

Staying on Message

One of the privileges of being a creative consultant and copywriter in direct mail, at one time, was the access you had with the leaders of social cause and charitable organizations. Since you were charged with communicating an institution's mission to its core constituency, the powers that be wanted to ensure that in you were an educated "channeler;" that you were sufficiently knowledgeable of where their organization was headed and how they intended to get there. If you "got it," so went the presumption, then the donors would too.

Regrettably, we can no longer count on this inclusive process. It died, I believe, with the "professionalization" of non-profits and the growing isolation of fundraising from the determination of mission and message.

It is no secret that non-profits like their corporate models have grown increasingly hierarchical in recent years. "Message," as a result, has fallen under the administrative rubric of a host of divergent departments. And the copywriter has to rely increasingly on a "titled" employee who may not have a clue as to the direction their organization is taking.

Relatively isolated in an ever growing "development" department, having little direct contact with Board or organizational leadership, considered a country cousin to in-house "communication" people and intimidated by the arrival of website gurus, these direct response managers to whom the copywriter is now beholden, are the new sergeants of the non-profit army. Though they are charged with running a fundraising "campaign", they are not informed of the organizational strategies and programs in play to win the frontline battle for donor loyalty and commitment.

Though competent foot soldiers who know the immediate plan for their sphere of action, they are often woefully unaware of the organization's future roadmap for achievement. And lacking the informational knowledge base to pass on to their befuddled consultants and copywriters, the donors are thus shortchanged in the information they receive. Ultimately the organization pays the price as its mission is lost or diluted somewhere down the organizational food chain.

There are no villains here. Mid-level managers, particularly in a down economy, are charged with raising enormous budget numbers beyond any reasonable expectation. And these folks have to carry the water for many organizations that simply expect the money to be there when they need it.

The larger issue is the unwillingness of most non-profits to take a hard look at their mission and to cope at the highest level with how they communicate with the very constituency which guarantees their existence – their donors. And to let their fundraisers engage in this critical process as well.

This responsibility must also be borne by the many consultants, I among them, who claim to guide organizations toward better fundraising through a strong and resilient messaging. The

path of least resistance would be to continue to sell “smoke” rather than a fiery brand which inspires hope and confidence; to accept the lack of informational grounding and institutional knowledge provided by our harried opposite numbers in the organizations with which we work; to not demand that organizations regularly meet with their marketing and communication professionals to share ideas and define cogent strategies.

Given these down times, a world spinning out of control and the desire of many people to turn inward in the face of it, there is some urgency to renewing the creative process of messaging if many non-profits hope to survive.

In cause and charitable marketing, I believe the time has come to speak truth to power as effectively as we possibly can. By not doing so, many organizations will continue to be defined as living off the accomplishments of the past and the echo of greatness that once marked their success.

The non-profit sector has grown enormously over the past fifty years, but one wonders if the clout it manifests is equal to that growth? Have these organizations lived up to their responsibility as the backbone of a vibrant civil society? Can they stake their ground as the loyal opposition to over weaning government power by rousing the loyalty and driving the action – of supporters? Will concerned government responsive to the needs of the people make these organizations look increasingly irrelevant? Or is there a void, a need and a very real hope that these organizations can fulfill?

Perhaps non-profit consultants and message crafters can help drive the debate within these organizations. At least, we can make a beginning.

Bob Levy has been a consultant and copywriter for social cause and charitable organizations for almost thirty years. (rjlevyink@aol.com)