payer Roles***

Nonprofits generally provide goods or services to those who are not in a position to adequately acquire these services for themselves. Consequently, nonprofits have at a minimum two distinct audience groups: the payers (donors) and the users (those served / consuming the nonprofit services.) The nonprofit organization serves as the facilitator (buyer), using the resources from the payer (donor) to provide goods and services to the users. [6][7]

Drawing an analogy to the historic American family household breakdown of roles, one can think of the payer as the breadwinner (historically the father), the user as the child (or children), and the buyer as the caretaker (historically the mother) who has responsibility for providing care (and goods and services) to the child.

Figures 5 & 6: Traditional Historic Household User / Payer / Buyer Model

Payer[8]

User and Buyer[9]

[6] Source: Sheth & Mittal (2004), "Customer Behavior: A Managerial Perspective," 2nd edition, Southwestern, Mason, Ohio, p. 14 - 17.
[7] The exception to this rule would be membership organizations and / or nonprofits providing fee for services. Generally in the latter case, part of the funding for the services is subsidized by additional funding.
[8] Source: http://sharetv.org/person/hugh_beaumont; accessed 07/07/2011.
[9] Source: http://thebluegrassspecial.com/archive/2010/november10/billingsley-anderson-macarthur-obit-news.php; accessed 07/07/2011.

Similar to this traditional family user-payer-buyer framework breakdown, both the Payer (Donor) and Buyer (Nonprofit) have an interest in meeting the needs of the User, who currently is not in a position to meet their own needs.

However, unlike the traditional family model, for nonprofits, there may be multiple:

1: Payers (e.g. various corporate donors, individual donors, government organizations): each with their own interests, and beliefs regarding how the users' needs are best met, preferred modes of communication, access to information, and sources of influence.

2: User groups (elderly vs. young individuals; individuals from different ethnicities or geographies, individuals with different skill levels or access to different resources) each with their own unique needs, interests, preferred modes of communication, access to information, and sources of influence.

3: Buyers (e.g., other nonprofits) who each have their own ideas, processes, and infrastructures in place regarding how best to meet the needs of the users.

It is the buyers' job to identify, understand, and reach each of these various Payer and User groups, and make these groups aware of their organization as well as their ability to meet the needs of the users.

***Serving the Community at Large***

The audiences of interest for nonprofits does not stop with the Users and Payers. As Scott Doll, Executive Director of Mission Advancement at Metro Atlanta YMCA points out, nonprofits have "at least three audiences, the two (users and payers) you mention, as well as the general public. To attract the community to your services, your organization must be accurately perceived by the community for the good you are doing...."

***Reaching and Resonating with Each Audience***

Scott Doll goes on to mention that "What is important and relevant to a service recipient is different than that of the donor or internal clients such as staff, volunteers, and board members.... The methods of messaging will vary as well. The younger generations, active in social media, would be more likely to become a Fan of your FaceBook page, or follow you on Twitter."

***A Tale from the Trenches: CoreNet Global***

Even for membership groups, which don't rely on donors for funding, reaching and resonating with each user group can require great customer insight and effort. As Eric Bowles, Director of Marketing and Membership for Corenet Global elaborates, "as a professional association, the core group is members. But one group of members heavily emphasizes education, learning and best practices. They want networking but the networking they want is focused on their peers. The other group of members – service providers – essentially sell goods and services to end users and their companies. They are much less interested in education, and more driven by clients and potential clients. Thus they are a lot like donors – but less altruistic. But the value proposition is so strong they are relatively insensitive to price and account for 70% of funding of the organization."

The story for both of these groups is very different. Each has a value proposition – and they are different. For events, they also have different timing as the value proposition for Service Providers is often the specific End User already registered for the event. CoreNet uses a highly segmented approach to email and other marketing efforts in order to target messages and timing to each segment. But it increases the complexity and the cost of marketing. And it is a difficult nuance for new staff.

In terms of corporate sponsors, Eric points out the importance of understanding not only what is relevant, but also the corporate structure, "in the corporate world funding is more clearly linked to ROI. But – ROI can include subjective elements. The added issue is that with large sponsors, the funding decision is made by marketing staff with input from line of business leadership. And budgets are typically in marketing. Membership and event participation budgets are typically in the line of business. And Education budgets may be separate. So it is important to understand stakeholder budgets."

## Challenge III: Story Complexity

A third challenge nonprofits face is the fact that their missions and the services they provide are often multi-faceted and complex. Consequently, they are not easy to understand internally, much less explain to others.

### *Comprehension vs. Awareness*

Lauren Chandley, Atlanta Ronald McDonald House Charities (ARMHC) Marketing and Communications Coordinator points out that brand comprehension is something they struggle with and are actively trying to address. While "many people know of Ronald McDonald House Charities and recognize our logo....do they really understand our mission and purpose of the charity?"

Linda Morris, Executive Director for ARMHC concurs, "with our charity, it is often difficult to describe how we accomplish our mission.... at our recent board retreat we chose four main topics to focus on and one was 'the elevator speech.' We realized that even our own board members and other volunteers don't always know how to 'quickly' describe when an opportunity occurs, who we are and what we do."

### *Balancing Relevance with Robustness*

Telling the story quickly and completely is not always easy. As Scott Doll, Executive Director of Mission Enhancement, Metro Atlanta YMCA points out, the 'story' must be told in a way that is relevant to your audience, particularly when the nonprofit has multiple services.... Some areas of the organization may be of little interest, while others compelling and relevant. So, sometimes the message must be segmented for a specific audience...." Unfortunately, "often the public perception is based on a narrow view of what the organization does - not the full picture, and not the full impact."

### *A Tale from the Trenches: Starlight Foundation*

As Scott Gold, former Development Coordinator for Starlight Foundation points, out, telling the full story takes both time and the capacity and motivation to want to understand. "Everyone's time is limited and thus an adequate amount of information is not given to each party." Scott goes on to break down the challenges by audience type:

With respect to donors, "a potential donor will allot time to hear a pitch for money, but more often than not the donor is more concerned about how his / her dollar is spent rather than the actual mission of the organization. Of course the donor is interested in the organizations' mission, which is why they possibly will get involved, but the donor will not understand the nonprofit's actual story. The actual story of the organization tends to get lost during the financial discussions and what ends up happening is those that do end up donating don't actually understand what they are giving to. Those that aren't interested in giving money (or at least a large sum) tend to care more about learning the actual story of the organization since they aren't preoccupied with ensuring that their dollars are well spent. Perhaps if there was more time to spend with the donors they would more fully understand the nonprofit's story."

With respect to those that use their services, Scott Gold points out that their users (children and their families) "don't always have the capacity to fully understand the benefits of the services they are using. To complicate matters, the Starlight story is often delivered by 3rd party facilitators (such as doctors and nurses) who may not be fully versed in the services provided by the nonprofit to potential users of the service. If there were more time available to inform both the donors and the 3rd party facilitators, the story of the organization could be spread to more potential users."

## Strategies for Success: Effectively Developing and Delivering the Story

Beyond highlighting their challenges, the experts also provided their own insights regarding critical success strategies -- and ideally steps -- for efficiently developing and delivering an effective message.

### Success Strategy I: Identify, Prioritize, and Understand Your Customers

#### *Identify your Customers*

The first step is to internally make sure you have agreement on who your customer is. Mike Neynhuis, President and CEO of MAP International, makes a point of having that discussion internally from time to time, posing the question, "who is the customer?" or more specifically "who are we trying to please?" The outcome of these discussions has led MAP International to think and talk about their customer in terms of "three overlapping circles: community need, donor interest and our vision and capacity."

### *Prioritize your Customers*

Identifying your primary customer group(s) is key especially for nonprofits operating on limited resources. This is neither an easy nor comfortable question for many nonprofits to address. The answer also varies across organizations. Elizabeth Kelly, former Executive Director of Dress for Success sees their primary customer as the women who utilize their services. As Elizabeth notes, while "we love our donors and seek to cultivate and thank them in every way we can..., our mission is about the women we serve." Conversely, Christina Lennon, Executive Director at the Lions Lighthouse, currently sees their primary customer as the doctors that provide eye care services to their users. Christina is quick to point out that, over time, the prioritization may change. However, currently "I have a waiting list for all my services, so I have been concentrating on the supply chain....so to speak."

While neither Elizabeth nor Christina are discounting the value of their other customer groups, as they move their organizations forward, they have each made a point of successfully gaining consensus and a clear vision as to who their primary customer is.

### *Understand your Customers*

Understanding your customers is often easier said than done. One strategy that nonprofits should consider is ensuring that their organizations reflect their customers. This can happen in terms of staffing as well as structure and operations. Lynn Labuda, former Executive Director for Tile Partners for Humanities believes that nonprofit's board of directors should include all stakeholders. "Many boards only reflect the perspective of donors, but need to insure that user representation is covered as well. If a board can reflect both user and donor perspectives, it is much easier to create and tell a 'win-win' story." Christie Pettitt-Schieber, who wrote her honors thesis on the history of Regional Theatre in the US, notes how arts organizations have evolved to better reflect and relate to their donors. Christie points out that these "organizations now understand that they can't just be completely staffed with dreamers or artists, they have to have some business sense, too." She goes on to explain how arts organizations have made "strides towards making their organization look like a business... in the hopes that.. they will be given more credit for their good work, taken more seriously as potential funding recipients, and be more successful."

Beyond reflecting your customers internally, building external relationships and listening to your customers are a must. Vicki Gordon, retired Senior Vice President of Corporate Affairs for IHG, and currently board chair for en*A*ble of Georgia and Global Soap Project notes that "In my role in corporate philanthropy I met with so many truly committed people who seemed to believe that the mission of the organization speaks for itself... and that potential donors/supporters would want to support a cause because 'they do such good work' or provide 'such a needed xxx for the community'.... A fundamental rule of sales is building relationships by understanding the buyer’s (donor’s) reason for purchase. That means listening to what the person with the money wants/needs. Don’t assume that selling is all about telling YOUR story, you gotta understand who you’re talking to and what their motivations are."

Cynthia Currence, Vice President of Development and Marketing for Girl Scouts of Greater Atlanta, echoes Vicki's sentiments, adding that "I actually think that one of the main reasons that it is so hard for nonprofits to tell their story is that they are too close to it. They often talk from the organization's point of view and try to say everything when they get an opportunity rather than boiling things down to the essence of what is most compelling to key stakeholders."

Dr. John Bare, Vice-President for Sports Philanthropy and Affiliated Funds at The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, points out a possible root cause that may be fueling this inward focus: "a potential variable that complicates storytelling for some nonprofits, especially those organizations still run by a charismatic founder, (is that) the story of the organization is tangled up in the story of the founder. Thus the story is quite personal, sometimes to the point of being evangelical. And the story is less likely to be focused on the value created for society than on the gratification (and sometimes astonishing feats) of the values-driven founder."

**Success Strategy #2: Capture and Develop Story / Stories**

Beyond a belief that the stories, 'speak for themselves,' another habit nonprofits fall into is that that when they do try to tell their story, they often focus on only one aspect of the story, or one way of telling the story. Paul Towne believes that "nonprofits are often more focused on aggregated data. For example X Nonprofit provided 5,000 meals to 3,000 individuals living in poverty, versus telling the story of John Doe and how the services provided by X Nonprofit impacted his life." Christie Pettitt Schieber believes the reason for this is because nonprofits err on the side of only telling the stories that are easiest to tell. For example, "the impact of arts in a child's education is something that we have found a reasonably good way of measuring, so we continue to use it to demonstrate the overall impact a theater can make."

***Capture vs. Create Stories***

For Metro Atlanta YMCA, their emphasis isn't on creating so much as capturing. Specifically, Scott Doll explains "We have been having conversations with our staff on how to recognize the stories happening around them. Nonprofit staffs are so busy carrying out their work, that it becomes difficult to stop and recognize the good that is happening in front of them. Not that they don't value the impact of their work (it's the reason why they do it!), it's 'just what they do.'"

***Develop Stories***

Scott goes on that "even more than simply recognizing these stories, nonprofit staff should do what they can to learn more, dig deeper. By interviewing those involved, one learns the 'back-story' that adds richness and color. Finally, the staff needs to become good story tellers. Now that you have the story, how do you tell it most effectively, bringing it to life as it deserves. What is important and relevant to a service recipient is different than that of the donor or internal clients such as staff, volunteers, and board members. It is important that the nonprofit have the perspective of their audience firmly in mind. Better yet, involve members of the audience in the development and testing of the message or story to ensure relevance, and effectiveness."

Lauren Chandley, notes that ARMHC tries to take it one step further by trying, when possible, to tell their story through personal testimony. "When a donor hears first hand from a family staying at the House that makes a lasting impression on them and confirms why they have chosen to support ARMHC."

**Success Strategy #3: Identify and Create Opportunities to 'Tell' the Story**

Once the nonprofit has developed their story or stories, the final challenge is to not only ensure they don't miss any opportunities to deliver their message, but also to identify and create new opportunities to 'tell' the story.

***Experiencing vs. Telling the Story***

Linda and Lauren at Atlanta Ronald McDonald House Charities (ARMHC) have learned that often the best way to deliver their message is not strictly by 'telling', but instead giving their audience a chance to experience it. As Lauren notes, "It is important for donors of ARMHC to visit and take of tour of the Ronald McDonald House and see the Charity in action." Linda concurs, and adds, "if we can get a donor or potential one in the House - they 'get it'. I believe social media is also beginning to help by reaching far more people."

Indeed, while ARMHC creates opportunities for donors and other audiences to visit their location, they have also tried to bring the ARMHC to a wider audience through social media. As Lauren notes, "through social media we try to bring the Charity to life through sharing family stories and testimonies and photos of activities at the House on our Website, Facebook and Twitter. Once our followers see our mission in action they understand what ARMHC is about and why we are here to serve families."

***Equipping others to Tell the Story***

Rob Brawner, Program Director for the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership notes that while a key strategy is providing individuals the opportunity to experience the Atlanta Beltline through their tours, another critical aspect is equipping others to tell their story. Not only does the Atlanta Beltline Partnership provide collateral, they have also developed a Speakers Bureau Program, where trained volunteers teach an 'Atlanta Beltline 101' to residents. "We are very intentional in the collateral we create to ensure it not only tells our story accurately but equips others to tell our story accurately as well." All collateral directs people to www.BeltLine.org where they can get up-to-date news, project information, photos, videos, and more. Rob explains that after individuals experience the tour, they generally are excited about the Atlanta Beltline project. Giving these individuals the tools to tell and share the story is crucial to their success.

**Parting thoughts: Story Identification and Development Critical for Long Term Success**

As our nonprofit community experts and leaders have suggested, telling your story as a nonprofit is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. Success requires internal buy-in and coordination, as well as ongoing external dialogue to ensure your message remains compelling as your audiences, and environment, continue to evolve.

Keeping a pulse on the environment and a continuing dialogue with the various audience groups, even at the cost of implementation, is not an easy trade-off for nonprofits to make.  But in the long run, the result will benefit not only the nonprofit, but also the audiences it serves.