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Planning Your Nonprofit's Communications in an Ever-Changing World

By: Rick Cohen

Planning your nonprofit's communications schedule in today's chaotic world with its non-stop news cycle and attention spans shorter than the blink of an eye can seem daunting. That said, having a flexible communications plan or calendar as a guide allows your organization to be prepared for key dates and events, yet also nimble enough to shift quickly to adjust to external developments. The plan doesn't need to get lost in the weeds of minor details and tactics or take hours upon hours to create.

Be guided by the mission and organizational strategies and goals first

Remember that communications are a means, not an end. None of us should be trying to get Twitter followers for the sake of hitting a certain number. Rather, we look for Twitter followers to spread the word about our nonprofit's work and inspire those people to support our missions and strategic goals. Always ask the question, "How can this communications activity support our mission?" If you use that as your

lens for planning, you can't go wrong.

Meet your audience where they like to hang out

No, not at the local mall or bar, but on the communications platforms where they connect with you most. For some nonprofits, a Facebook page is the best place to engage with your audience – and for that audience to invite their friends to connect, too. For other nonprofits, your audience may prefer email or even – gasp – an old-fashioned, hard-copy letter that you mail to them.

Identify the stories that will connect

In anything you do, always seek ways to connect audiences personally to your organization's mission. Whether that audience is one reporter you hope will cover the organization's work, or donors, volunteers, board members, or potential patrons, think about the anecdotes and visuals that will engage them. Planning in advance to capture those stories, images, and videos will help messages come together more easily later.

For tips in this area, check out Kivi Leroux Miller's blog, [Nonprofit Marketing Guide](#). Another blog to watch is Nancy Schwartz's [Getting Attention](#). She's launching a new series about telling stories with purpose, or [G.R.E.A.T. stories](#), that should make for G.R.E.A.T. reading.

Map out the big signposts

Does your organization have a big annual event? How about a regular report or updated statistic that it releases each year? What needs to happen to make that event or report launch successful? How far in advance do you need to start promoting it? Are there other big events that your organization is connected to or will need to respond to, such as the President's State of the Union address or a local event? Start there. Mark those down as the fixed items before building the rest of the plan. Again, don't hold a press conference, send out a press release, or try to launch a new hashtag just to do so. Connect those activities to the broader organizational goals.

Latch onto other events

No matter your nonprofit's mission, there almost certainly is a designated special day that connects to your work. By "[newsjacking](#)," you can use bigger events to provide a timely and enjoyable angle for reporters to cover your organization's work. For animal shelters and veterinary groups, consider doing something on January 14th for National Dress Up Your Pet Day. Does your nonprofit work on agricultural issues? How about National Corn on the Cob Day on June 11th? We're publishing this article on October 10th, which happens to be National Emergency Nurse's Day, National Stop Bullying Day, and World Mental Health Day - all days that celebrate important work done by nonprofits. Check out this [handy calendar of all the "days" in the year](#) (unfortunately, you can only browse by day, not by issue). These days are also opportunities for a lighthearted email to your supporters and a fun social media post using a hashtag that has a chance of trending during the day. Mark these special days on your communications calendar, with messaging and images lined up in advance.

Following these steps will provide your organization with a framework for successful communications that will keep everyone focused and still provide flexibility for emergent circumstances.

Resources

- [Nonprofit Communications Plan Template](#) (Upleaf)
- [Template for Strategic Communications Plan](#) (W.K. Kellogg Foundation)
- ["No Time for a Marketing Plan? Start With a No Pain, All Gain, Do-It-Now Nonprofit Communications Audit"](#) (*Getting Attention* blog)