



Marketing is essential, even in tight times

By Barry VanderKelen

During times when budgets are tight, nonprofit groups are faced with the dilemma of where to cut spending. Oftentimes, the first expenditures eliminated are for marketing and public relations. But is this the wisest strategy? To answer this question, I spoke with Maggie Cox, president and chief executive of Barnett Cox and Associates, a public-relations firm in San Luis Obispo. "It's never okay to stop marketing," Cox said. "There will be a residual effect of marketing efforts that will quickly taper off when marketing activities stop. "During tight times, the marketing must become more strategic in order to reach the people you want to reach when you want to reach them, but not stopped," she added.

Cox explained that the benefits of marketing include increasing people's familiarity with an organization's programs and services.

This is important to motivate people to make a donation or buy a product, she added.

"To accomplish this, the marketing presence needs to be constant," Cox said. According to Cox, the biggest investment in marketing is the time it takes to figure out how best to reach and motivate the right people to take a desired action.

Without this investment, marketing efforts will be less productive and, therefore, more expensive.

How can effects of marketing be measured? There are simple and complex ways to measure that.

One of the simplest and most overlooked ways is to ask visitors, callers and donors, "How did you hear about us?" or "What made you attend our event?"

While the results are not scientific, general patterns will be recognized.

Whether fundraising or event ticket sales are meeting their goals are also a measure of impact.

The most expensive method is to conduct post-marketing research and measuring effects and attitude changes in target audiences. Not many nonprofit organizations can afford this level of research.

"Good ways to begin marketing efforts are having a Web site and mailings," Cox said.

These are relatively low-cost items that not enough organizations track usage and responses.

Interestingly, a recent study by The Nonprofit Times — www.nptimes.com — found that nearly half of all respondents, regardless of age, gender, race, income or education, went to an organization's Web site for information before

responding to a solicitation by letter. The old technology of direct mail is now linked to the new Internet technology.

Cox encourages nonprofit groups to consider cross-promoting with other organizations.

"Well-fitting partners allow leveraging each other to reach new audiences," she said.

For instance, a company including a nonprofit group's flier in employee paycheck envelopes.

Marketing strategies should be reviewed at least every six months, Cox added.

"An activity must be given a chance to work before it is scrapped or altered," she said.

All marketing activities should ask people do something, such as attend an event, donate, visit a Web site or request more information.

If these responses are measured, the message can be refined based on real information rather than suspicions and hunches.

Board and staff members of nonprofit organizations can find a lot of information about marketing on the Internet.

Cox especially likes the site www.marketingprofs.com. It presents articles, tips, research and techniques on marketing.

Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

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