

SALLY J. PATTERSON

GENERATE BUZZ!

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
FOR NONPROFIT BOARDS

SECOND EDITION

BoardSource®

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Patterson, Sally J.

Generate buzz! : strategic communication for nonprofit boards / Sally J. Patterson. -- 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-58686-125-5 (alk. paper)

1. Communication in management. 2. Nonprofit organizations. 3. Strategic planning. I. Title.

HD30.3.P389 2011

658.4'5--dc22

2011013622

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First Printing, April 2011

ISBN 1-58686-125-5

Published by BoardSource

750 9th Street, NW, Suite 650

Washington, DC 20001

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PREFACE

In the five years since I wrote the previous edition of this book, a growing number of nonprofit organizations and their boards have embraced strategic communication as a key component of their work. Life, it seems, is a constant audition and successful nonprofits understand the necessity of keeping on top of their image and brand, communication and outreach, strategic use of resources, and constant monitoring and evaluation. Among the reasons for this shift:

- Nonprofit organizations are seeking more targeted and more thoughtful ways of encouraging behavior change and framing their messages to resonate with key constituencies.
- The use of social media has transformed communication from one-way outreach to a two-way dialogue about social change and community building.
- The economic downturn, combined with an increasingly connected world through social networks, has highlighted the necessity of transparency and frequent communication about organizational management and leadership during difficult times.

Most surprisingly for me, the very meaning of “strategic communication” has evolved in recent years. Not long ago, it meant ensuring that nonprofit organizations used all of the communication resources at their disposal to develop and disseminate their messages. Now that organizations have so many ways to reach out to key audiences (via social media, traditional media, and other means), strategic communication requires a much more deliberate approach to integrating and coordinating an organization’s communication activities.

Change, it seems, is the only constant in effective dialogue with key stakeholders, constituents, community partners, and others touched by your work.

It is my belief that following a generic plan will not move an organization to peak performance. Rather, nonprofit boards and senior management have to engage in the hard work of developing a plan that works for their organization. They must ask tough questions, engage in active discussion about their options, and build consensus about their priorities and a forward path.

Rather than laying out a prescribed course of action for nonprofits, this book presents core principles for strategic communication. I return to these principles again and again in my everyday work with our nonprofit clients, who continue to enrich my understanding of the challenges of strategic communication in the nonprofit sector.

I want to thank Penny Norton, CEO of FACE, and Michael Khoo, vice president of communications of Population Action International, for sharing their organizations' paths to strategic communication. Steve Wattenmaker, president and CEO of SimulConference Solutions, Inc. and Randy Rieland, nationally known consultant on social media were also generous with advice on social media. Their willingness to share the lessons they have learned strengthened and enriched the concepts presented in this work.

The challenges remain the same: Watch for opportunities to expand awareness, be targeted about the audience(s) you seek, and be specific about the desired actions needed to support your work. Be creative, be bold, generate buzz!

INTRODUCTION

“Why aren’t people more supportive of our organization and the excellent work it does?”

If this is a familiar question among your organization’s board members, you aren’t alone. Most nonprofit boards understand that they are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their organization communicates a compelling message to the community. But board members often become frustrated when it appears that the organization is not generating much excitement or interest. All board members want is for other people to care as much about the organization as they do.

Even if the nonprofit has a good newsletter and Web site and gets decent media coverage, the “buzz” isn’t always there. And a lack of buzz can mean that the organization has to struggle for the visibility, recognition, money, and volunteer support it needs to succeed.

Many board members sense that communication strategies need to improve within their organizations, but they aren’t certain what they can or should do about it. The answer is to get more strategic in their approach to communication. This means reassessing the organization’s methods for making messages heard and for stimulating stakeholders to take action.

Strategic communication is the art of expressing ideas combined with the science of transmitting information.

The role of nonprofit board members in protecting and advancing the reputation of the organizations they govern has come into sharper focus in recent years. Among the reasons: the advent of social media; growing understanding of social marketing techniques; the importance of communication and transparency as nonprofits navigated the financial downturn; and the increase in chief executive turnover, which has placed more pressure on boards to take responsibility for advancing a consistent and favorable message and image for their organizations.

As a result of these and other factors, board due diligence has expanded to include a greater role in monitoring, refining, and promoting the basic communication work of the organization. This book encourages boards to consider strategic communication as the pathway to fulfilling this evolving role more effectively.

Strategic communication is the art of expressing ideas combined with the science of transmitting information. It is about presenting a message to motivate target audiences to act in a desired manner. It integrates all aspects of the organization — including public education, advocacy, service marketing, fundraising, and membership services — into a single, disciplined, potentially powerful mechanism for advancing the organization's reputation and mission.

This book is intended to help nonprofit boards provide the necessary vision, support, and oversight to make strategic communication work for their organizations. The six chapters set out to answer the following questions:

- What is strategic communication, and what does it require of the board, the board chair, individual board members, and the chief executive and staff?
- What is the board's role in strategic communication planning?
- How do nonprofit organizations engage individual board members in outreach and communication efforts?
- How can nonprofits adopt framing and branding practices to better position their organizations, and how is the board involved in this work?
- What is the board's role in crisis communication?
- How can boards ensure that they are engaged in effective monitoring and oversight of strategic communication?

Within the six chapters, readers will find tools to help their organizations engage board members, community partners, and allies to advance the organization's mission and goals. Naturally, nonprofits have different levels of experience and expertise when it comes to communication. Some will find this book useful from start to finish, while others may consult it as a guide for addressing specific challenges such as reaching new audiences or undertaking a rebranding project.

The book uses the experience of a two organizations to illustrate strategic communication concepts and practices. The first, FACE, is a small organization that is developing new social marketing campaigns to advance community efforts to reduce underage drinking and influence alcohol policy. The second organization, Population Action International (PAI), is an international organization that works to ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services around the world. The stories in these pages about these and other organizations are intended not as a blueprint for other nonprofits, but to illustrate some of the insights and strategies that can come from clear strategic thinking about communication.

Among the most important contributions that a board can make to an organization is to encourage an organization-wide understanding of the connection between strategic communication and mission. It is no longer enough for nonprofits to simply do good work. Donors and supporters want to know more about the impact of the work. They also want evidence of effective management and fiscal due diligence.

This book was created to help boards ensure that their organizations are communicating effectively and strategically with key constituencies — and, in the process, creating the buzz that's essential to ensure that nonprofit organizations can succeed.