

# Nonprofit Communications Report

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MONTHLY COMMUNICATIONS IDEAS FOR NONPROFITS

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## COMMUNICATIONS METRICS

### Which Communications Measurements Matter Most?

**Q** Which communications metrics do you find especially useful and why?

“While we certainly want to communicate our message to the largest possible audience, engagement is more important than pure reach. When it comes to emails, opens and clicks are what we’re looking for. Even though the numbers might not add up, in my opinion an email that is sent to 10,000 people but is only opened by 10% is by far less effective than an email sent to 1,000 people with a 50% open rate. It shows you’re doing a better job of communicating and engaging with your community, and, with organic growth, that open rate can be maintained as subscriber numbers grow.

“Similarly, click-through rates on your website are more valuable than the sheer volume of page loads. If you pay for ads and the majority of your visitors spend 10 seconds on your homepage and leave, that’s far less valuable than a smaller number of visitors who find you organically through word of mouth or authentic search engine results and take the time to visit multiple pages, learn about your program and hopefully get involved or donate.”

Ben Vorspan, Veteran Nonprofit Director of Marketing & Communications and Author, The Nonprofit Imagineers, Los Angeles, CA.  
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“While it seems old-fashioned, clients still measure PR success by counting clips. Extra points if articles are in a top-tier outlet such as The New York Times or claim to reach an uber-large audience such as Yahoo! Finance.”

Sheri Singer, President, Singer Communications, Arlington, VA.  
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“The metrics I follow most closely are those tied to the overall brand and strategic objectives of UHealth including awareness, preference, likelihood to recommend, patient experience, employee engagement and retention rates. Of course, many programs and initiatives outside communications also drive these metrics, but I think it is important to remain focused on the goals for our organization. For specific communications initiatives, we watch open rate, engagement and page views; however, I like to connect back with the subjects of communications to get their feedback. For example, hearing that a specific medical clinic received a large number of calls and appointment requests due to a communications campaign can be one of the most tangible metrics of success.” ♦

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## ENGAGE YOUR COMMUNITY

# Turn the Need for New Ideas Into a Community Contest

Take advantage of local talent while giving the community the chance to help create new materials for your organization. Whether you're looking for a new logo, an event advertisement or other materials, reach out to the community for ideas.

If you're creating a child friendly contest, reach out to local schools, camps and houses of worship for help in spreading the word. You can also involve local businesses and organizations by allowing them to co-sponsor the contest or participate in another way. Contests are a great community relations tool and will provide your organization with fresh ideas. ♦

## NONPROFIT COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

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# WILEY

## ADAPT DIGITALLY

# One Way to Transition Your Print Magazine to a Hybrid

With the cost of paper and postage on the rise, many higher education institutions are now forced to consider whether it's possible to save money and preserve their beloved print publications. Some might decide to go fully digital, while others may see it beneficial to provide alumni readers with a periodic hardcopy memento from their alma mater. Howard University's (Washington, DC) editorial team recently took the latter route with Howard Magazine, ultimately swapping the quarterly offering for a hybrid format that includes two print issues and a digital version covering the spring and summer seasons.

"We knew we couldn't sit back on the glory days of a brilliant print publication without an equally strong web presence next to it," says Howard Magazine Editor Rin-rin Yu of the new approach. So far, the feedback is positive. "People love it," Yu continues. "Some of our stories have gone crazy viral before we even had a chance to mention it ourselves online. We had a story about the women deans accompanied by a really beautiful photo shoot, and that story ramped up some of the highest traffic we've ever had." Still, there will always be folks who want to display their copy on the coffee table instead of their screen.

Thanks to the varying versions, readers can interact with Howard Magazine's content however they like best. Here Yu offers advice to organizations that opt for a hybrid rollout:

- 1. Run an audit.** Does your current publication match the organization's vision, or is a hybrid launch a perfect time to revisit layout and content? "Howard had launched a five-year strategy, and the magazine needed to reflect the goal that the strategy was aiming for — meaning, we had to change the look, feel, the way we communicated, the storytelling, everything. So we did," Yu shares. Any digital version that results should also reflect key aspects of the overhaul.
- 2. Create a unique digital experience.** "Think about how much further your messaging and storytelling can go digitally, and all the creativity behind it," Yu suggests. "There are so many ways people take in information — not everyone reads. Some people love videos. Some prefer audio. Pictures really are made up of 1,000 words." Avoid simply slapping your print version online — create something truly different for online readers.
- 3. Focus on exceptional storytelling first.** "Be strategic in what sort of digital components you add. Don't just add bells and whistles because it's available — simple is always best," Yu continues. "In the end, it still comes down to excellent storytelling and everything that accompanies and enhances that storytelling."
- 4. Consider whether an additional hub could fill in gaps.** Howard's editorial office launched an additional news and information hub called The Dig to alleviate some of the demand for news and stories all year.
- 5. Adopt a two-mag mindset.** Treat both editions with the same amount of love and attention, and remember, pursuing a hybrid format is more like planning two magazines in parallel. "To us, there is no difference when it comes to how much we dedicate ourselves to each issue," Yu says. "In fact, with the digital-only issue, we have a lot more room and time for multimedia and creativity than if we're planning both print and digital." ♦

Source: Rin-rin Yu, Editor, Howard Magazine, Howard University, Washington, DC. Phone (202) 238-2345. Email: [zirin.yu@Howard.edu](mailto:zirin.yu@Howard.edu). Website: <https://howard.edu/>

## IF YOU'RE NEW TO YOUR LEADERSHIP ROLE

# Follow a 30-60-90 Day Checklist

The first few months at a new job can feel like a whirlwind. There are the logistical tasks — adjusting to a new commute route, learning names and memorizing office phone extensions — and there are pressing matters to attend to, like board meeting minutes to review and next steps for initiatives left unfinished by the former president or VP.

“It’s common for someone to go into a new role and feel overwhelmed,” says Melissa Farmer Richards, vice president for communications and marketing at Hamilton College (Clinton, NY). “People have been waiting for you, and, in some cases, you’re arriving after a long search process. There can be an absence of leadership for months, and things pile up. This makes priorities difficult to discern.”

Richards has more than 30 years of experience in communications, 15 of which she’s spent in higher education. When moving into new positions she develops a 30-60-90 day checklist to set expectations for herself, her new boss and her colleagues. The checklist is founded upon three goals:

### 30 Days – Building Trust

“Trust is emotional, and you’ll need to forge an emotional connection with people in the early days,” Richards explains. “They need to get to know you, understand your style and see that you are listening to them in order to trust you.”

To build trust: Interview your boss, hold meetings with individual team members who report directly to you, create opportunities to listen, take time to understand workplace culture and get familiar with the institutional strategy.

### 60 Days – Establishing Credibility

“The 60-day window is for proving that you’re going to follow through on what you said you would do,” Richards attests.

To build credibility: Set deadlines and stick to them, continue

to collaborate with key leaders, get to know the members and function of your board and set realistic goals with input from your trusted teammates.

### 90 Days – Demonstrating Commitment

“By now, your team and colleagues should know that you’re all in,” Richards offers. “You’ve shown them that you’re willing to roll up your sleeves and work as hard as you’ve asked them to.”

To demonstrate commitment: Continue to learn in your new role, be open to new responsibilities as they are handed over, meet regularly with teams on in-progress initiatives and make yourself available when urgent issues arise.

Every checklist will look different depending on the role and workplace situation. However, Richards urges new leaders to build their 30-60-90 day plan by envisioning their duties through a lens of three concentric circles. At the center lies core responsibilities. (Start with those listed in your job description.) Then determine how your duties intersect with those of adjacent departments, and finally shape how your approach will align with industry and organizational best practices.

“I think one of the greatest values of the checklist is that it helps you pace yourself, because if you overextend yourself in the first 90 days, then you’re not going to reach the credibility or commitment-building phases,” Richards says. “And it’s really not until after the first 90 days are over that you should begin to develop a new strategic plan or initiate major changes — these take socializing, and people will only give you their buy-in after they trust and view you as a credible partner.” ♦

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Source: Melissa Farmer Richards, MPA, APR, Vice President for Communications and Marketing, Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Email: [mfrichar@hamilton.edu](mailto:mfrichar@hamilton.edu). Website: [www.hamilton.edu](http://www.hamilton.edu)

## PICKING THE RIGHT PLATFORM

# Look for Patterns in Names

Is Facebook still your supporters’ preferred platform? Will a new TikTok feed be worth the time and effort? Generally, user demographics like age or gender can help organizations answer those questions, but when a database presents gaps in these areas, there’s another effective point of reference: first names.

“Export lists of your donors by donation level and look at their names,” says Beth Brodovsky, president of Iris Creative Group Inc. (Fort Washington, PA) and author of [FocalPoint](#),

a newsletter that helps nonprofit communicators navigate the process of creating an audience-centered brand. “You can learn a lot about the gender and age of your audience as name trends often run in 10-year cycles. ‘Jessica’ was popular in 1993, and ‘Lisa’ was number one in many states in 1963.” Analyze these patterns and use your findings to craft messages for platforms where your target audiences are already spending their time. ♦

# Make the Most of Repurposing Your Content

When Southern Utah University (SUU; Cedar City, UT) was selected to appear on Amazon Prime's *The College Tour*, the marketing team there was thrilled to spotlight the most compelling aspects of the institution — soon everyone would know SUU as “the world’s best backyard.” Plus, the savvy communicators recognized another key opportunity to make the most of a resource-intensive filming effort.

“We went into producing the 30-minute episode knowing that we were going to repurpose this larger video format into many other things,” says Nikki Koontz, assistant vice president of marketing communication for SUU. “We have a segment about the outdoors and one about our aviation program and one about our peer mentorship offerings. We were able to select the segment topics to really highlight what makes our university special.”

The campus community gathered for an official watch party when SUU’s episode hit the streaming platform in August 2021. In the two years since, Koontz and the marketing department have continued to rework the content into inspiring assets such as print advertisements, paid promotional social videos, university blog posts, email campaigns and more.

“Nikki and I had lots of conversations before we ever cast or filmed the show about how we could use the content,” says Lexi Carter, assistant director of marketing. “Even with all of the prep work, there were still so many ways that we used it that we hadn’t anticipated — such as having it run online for our local city office as a highlight video in our Welcome Center and in the view book that gets sent out to prospective students.”

They attribute the versatility of the content to thoughtful planning and a top-notch production team. Here Koontz and Carter share tips others can use to stretch their film projects further:

- 1. Hold auditions.** “Students were able to submit a short, two-minute video that they filmed so that we could hear them, see them and understand how they would interact with the camera,” Koontz shares. “If you have time ahead of production, use it to find the right subjects.”
- 2. Pick evergreen topics.** “You can’t always anticipate when a faculty member will put in their two-week’s notice,” Koontz cautions. “That’s why we chose to focus on our students and high-quality academics, and we have a great location that we knew would not be changing. Consider highlighting the attributes or personality traits of your organization that aren’t necessarily tied to a specific face or person.”
- 3. Spotlight key programs.** “*The College Tour* is aimed toward high school students and their parents, but we recognize we have a growing group of online students too,” Carter shares. “We made sure to give that offering a mention, and we also filmed an international segment to showcase our position as being global ‘TBirds.’ Don’t forget to create moments that engage your niche audiences.”
- 4. Collect thematic B-roll.** “Going through this process forced our video team to create B-roll packages centered on themes we established beforehand,” Koontz says. “Since the episode’s aired, it feels like every video project is so much easier because we already did the work of collecting years and years of archival footage into different student life, athletics or academic packages.” ♦

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Sources: Lexi Carter, Assistant Director of Marketing, Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT. Email: [lexicarter@suu.edu](mailto:lexicarter@suu.edu). Website: [www.suu.edu](http://www.suu.edu)

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## ENGAGEMENT IDEAS

# Weekly Flamingle Keeps Alums Engaged

Want to engage your audience and build loyalty? Staff at the Wisconsin Alumni Association (University of Wisconsin, UW; Madison, WI) use *The Flamingle*. This weekly email publication is designed to keep UW-Madison alumni engaged with the UW community by highlighting current campus news, sharing nostalgic stories and images and featuring UW traditions.

Each issue consists of an Ask HQ article, which answers a question about campus history, traditions or trivia; an In Case You Missed It curated news section, which features three one-to two-sentence news clips with links to the full stories, a campus image or flashback photo; and a puzzle or quiz, such as the

fill-in-the-lyrics [On Wisconsin](#) quiz.

“The tone of *The Flamingle* is very informal,” explains Esther Seidlitz, writer for the association. “Our team uses humor, interactive elements like the lyrics fill-in-the-blank and nostalgia to remind alumni about their time at UW and to keep them interested and invested in the current campus experience.” With 92,000 subscribers, the publication effectively reaches their target audience for engagement. ♦

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Source: Esther Seidlitz, Writer, Wisconsin Alumni Association, Madison, WI. Email: [esther.seidlitz@supportuw.org](mailto:esther.seidlitz@supportuw.org). Website: <https://www.uwalumni.com/>

# Learn the Mechanics of Creativity

By Daniel Lindley

Although creativity is in high demand, most people don't think they're reaching their creative potential, says Anna Consie, senior director, creative, ASU Enterprise Partners (Tempe, AZ). That's limiting their own success as well as their organizations', she says.

"Creativity is a skill and a muscle, and you have to work at it," Consie says. "There are things you can do to become more creative and more comfortable with creative thinking."

1. Encourage creativity by example. "It is scary and requires vulnerability to be creative," Consie says. "If you have a leader who is willing to be a little bit creative, it gives permission to everybody else to join in and be creative as well. Studies show people will mimic that."
2. Make creativity a habit. "Just like every other skill, the more you practice it, the more comfortable you are with it. The more often you can practice your creativity, the easier it is to turn on that skillset in your brain," Consie says. Being creative doesn't mean you have to be a great artist. You can boost your creative skills with daily exercises like doodling, coloring or writing a six-word story. These simple exercises "take the pressure out of it," she says.
3. Make creativity even less serious. Try drawing or coloring with your nondominant hand. "Just let it go," Consie advises. "Let it flow out of you."
4. Make it weird. "A lot of people think creativity requires

something serious or this huge discipline. It doesn't," Consie says. Come up with a "weird" question and solve it. How do you make a dog fly? How do you make a rock talk? "That forces you to think outside of your standard thinking pattern," Consie says.

5. Call it "creative thinking" rather than "creativity." Consie suggests, "When you say to someone, 'Be creative,' you're asking somebody to be something. If you ask them to engage creative thinking, you're asking them to create a product. That takes the pressure off. It gives them permission to try without asking them to be somebody."

These exercises can be done individually or in groups, Consie says. Her team engages in a "Creative Friday" every other month in which they spend the day solving a problem having nothing to do with their jobs — such as creating a song parody with an accompanying music video. The exercises have helped her group work more efficiently and tackle last-minute projects better, Consie reports.

"Our creative brains are really a marvel," she says. "They're a beautiful, powerful thing. By giving ourselves permission to play and utilize them, we are helping ourselves and helping our organization." ♦

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Source: Anna Consie, Senior Director, Creative, ASU Enterprise Partners, Tempe, AZ. Phone (480) 727-9771. Email: [anna.consie@asuemp.org](mailto:anna.consie@asuemp.org). Website: <https://asuenterprisepartners.org>

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## WHEN YOU'RE BEING INTERVIEWED

# Prepare for Successful Press Interviews

Press interviews can be nerve-wracking. Prepare ahead of time and stay focused to ensure a positive and less stressful interview.

Keep these tips in mind:

- **Stick to the questions asked.** While background information is often helpful, it is not always necessary.
- **Offer reporters access to further information,** such as referring them to a knowledgeable colleague or to your website.
- **Create an environment where you feel comfortable and free to speak at length.** When interviewed over the phone, make sure you have access to a quiet and private space, so you don't get interrupted.
- **If you share something you wish you hadn't, let the reporter know.** Asking to strike or delete certain remarks shouldn't be a problem, as long as you state your request at the interview.
- **Arm yourself with updated statistics and other valuable information.** You may have an opportunity to share an impressive fact about an ongoing program or campaign.
- **Ask for a copy of the piece/article for your records.** Whenever interviewed, ask the reporter to send you a copy of the published article. It will be a great addition to your portfolio and give you a chance to review the finished product. ♦



# Discover What LinkedIn Can Do for You

LinkedIn's positive reputation has content creators flocking to the platform in record numbers. Competitors are always in the news, and generally the headlines point to something problematic. That's just one reason why Lawrence Synett, director of social media for University of Colorado Denver (Denver, CO), believes nonprofits should give more of their attention to the professional space.

"LinkedIn isn't going anywhere, and people are starting to notice," he explains. "But what are you going to do to cut through that noise now that organizations are starting to use it more?" For Synett, visual content and ample testing has helped his institution engage a fresh and captivated audience, and he's got ideas for others who want to achieve similar outcomes, which he reveals here.

## **Why is LinkedIn your favorite "fun" space?**

"The folks at LinkedIn have stayed true to themselves for 20 years. Instagram has an identity crisis. It's a wait-and-see strategy with Twitter. You must pay to play to be successful on Facebook (Meta). TikTok? We all know what's going on there, and even if you want to be in that space, it requires significant bandwidth to be successful.

"LinkedIn is no longer a faceless blue man in a suit. After Microsoft purchased LinkedIn in 2016, leaders empowered its employees and allowed the organization to keep its identity. Over the subsequent years, they reimagined what it meant to serve the workforce and those looking to join it. Then, almost under the radar, they began testing new features all while creating an algorithm that didn't appear to punish users for making mistakes."

## **Speaking of which, what common missteps do nonprofits make when using LinkedIn?**

"The biggest mistake we see is nonprofits are using LinkedIn now as it was used pre-pandemic. Nonprofit social media has a dilemma — and it revolves around link clicks, calendar items and events — and that's what we see often on LinkedIn. They often push to outside links, highlight significant cultural dates and overamplify organizational events. 'Register here.' 'Click here for more.' That type of content kills the algorithm, and our audiences are far smarter than that. It's about what we have to offer them, not what we are trying to get from them."

## **What content performs best?**

"The fact of the matter is what performs well for me most likely won't perform well for you. And vice versa. Sure, polls tend to play better, but the wording for our polls is going to be vastly different than yours. Turning PDFs into visual carousels does seem to be one exception. They perform so well."

## **What's the secret to better engagement?**

"Stay up-to-date on the news out there, not just about LinkedIn but all the other channels your organization uses. It literally changes daily. Follow other social media managers and like-minded professionals, especially on LinkedIn and Twitter. The pandemic gave

social media managers a voice, and now they are sharing all that knowledge with others. There's no magic formula. You must find your organization's voice, lay a foundation and see what works for you. Be clean. Be concise. Test. Test. Test."

## **What leg up does LinkedIn have on other platforms?**

"As I mentioned earlier, LinkedIn is far less toxic than other channels. I really feel like that will remain because those who are on LinkedIn (except for bots) are still professionally representing themselves, their organizations, etc. You can be cute on LinkedIn but not too cute. You can be honest on LinkedIn but not too honest."

## **What's the best strategy for building a following?**

"Because of the way LinkedIn works on the backend, you will gain followers no matter what you do, but you really need to take time to gain insights into your current audience, engage with them, but also curtail day-to-day content to grow that audience.

"Tag folks in your posts (but don't tag too many, and don't just slap a bunch of tags on the bottom of your post). Pay attention to your mentions, and like and reshare (but don't over-reshare). Those emails that you get from LinkedIn encouraging you to celebrate employee milestones? Do it. It's called social media for a reason — be social."

## **What's one innovative way you're planning to use LinkedIn?**

"This summer, we're discussing the possibility of testing more user-generated content on LinkedIn — not the polished content everyone is used to. Testing polls that creatively engage our audience — not just asking them to answer a question. We all remember the 'choose your own adventure books' we read as children — why can't we do that on LinkedIn?" ♦

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Source: Lawrence Synett, Director of Social Media, University of Colorado Denver, Denver, CO. Email: [lawrence.synett@ucdenver.edu](mailto:lawrence.synett@ucdenver.edu). Website: <https://www.ucdenver.edu>

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## BRIEF

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# Survey Your Readers

You don't have to guess what your audience wants. Ask them directly with surveys. Staff at Auburn University (Auburn, AL) have enhanced their magazine engagement with two simple methods: flash surveys and pop-ups. Todd Deery, assistant director of marketing and communications for Auburn University Advancement, notes, "We do a flash survey that hits readers' inboxes a week after each publication lands. Pop-ups on our website also encourage readers to take a survey about the current issue." Staff use the Qualtrics survey platform and the WordPress plug-in Popup Maker to create these tools. ♦

# Create Audience-Generated Content

**By Erin Sandage**

Continually coming up with good content to post can be a daunting task. What's worse, your efforts might fall on deaf ears. Solve your continual need for engaging content by tapping into your audience.

"Audience-generated content boosts engagement by making your audience co-creators, giving them a vested interest in the content," says Jess Dansie Anderson, managing director of Marketing and Communications, BYU Ballard Center for Social Impact (Provo, UT). "It also makes the content feel more genuine and authentic, since it is coming from other members of the community that your audience can better relate to."

In 2023, the BYU Ballard Center created a campaign called Changemakers where students were asked to submit an Instagram Reel sharing their idea on how they would change the world. Anderson says they received 64 submissions, which were posted on the participants' personal accounts, and then six finalists' submissions were posted to the Ballard Center's Instagram account. Their audience was then asked to vote for their favorite by liking and sharing the post.

"We reached over 81,000 accounts in the one-week voting period, which was huge since our account has only about 3,300 followers. We also received tons of engagement as people were commenting on and cheering for their friends' submissions."

High-quality content submissions were ensured due to a good incentive and clear, concise instructions for submissions, Anderson adds.

"We offered a cash prize of \$1,500, which was big and exciting but also much less than we would have had to pay to get the quantity of video content that we received, and the video content was more successful for feeling 'genuine,' versus content that is professionally produced."

Because there was such a great incentive, Anderson says they received a lot of responses, allowing them to vet all the submissions to choose the top six to share that aligned with the

school's mission and values. But if the budget doesn't allow for a big incentive, she says she has seen big responses for other prize items like gift cards to Raising Cane's, Stanley tumblers, Apple AirPods and so on.

"The better the incentive, the better quality the content will be and the more people will actually participate. Especially when it comes to social media, you need to have a reward to compensate them for going out of their comfort zone and spending their social capital by posting something that their friends and family will see."

Anderson recommends organizations first trying to get audience-generated content ask for content that will spark emotion in their audience.

"Asking for testimonials can be effective at times but could also be somewhat boring, unless people are super enthusiastic about your brand. Asking questions about something your audience cares about and that is relevant to what your organization does and has to offer will help build your brand and spark meaningful conversations."

Anderson also notes the most valuable content will come from your brand advocates, those who already understand and appreciate what you do.

"Many of the best submissions for our Changemaker campaign came from students who had already taken our classes and have been involved in our organization, and they became aware of the campaign through our newsletter and advertising on our social media channels," she says, adding that it still can take up to 7 to 12 contacts before a person takes action, so getting the word out through all your channels and multiple contact points is essential. ♦

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Source: Jess Dansie Anderson, Managing Director of Marketing and Communications, BYU Ballard Center for Social Impact, Provo, UT. Phone (801) 422-9009. Email: [jess.dansie@byu.edu](mailto:jess.dansie@byu.edu). Website: <https://socialimpact.byu.edu>

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## SUPPORTING OTHER CAUSES

# Enhance Image and Employee Morale

If your organization is asked to support charitable causes, you can approach it as a win-win for your organization. It can be fun for your employees and give you extra visibility.

While nonprofits may be unable to write a check, they may be able to involve employees, which can educate them on national health issues and boost morale with team-building activities.

If you're asked to participate, take these steps:

1. Recruit employees at sign-in with messages and treats.
2. Create promotional displays to educate employees on the cause.
3. Create competition among employee groups. Promise incentives such as a pizza party.
4. To raise additional funds, allow employees to organize fundraising rummage sales, basket sales, bake sales, blue-jean days, etc.
5. At the event, identify your group with special hats or T-shirts.
6. Photograph the activity for displays and feature articles in your newsletter, annual report or local newspaper. ♦

# Core Principles That Guide Authentic Brands

Patagonia doesn't possess a tagline. Instead, the sustainable clothing company presents to its outdoors-loving audience a brand purpose: "We're in business to save our home planet."

This simple, mission-driven statement tells consumers that Patagonia cares for the mountainous landscapes and winding rivers where its durable garments work best. With more than 87 percent of its products made from recycled materials, Patagonia lives up to its promise, and its confident messaging lends itself to an image that resonates with avid environmentalists — this is success.

"As nonprofits we think of ourselves as being our own special islands — completely different and unique from other organizations," says Russell Yost, associate vice president for university marketing and communications, University of San Diego (San Diego, CA). "In reality, there are commonalities shared across industries we can look at to build stronger brand identities."

Recently, Yost joined his colleagues Lori Bachand, senior director, communications, Community College League of California (Sacramento, CA); Kin Sejpal, vice president of marketing and communications/chief marketing officer, University of Redlands (Redlands, CA); and Vince Alberta, chief marketing officer and vice president of brand integration, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in a discussion about brands like Patagonia as well as other nonprofit entities and how their messaging strengths apply to the world of higher education. According to these MarComm leaders, authentic brands are:

- 1. Based on values.** "If you reach a point of conflict with your audiences or consumers, are you going to embrace those values or back up a bit?" Alberta inquires. "It can be difficult for organizations who have donors, elected officials or business leaders involved, but leaning into values during challenging times will pay off with the audience who matters most."
- 2. Self-assured.** "You know who succeeds: organizations that are steadfast in their own missions, values and personalities and not necessarily looking back over their shoulder to see who is doing it better," Bachand says. "They live and breathe their values, and sometimes they're willing to poke fun at themselves as well."
- 3. Truthful/relatable.** "The brand experience you're selling to stakeholders and students should be reflective of the actual experience," Sejpal adds. "Brands can be aspirational but not at the expense of being authentic. They should be both a bridge of where you want to go and a mirror of who you are today."
- 4. Aware of their competition.** "Living in a global economy means that your competitors may no longer be who you think," Bachand says. "Authentic brands look at opportunity through a wider lens to reach their relevant audiences."
- 5. Research driven.** "Without research, you're in the middle of the ocean without a compass — you don't know where you've been, and you don't know where you're going," Alberta says. "It's key to know the perception of your organization before you can create a strategy to strengthen your brand."
- 6. Attentive to their audiences' wants.** "You need to regularly revisit your value proposition and make sure that what you're actually delivering to the audience is what they're asking for," Yost says. "In higher education we like to show off our beautiful campuses, but we also need to prove that an education is a worthwhile investment."
- 7. Distinctive.** "It's about how you communicate 'why me' and 'why not somebody else?'" Sejpal continues. "You're competing against a lot of noise, so lean on both stories and stats to make your case for differentiation."
- 8. Reflective of the culture/location of the organization.** "Like Patagonia, higher education tends to do this well — if you're based in an amazing location or embedded in a niche culture, make that part of your brand identity," Yost says.
- 9. Achieve brand alignment throughout the organization.** "Marketing communications is also not meant to be an island within the organization — leaders have to be a part of those conversations," Bachand adds. "The magic bullet can't come from just the marketing communications team — it really has to be an organization-wide commitment to the values, to the work, really all of the pieces that lend themselves to authentic marketing." ♦

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## BRIEF

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### Assemble a Media Portfolio

Keep copies of media coverage to build a portfolio for your organization.

Request copies of media coverage, such as clips on the evening news or feature articles and photos in print publications. Most local TV stations will provide an electronic file — same goes for local radio stations.

Compiling a detailed media portfolio is a great way to illustrate your nonprofit's success and will come in handy when meeting with potential donors and employees. If you have an in-house graphic artist, consider compiling some of your media coverage into a video reel or slideshow to show at special events or important meetings. ♦