
Strategic Communication Is Key to Nonprofit Advocacy

I had just returned to Atlanta after a year teaching English in Panama. While there I quickly learned what it meant *not* to have a voice. It was a humbling experience.

A chance encounter with an amazing professor led to an invitation to cowrite a grant for Georgia's first rape crisis center. I started researching everything I could find about sexual assault and the laws governing rape. I also joined a passionate, committed group of women intent on making a difference to victims, educating the public, and exploring ways to change public policy.

At that time, every marketing and PR firm did pro bono work with nonprofits. A known marketing guru took the center on as a client. I had volunteered to do the PR for the opening. So, I took my six-page annotated press release to be reviewed.

I was asked, "Do you really want to learn how to write a press release?"

"Yes, of course," I replied.

Soon, pieces of my missive were tossed into the air. Once I agreed to help pick up the pieces, I started to learn the art of public relations.

Nonprofit Advocacy Changes Attitudes and Behaviors

Nonprofit advocacy changes the attitudes and behaviors of individuals and institutions. Advocacy shines a light on different perspectives and uses communication tools to press ideas on the public, decision makers, and legislatures.

All mission-driven nonprofits advocate, to varying degrees. For some, advocacy is the focus of their work. For others, advocacy is used to respond to issues about their mission.

Many nonprofits mistakenly believe that advocacy means lobbying and is not allowed. But organizations do have the right and responsibility to advocate for or against decisions and new policies that could hurt or help their mission.

[BoardSource](#) is a recognized leader in nonprofit board leadership. One key responsibility of boards and board members is to advocate for the organization's mission. An unpaid volunteer's voice carries a lot of weight. Board members provide an invaluable service when they serve as

ambassadors and advocates for their organizations.

Nonprofit advocacy takes many forms:

- Educating the public or elected officials
- Providing research to public officials
- Seeking actions to benefit clients and in support of your nonprofit's mission
- Swaying public policy
- Engaging in limited lobbying for or against specific legislation related to your mission
- Inviting decision makers and influencers to your facility or an event where you educate and highlight your services

Deborah's Must-haves for Advocacy Communication

Advocacy is about influencing and persuading individuals and institutions to change. To make an impact, it is so important that you communicate your advocacy initiatives.

Strategic Marketing Communication Plan

A well-thought-out marketing communication plan supports your mission and the objectives laid out in your strategic plan. It allows you to focus your communication, making sure that all activities work together to support the big picture.

If you go through the process, your advocacy campaign will be stronger and will meet your goal of producing successful social change campaigns. Elements of a plan:

- Goals and Objectives
- Target Audiences
- Strategies
- Tactics to engage target audiences
- Create targeted messages
- Choose channels and deliver messages
- Roles and responsibilities
- Work Plan
- Budget
- Evaluation

Brand Positioning

Positioning is at the heart of nonprofit marketing. It designs an organization's image and value offer so that its customers know what the organization stands for in relation to its competitors.

Marketing "pulls" a nonprofit's audiences from where they are to create the desired action. Communication "pushes" out messages. Positioning is the linchpin between the two.

Positioning flows from a nonprofit's mission. It guides an organization into the future and works to build its reputation with its key audiences.

A positioning statement is a tight, focused description of the core target audience to whom a nonprofit directs its messages. It provides a compelling picture of how the organization wants its target audiences to view them.

Storytelling

Storytelling is an important tool for successful advocacy. Our brains are hardwired to process stories. A good story will have more impact than logical arguments. People are far more likely to remember a good story than an information sheet!

Your nonprofit's stories will help your audiences understand the issues that impact your mission. Stories are a direct route to our emotions and decision-making. As such, they are an essential route to creating transformative social change.

I'd like to close this article with one of my favorite projects with [Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition of Georgia](#) (HMHB). The organization works in the community to promote maternal and infant health. It conducts educational initiatives, supports policy and legislation, provides direct services, and network to achieve its maternal and child health goals.

I was the project manager for this AMA Atlanta Pro Bono Project to position HMHB. The team conducted a SWOT analysis, reviewed and critiqued all written materials provided by HMHB and the website, and conducted eleven interviews with HMHB audiences identified by the organization.

After analyzing the results of the SWOT and Audience Discovery calls, we provided an updated mission statement, created a vision statement and two positioning statements, and provided a list of marketing communications opportunities in the short-term.

The engagement was successful and helped ensure HMHB's success in advocating to support its mission. The results also led to board training and a better understanding of the organization's values and beliefs. HMHB also designed ways to bring its clients to the table and hear their stories.

I believe that advocacy is our most potent strategy for social change and that strategic communication is the best way to get people to pay attention and act.

Additional Resources

I have a collection of additional resources that you may find helpful on my website:

<http://www.creative-si.com/shared-resources>.