How to run your organization into oblivion

About a decade ago, I was on the board of a small nonprofit that provided educational programming. I lasted all of a few months since I was fighting a losing battle with the other board members and a spectacularly uninformed (and very young) executive director.

This nonprofit had very little money but insisted on a color brochure printed on heavy paper, listing their courses. The ED would then mail it first class (read, the expensive way) because it would take too long to prepare it for the cheaper, bulk/nonprofit rate.

Among the things I suggested was to print the brochure on cheaper paper (like newsprint), use the bulk rate, and to consider going all electronic instead. All these ideas were dismissed. One board member thought it was crucial to print the brochure on good paper because it made it seem more serious (?). The ED was balking at using the bulk rate because it meant pre-sorting the brochure. And another board member said that many people wanted the printed brochure and would never abide an electronic format.

Like I said, it was a losing battle and I believe that there’s no sense in discussing change with people who don’t want to change.

Here we are a good ten years later, and I just got their latest brochure. Yes, I am still on the mailing list even though I have not signed up for a class or donated any money or shown any interest whatsoever. It is still printed on heavy paper, and has full color (which adds to the expense). They are now using the nonprofit/bulk rate. When you use use the bulk rate, you have to be aware that delivery will take longer than using first class postage. Apparently, it is not something that this nonprofit understands. I got the brochure yesterday (May 10). The front cover has a banner telling me spring classes begin on April 26, 2017.

This nonprofit continues to print an expensive brochure. However, it doesn’t print it out with enough lead time to be able to overcome the slower bulk delivery rate. In effect, this is a complete waste. If you are using a brochure as your only means to communicate your offering, then it better be timely.

And, it seems this organization does not review its database. It continues sending out brochures to people that have not indicated any interest in years. Of course, this adds to the cost of the printing and mailing.

Can you imagine if they had provided this brochure electronically? They would be able to send it out at precisely the right time. They would be able to gauge interest from the open and click rates. They would be able to scrub their lists of any bad addresses. They would increase their reach through the ability to share online. But why change?

Here’s how you run your organization to the ground: you waste your precious resources and keep doing it until you have nothing left. You keep doing things the way you always have even though it has never been cost-effective. You don’t adapt.

Sigh.

A tale of two organizations and five best practices

To paraphrase the opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities*, it was the best of practices and the worst of practices. Let me explain.

In the past few weeks, I’ve attended two remarkably similar events put on by two different organizations. Both organizations are membership-based, advocacy/non-profits, and are local affiliates of a national organization. One organization clearly followed best practices, while the other appeared to have no idea how to make the most of a successful event.

Organization A

Event description: Luncheon featuring a *Washington Post* reporter discussing the challenges of covering the Trump Administration. Cost was $35.

Sign up: On the organization’s website, taken to an outside website (PayPal) for payment. Receipt sent from PayPal but no acknowledgment from organization. No information or email list sign up captured.

Reminder for the event: None.

Follow up after the event: None.

Organization B

Event: Cocktail reception followed by panel discussion, featuring three White House correspondents, about the challenges of covering the Trump Administration. Cost was $36.

Sign up: Through Eventbrite, which allows for email capture, branding, and payment on one page. (There are other benefits to using Eventbrite, including ability to sign in people, print labels, be listed on an events page, and others.) Tickets with event information sent from Eventbrite.

Reminder: Eventbrite sends a reminder two days ahead of the event.

Follow up: Personalized thank you email from the organization's development director, including a program survey, and encouraging involvement in the organization and attendance at future events.

Five best practices

1. Have a hook

Kudos to both these organizations for their choice of speakers. Both events were very informative, lively and interesting. **Hosting an interesting, topical event is a big draw for members and is attractive to non-members**.

2. Use the right online tools

There are lots of online tools available to organizations, at all different prices, for various functions (event management, surveys, time management). They offer functionality such as being able to generate reports, charge credit cards, build email lists, communicate with attendees, and so forth. **Using the right online tool will let you increase your organization's efficiency through automation and increased functionality.**

3. Build your email list

If you are a membership or donor-based organization it becomes extremely important to build and expand your email list. Having an event is a great way to attract new people, so it makes sense to get their email address so you can keep in touch. **Automatically adding people that have signed up for an event to your email list is easy and smart.**

4. Follow up after the event

Presumably, by hosting an event, you have a goal for it. This goal could be to increase awareness, or increase your membership, or attract donations, etc. **Following up after the event, reminding people of what you do and how they can be involved will go a long way to achieving your goal.**

5. Survey your audience

If you want to continue to have successful programs, you'll need to know what attendees liked and didn't like. **Asking attendees to rate your program and give suggestions is a great way to improve your future events.**

It really was the best of times and the worst of times

Organization B was much more sophisticated and tech-savvy than Organization A. It used online tools to make things easier, and it seemed to be clearer on the outcomes it wanted. Even though both organizations advocate, only Organization B had the foresight to build their email list to make advocacy happen.

Organization A, in effect, has put the onus on me if I want to be more involved in the future. If I want to see what programs are coming up, I will have to visit their website. Organization B is making my involvement and support easier. Since I will be getting B's emails about advocacy and events, I will be able to involved if I choose, without having to take an extra step to do it.

Tools save you money, except when they don’t

Not a day goes by that I don’t see a post about tools. Just this morning I saw this: “10 Social Media Tools for Small Businesses and Freelancers.” We are obsessed with tools, especially the online and free variety.

watercolors sets 1 by niftynotebook on Flickr

Tools exist to make jobs easier

It’d be hard to create this blog post without Microsoft Word or WordPress. If I wanted to make a cake, having an electric mixer would be helpful. But, owning or having access to tools, even the most advanced or professional type, does not make you a professional or an expert. In other words, owning a paintbrush does not make you an artist, any more than having Adobe Photoshop makes you a graphic designer.

Having a tool does not make you an expert

Say you bought some sculpting equipment. Do you think you will now be able to sculpt something like Michelangelo’s David?

Well, you might…*if* you had years of training, Michelangelo's genius, and some amazing Italian marble to work with.

The problem is not using tools to help you do your job, it's that some organizations and individuals believe they can substitute a tool for an expert, or worse, that having the tool (Adobe Photoshop comes to mind), makes you the expert.

Doing it yourself could cost you

Last week, I was meeting with my accountant and he told me about a new client he recently started working with. This client had been filing his taxes using a popular online tax software. It turns out that my accountant was able to find the client thousands of dollars in tax savings because the do-it-yourself client had not known how to take depreciation on his mortgage and other deductions. Having tax software does not make you an accountant. The reason accountants can charge for their time is that they know what to do with the tax software, they understand tax laws and how they affect individual situations.

How do you say wrong in Spanish?

Some organizations are turning to tools like Google Translate (or other online translation software) in order to save money by not hiring a professional translator. The results can be disastrous. Same can be said for do-it-yourself graphic design, website building and any number of services people think they can get for free or cheap.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was on a national environmental group's website. The group has chapters around the world, and in the Spanish version of the website, the word used for "chapters" was "capítulos," which quite literally means chapters in a book. In Spanish, capítulo is *not* used as a synonym for a section or group of people.

My advice is to only use tools for routine jobs and leave the skilled work to the professionals. It may seem to cost more to hire somebody, but as my accountant proved to his new client, it could end up saving you thousands down the road.

What do you think? Do you rely on tools to avoid hiring a professional?

Are your volunteers on message?

Nonprofits are notorious for having difficulty with communications. Many times, it has to do with lack of funds (and thus, insufficient support). What many nonprofits tend to have in spades, however, is volunteers. Volunteers are great for nonprofit organizations. They can staff an event, or help serve lunch, or provide input, or, maybe most important, help spread the word about the nonprofit.

And yet, some nonprofits don't seem to appreciate the role that volunteers play in communications. Let me give you two examples.

A chaotic, disorganized volunteer experience

Around Christmas, I volunteered to do some gift-wrapping with a DC-based nonprofit. The sign-up form indicated I was to work from 10 am to 3 pm. I arrived at 10 am, only to find a bit of chaos. The volunteer director told me to go one place, where I was promptly told to go back to where I started. The volunteer manager had limited ability to organize, and ended up wasting a lot of time. Two other volunteers were grousing along with me on how disorganized the event was. We didn't start wrapping (in a very chaotic and inefficient manner—also lacking tape, wrapping paper, etc.) until about 11 am. One full hour was wasted. No water or snacks were offered. No guidance as to how long we were expected to stay. When I left around 12:30 pm, no one even noticed or thanked me. In fact, I never got a thank you at all. I will not be volunteering with this organization ever again.

There are two different issues at play here. One is the negative impact of disorganization on people who volunteer. People (like me) who have a bad experience volunteering won't volunteer with your organization again, and worse, will tell others of their bad experience. The second issue is that volunteer leaders are not being given the tools to make sure they provide both a message and a positive experience, quite possibly because the volunteering role is not valued.

Volunteers who don't have the right (or any) information

Just this week, someone in my network invited me to attend a business networking event run by a large nonprofit. The invitation said the price of the event itself was $75, but attendees were required to donate a minimum of $500 to the nonprofit during the calendar year. I pointed out that the real cost of attending this event would be $575 to the person who invited me. He called and emailed me to tell me that the $500 was "only if I wanted to donate" and that the event fee was "totally separate." However, the invitation clearly stated that the annual contribution was required.

Volunteers need to know the facts…all of them. But more importantly, they need to know the reason for the information they are sharing. The nonprofit above SHOULD have informed my contact about the requirements for the event, but moreover, should have told him WHY this event has a minimum contribution, why it is necessary, what the contribution is for (what are the impacts etc.).

Imagine if this guy had come back to me and said this instead:

Yes, you are right. You will be required to donate $500 during the year, which by the way, you can give in several installments, not all at once. That money will be used to fund our X initiative, which helps X number of people. Also, you will be assured of meeting some awesome business leaders at the event, and we will be having other events during the year.

I suspect that this volunteer was only told to recruit people to come to the event. He didn't get any additional information or a script or any other tools that would help him not only recruit attendees, but spread the message about the work the nonprofit is doing and will do with additional funds.

Volunteers can help with a nonprofit's tasks. And volunteers help communicate the nonprofit's message. Are your volunteers on message?

Did Komen know much about its supporters?

Given the tremendous amount of negative press, critical comments and social media outrage regarding Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation's decision to stop funding Planned Parenthood,we may be able to conclude that there is a rather large disconnect between the foundation's leadership/decision makers and its donor/support base. In fact, the decision has been received so poorly that it points to a top down decision-making approach that seems wholly ignorant of what supporters want.

It is an axiom of marketing (and of fund-raising) that you should understand and know your target audience. How can you market (or raise funds from) people you don't know? This is why marketers often use focus groups, surveys and other methods to determine just who makes up the customer/client/donor base.

I participated in the Komen Race for the Cure for two years. I am not sure if I ever got a survey from Komen. I did get tons of emails selling me Komen merchandise, which is why I unsubscribed and stopped supporting the organization.

Of course hindsight is always 20/20 but <u>I believe that if Komen had done more to understand who supports the foundation and why, it may have avoided taking this decision and the huge firestorm of bad publicity that has followed.</u> Perhaps every time someone gives a donation or signs up for a race, Komen (or any other nonprofit), could send out a quick survey. In Komen's specific case it could have been as simple as a question asking:

Which of our programs do you feel has the most value? (along with a checklist).

Perhaps if Komen had been aware that many people think Planned Parenthood provides good services, it would not have been so quick to pull funding and so ignorant about the potential outcry.

There are multiple lessons to be learned from the Komen debacle (PR and crisis communications matter, for one), none the least of is: **KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE** (customers, clients, donors, supporters)… and remember you work for them, and not the other way around.

Have you signed up to get my enewsletter? All you have to do is enter your name and email address on the upper right hand side of this page. Your name/email will not be shared.

Remember the after

Often, we focus on the here and now. There's nothing wrong with that. However, you shouldn't forget about the after.

Yesterday was Greater Washington Give to the Max day. Various DC-area nonprofits were beneficiaries of a massive, day-long donation drive. Nonprofits who got the most donors got bonuses. There was an urgency to get donors to give during the day. This resulted in many social media and email messages being sent out by the nonprofits. I receive communication from several nonprofits and all of them sent at least one email during the day if not several. But, only very few sent emails today. **Today is the after, and it is a great opportunity to reaffirm a message.**

One nonprofit said thanks on an email. Another posted on Facebook detailing how much money had been raised, and reminding us that we can give ANY day. This is smart. By forgetting the after, the other nonprofits are losing opportunities and they are seeming to only communicate when they perceive it is necessary (there is a deadline for example).

Nonprofits who use email and social media to ask for support and businesses who sell products and services would do well to think about the after. **What is your message to your target audience AFTER you've told them what you wanted to tell them in the first place?**

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.