



Why Organizations Go Off Course – Lesson 9: Pay Attention to your Brand
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course*. The article details a series of lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),¹ buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in my other series: *Why Organizations Thrive*.

Why Organizations Go off Course Lesson Nine is: Pay Attention to your Brand.

Too many nonprofits don't pay attention to their organizational communications strategy, focusing only on the tactics of any given communication. Or maybe they plan for communications around a specific program, but never for the institution overall.

I've seen nonprofits that put out great letters, emails, and press releases – but they fail to integrate into any coherent whole. Or worse, they are internally contradictory.

Nonprofit managers often want to reward employees by letting them express their creativity (since high pay isn't one of the perks), but this creativity can undermine the organization's need to speak with a consistent voice.

Why is this so problematic? And how can organizations address the challenge without spending money they don't have on outside consultants?

Nonprofit organizations face a big challenge when communicating, often much more so than for-profit companies. Unlike a for-profit whose communications are driven primarily to generate customers who then interact with the organization through a transaction, nonprofits often are communicating with very different goals in mind.

One arm of the nonprofit is seeking to raise money from Audience X, another arm is seeking to do its program by communicating with Audience Y. Still another arm might be doing advocacy, trying to influence Audience Z. There may be little overlap between Audiences X, Y, and Z.

Yet, even with different audiences, inevitably communications aimed at one audience are heard by those in the others. So if your fundraising message undermines your advocacy message, it will have an impact. A message that maximizes the impact of your program might be heard by an elected official who won't like it, negatively impacting your advocacy work.

¹ I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

The response to this conundrum shouldn't be to just let the chips fall where they may. Rather, the response should be to think about how to find synergies between the messages and audiences for fundraising, program, and any other aspect of your organization.

You need messages that reinforce, rather than conflict. You do this by branding.

Unfortunately, too often organizations think about branding as just looking at the basic elements of organizational identity: name, logo, and tagline.

Yet, in reality, branding should be an exercise that first flows from having a strategic plan and then asks how the organization positions itself in relation to its competitors/allies. What single sentence answers the question: what makes the organization unique so that it stands out from its peers? What words or phrases would you want people to think when they hear the organization's name?

As you then develop specific messages as part of communications with specific purposes (e.g. fundraising, program, etc.), you can look back at the brand and ask: is the communication consistent with the brand?

Smaller nonprofits don't need to hire a consultant to do this type of branding – though larger nonprofits may wish to invest in some expertise. Just sit down 3-5 smart people involved in the organization and ask the questions above. Then look at some of your recent communications and ask if they're consistent with the desired brand.

Solutions will emerge for how to improve them.

Of course, if your organization has no strategic plan or the equivalent, this exercise becomes much more challenging. But that's the subject of a different lesson.

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