Nonprofit communications: how not to do it

Several years ago, I was asked to join the board of a local education nonprofit. This particular organization was tiny, and operating in the red. The executive director was a very young and inexperienced person, who was getting paid a salary and benefits that the organization just could not afford. Clearly, funds were the issue, as they are in most nonprofit organizations.

There is a tension between marketing communications and nonprofit organizations. As a marketer, you want your communications to look professional and put-together. I have always advocated for professional design. However, professional design does not come cheap, and it certainly is not free. But good design pulls in eyeballs and may actually help drive traffic to your website/brochure/etc. So what is a nonprofit to do? In my opinion, a nonprofit needs to commit resources to its communications needs—carefully. For instance, a cheap website will not attract donors. An overly glitzy website could potentially turn off donors. Somewhere in between—a website that has the necessary elements, looks clean and modern, has the ability to receive donations—is probably where nonprofits need to go.

Back to the nonprofit organization I was involved with. The board was committed to having a printed brochure, which was mailed to the mailing list of members and former students. Because the executive director was lazy (there is no other word), she paid first-class postage instead of the more labor-intensive bulk nonprofit mailing rate. The brochure was printed in two-colors on heavy bond paper, adding both mailing costs and printing costs. The executive director laid out the newsletter in Publisher, and it was very difficult to edit and to update. Additionally, the organization had very little idea

of who attended the classes offered or where they came from. In other words, they had no demographic information.

I recommended moving the brochure to an electronic format and mailing out only to those who requested printed copies. I recommended using the nonprofit rate. I recommended getting a logo designed by graphic designer. I recommended getting all content in Word, edit and correct it, and then lay it out. I recommended conducting a survey to get a sense of who is taking the classes. Guess what? They did not show any interest in any of these recommendations. It was so frustrating that I quit the board. A few months later the executive director left, and they hired someone more mature part-time. Last I know, they don't have any executive director.

This organization is now sending out an even less graphically appealing printed brochure (I just got one the other day and it ended up in the trash). It is still being printed on heavy bond paper, without color though. And they are using their nonprofit bulk rate instead of first-class stamps. I wonder if this is working for them.

First of all, who are they trying to attract? An older, less sophisticated audience might not mind a brochure that looks like a secretary in the 1990s put it together. Why am I still getting their mailing? I haven't attended a class there for years, which indicates to me they haven't cleaned up their database.

When you have limited funds, you should use them wisely. In this case, the organization is spending too much money on printed materials that are not visually appealing. I would bet that they are not achieving good return on investment.

Do you have examples of other nonprofits that are not doing things "right?" Please share stories and examples.