

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT
ANSER 2012**

TITLE: Non-profit public communication: Strategies, goals, tactics and tensions

AUTHOR: Georgina C. Grosenick, PhD
Carleton University
Email: grosenickg@shaw.ca
Phone: 613-599-1920

CONFERENCE THEME: Communication, Networking & Social Media

ABSTRACT:

Non-profit public communication is the “oxygen” of non-profit activity and issue promotion (Deacon, 1999; McNair, 2007), yet the communication activities of non-profit organizations remains under-researched. An online survey of 118 Canadian non-profit executives was conducted to explore the ways in which non-profit organizations communicate with their external publics in their regular course of business, their goals and objectives for these activities, and their capacities to maintain and support these efforts. Findings reveal that raising the public profile of the organization and client/member support and development were the primary motivations for public communication among those respondents; whereas issues advocacy is of significantly lesser importance. In addition, non-profits are actively embracing internet and social media platforms and incorporating them into their public communication practices. Moreover, social media is primarily being utilized for maintaining existing organizational relationships. This study offers evidence to suggest that the call for non-profits to be more strategic and instrumental in their communication practices, while at the same time opening their social media channels to expand networks and promote issues continues to go unheeded as organizations focus their goals and efforts on internal forums and audiences.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Public communication is the “oxygen” of non-profit activity (Deacon, 1999). Public communication surrounding not only the organizations actions, but its mission and the issues that give rise to it is essential to maintaining the organization’s profile, legitimacy, viability and to achieving its goals and mandate. In an environment of competition for funding and attention, this public communication is equally important for service delivery organizations and charities as it is for advocacy and special interest groups. Non-profit organizations, thus, are being encouraged by communication scholars to adopt strategic, planned, and integrated approaches to communication planning and management (Bonk, 2008; Davis, 2002; Dimitrov, 2009) to maximize impact and opportunities. The need for strategic planning and coordinated efforts becomes even more important as the range of communication practices and tactics expand through new and social media.

Evidence suggests that many non-profit organizations have recognized the importance of communication for achieving organizational goals and have institutionalized a communications function into their organization (Greenberg & Grosenick, 2008). However, there remains a lack of understanding of the realm of strategies and tactics that are used by non-profit organizations in their day to day public communication practices and the role and function that organizations feel that they serve.

To date, scholarship surrounding the communication practices of non-profit organizations has concentrated on the ability, challenges and barriers to non-profit media coverage (e.g. Jacobs & Glass, 2002; Greenberg & Walters, 2004) or prescriptions for adopting media or specific lobbying tactics to effect the policy process (e.g. Bonk, 2008, Phillips, 2007, Pross & Webb, 2003). Generally, these studies report that most non-profits, and especially social service

organizations, are either inactive or ineffective in raising the profile of their organization and issue among decision-makers. However, a body of empirical studies is developing that chronicles some campaign successes realized by some organizations adopting media management and PR strategies and the need for non-profits to be more strategic and instrumental in their public communication practices to realize specific goals.

More recently, a nascent scholarship has emerged exploring the uses and opportunities of new and social media for non-profits to communicate with existing and desired audiences. Explorations of the sector's use of the Internet, Facebook, Twitter and Blogs, (e.g. Kenix, 2008; Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009) conclude that non-profits are not maximizing the dialogic potential of these forums and using them instead as information repositories or as information dissemination forums.

The limitations of this scholarship are that the individual studies are largely campaign specific and divorced from the day to day communication activities of the organization. They are also largely prescriptive, focusing on how organizations should undertake specific campaigns or utilize specific tactics. Moreover, there exists a theoretical tension across this literature in that non-profits are encouraged to be more strategic and instrumental in their public communication activities to gain more effect with media and policymakers, yet at the same time are reminded to be more open and dialogic to maximize the opportunities to promote public debate of issues within new and social media forums.

STUDY AND FINDINGS

An online survey was designed to identify the myriad ways in which non-profit organizations communicate with their external publics and what tactics they employ to achieve organizational goals. The study consisted of 20 questions asking organization to report on all of

the ways that they communicate publicly, the frequency of this communication, what their goals for their communication were, and what activities they thought most contributed to their goals. Questions were included to identify size, budget, primary area of activity and communications capacity within the organization. Volunteer Canada partnered in the research agreeing to distribute invitations to participate in the study through their membership networks. The initial invitation to participate in the survey was distributed in January, 2012 with a followup invitation sent in February, 2012. A total of 118 organizations responded. Responses were received from organizations that were geographically dispersed and representing a range of non-profit activity and budget. While the sample is not large enough to allow for data to be generalized to the non-profit sector at large, it provides initial insight into the day to day practices and goals for nonprofit public communication

The key findings of the research were that organizations were most concerned with raising the profile of the organization and supporting and communicating with clients/membership through their communication with public policy advocacy of significantly lesser concern; that the organizations in the study were most actively communicating through promotional material and new media forums; and that organizational communication goals were believed to be achieved through dissemination of unmediated, internally produced documentation.

The need to maintain a public profile and raise public awareness of the organization was, by a significant margin, the primary communications goal for organizations in the study. 66.4% of the respondents listed this as their primary goal and a 27.5% reported this as their secondary goal. Client and membership support and development was second most prominent with 15% listing this as their primary goal and 33.3% listing this as their secondary goal. Public policy

advocacy was of a much lesser concern with only 6.5% listing it as their primary goal and 4.9% listing this as their secondary goal. These findings suggest that non-profit organizations recognize the importance of raising their public profile to maintain organizational viability and success. The limited prioritization of policy advocacy may reflect the “advocacy chill” (Phillips, 2007) that defines and directs much non-profit activity. It may also be a reflection of the internal structure of many organization where “policy advocacy” is often delegated to the Executive Director and not considered a communications function (Grosenick, 2010)

The most common communication activities practiced by the respondents were sending membership/client updates via email, producing and distributing a newsletter, publishing and distributing organizational and event information and updating the organization’s website and facebook page. These activities were ranked the highest by the participants as ones that they undertook more than 11x in the past year. Media management and sending correspondence to government officials were also regular activities, but were most often ranked as occurring only bi-monthly or quarterly for the organizations in the study. Least common activities (undertaken less than 2 times per year or never) were direct lobbying initiative such as initiating meetings with elected officials or government staff, participating on a government program/policy committee or task force, commissioning research reports, contributing to a blog or contacting individuals through LinkedIn, posting videos to YouTube or participating in an advocacy coalition. These findings suggest that much of the communication efforts of the responding organizations are dedicated to the day to day operations of the organization and to maintaining existing relationships through internal communiqués such newsletters and email. The printing and distribution of organizational and special event/program material suggests that these organizations may be looking to expand their base of supporters; it also suggests that they may

be more comfortable doing this in a non-mediated or non-dialogic forum. The extent of activity surrounding websites and facebook pages suggests that many non-profits are embracing some of the new and social media platforms to present their material. Further research is required to learn what information they are posting and how they are interacting with these platforms. It also suggests that many non-profits are recognizing that “social media will not fade away ...[and that] the question for organizational leaders is no longer whether to embrace social media, but how to do it effectively” (Kanter & Fine 2010). It is obvious, however, that some new media platforms are felt to be more accessible and relevant than others as non-profits continue to shy away from blogs, YouTube and LinkedIn. The lack of interaction with government staff and elected officials may be a reflection of the lack of delegation of this authority to the communications function mentioned earlier; however, this separation of activity limits the degree to which organizations can strategically plan and maximize the impact of their public communication activities. The data shows, however, that communication with government officials is not completely divorced from the communications function as there are efforts to correspond with officials on a semi-regular basis. This frequency of contact also applied to media contact activities. Media contact was most often reactive (responding to media requests) but many organizations did try to contact media outlets (pitch a story to journalists or send press releases) on a bi-monthly or quarterly basis. Mainstream media coverage thus remains an important communications goal for many non-profits; but they remain less strategic than reactive in their efforts. Of concern was that almost 80% (78.5%) of organization did not arrange for media training for their spokespeople; potentially limiting the effectiveness of the media opportunities available to them

Of particular interest in the study was which tactics the respondents identified as being most effective for achieving their goals. For those organizations that listed public awareness and promotion of the organization and its programs as the primary goal, the tactics identified as most important to achieve this goal were (in order of importance) producing and distributing the newsletter, updating the website, publishing material on the program or organization and sending email updates to members. Similar activities were also identified as most effective for achieving the goal of client and membership support and development. These include sending email updates to members, updating the website and updating facebook. It is apparent that non-profits see multiple audiences and goals for their regular communication practices; however, one must question the efficacy of these tactics for promoting the organization to wider and broader audiences. All of these activities, including website promotion, are largely directed to existing audiences (see Jamieson, 2000). Also, where non-profits may identify external audiences for the publishing and distribution of promotional material; the format limits the reach that it can achieve. The unmediated nature of these communication activities can affect how audiences perceive the legitimacy of the organization and its message. Mainstream media and promotion of the organization through other sponsors has been found to provide an inherent legitimacy to organizations and enhance their public profile that is unattainable through unmediated channels (Davis, 2007).

This study offers important insight into the many ways organizations communicate in their regular course of business. It suggests that while they are employing new and social media forums, they spend much of their effort disseminating internally produced promotional pieces and information to internal audiences or limited external audiences. The study raises questions

regarding the strategic nature of the communication and whether communication is an integrated function with the other external activities in the organization.

While not generalizable to the sector as a whole this research helps to direct new lines of inquiry for future non-profit communication studies. Future studies should expand the reach of this survey so that correlation of practices and organizational activity, size and budget can be explored further. Moreover, ethnographic studies that examine the “actually existing” (c.f. Fraser, 1992) communication practices within different associations will help us move beyond the campaign-centric, forum specific studies that comprise the bulk of non-profit communication scholarship.

REFERENCE LIST

- Bonk, K. (2008, January). Moving forward: Case studies on reframing the difficult issues for policy change. Paper presented at the True Spin Conference. Denver, CO.
- Davis, A. (2002). *Public relations democracy: Public relations, politics and the mass media in Britain*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Deacon, D. (1999). Charitable images: the construction of voluntary sector news. In B. Franklin (Ed.), *Social policy, the media and misrepresentation* (pp. 51-69). New York: Routledge.
- Dimitov, R. (2009). New communication strategies? Lessons from the refuge rights movement in Australia. Paper presented at the 2009 Association for Non-profit and Social Economy Research Conference. Ottawa, ON
- Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In Craig Calhoun (Ed.) *Habermas and the public sphere*. (pp. 109-142). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Greenberg, J. & Grosenick, G. (2008). Communicative capacity in the Third Sector. *Third Sector Review*, 14(2). 51-74
- Greenberg, J. & Walters, D. (2004). Promoting philanthropy? News publicity and voluntary organizations in Canada. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Non-profit Organization*. 15(4). 383-404

- Grosenick, G. (2010) *Communication as advocacy: The goals, contexts and strategies of non-profit communication surrounding issues of homelessness in four Canadian cities*. Unpublished thesis. Carleton University: Ottawa
- Jacobs, R. & Glass, D.J. (2002). Media publicity and the voluntary sector: The case of non-profit organizations in New York city. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Non-profit Organizations*, 13(3), 235-252.
- Jamieson, D. (2000) Building relationships in the networked age: Some implications of the internet for nonprofit organizations. *The Philanthropist* 15(2). 23-32
- Kanter, B & Fine, A. (2010) *The Networked nonprofit: connecting with social media to drive change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Kenix, L. (2008) Nonprofit organizations' perceptions and uses of the Internet. *Television & New Media* 9(5). 407-428.
- McNair, B. (2007). Pressure group politics and the oxygen of publicity. In *An Introduction to Political Communication*. (pp. 163-186) London: Routledge
- Phillips, S.D. (2007). Policy analysis and the voluntary sector. Evolving policy styles. In L. Dobuzinskis, M. Howlett & D. Laycock (Eds.), *Policy analysis in Canada. State of the art*. (pp.497 - 522). Toronto. University of Toronto Press.
- Pross, P. & Webb, K. (2003). Embedded regulation: Advocacy and the federal regulation of public interest groups. In Kathy Brock (Ed.), *Delicate dances: Public policy and the non-profit sector* (pp. 63-122). Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Waters, R. D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A., & Lucas, J. (2009). Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 102-106.