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**Building Relationships and Shared Visions with Foundations
through Integrated Marketing Communications and Social Media**

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Abstract

Gone are the days of relying solely on traditional communication methods to build awareness of fundable programs and ultimately garner support from foundations and corporate giving programs. This paper offers strategies for grant professionals to strategically develop sustainable relationships with foundations through *integrated marketing communications*. Though traditional modes of communication are still important, the use of social media should also be utilized by grant professionals, as foundations are increasingly using various online platforms for communication purposes. Specific techniques for interacting with foundations in today's technological environment, therefore, are emphasized to complement more traditional networking strategies.

Introduction

Both written and verbal communication from grant professionals helps grantors to assess the grants readiness of potential applicants. Strategic relationships often lead to pre-selected grant awards or invitations to submit proposals to highly competitive "by invitation only" grant competitions. However, some foundations and corporate giving programs require an initial meeting with designated staff or a Letter of Interest (LOI) prior to submitting an invited full proposal. In other instances, funders are willing to answer questions posed by grant professionals by phone or email before applying.

Once the initial research process is complete, cultivating and maintaining relationships with donors is critical to funding success. One key to achieving long-term mutually beneficial relationships with funders rests upon informing key staff about funding programs that align with an agency's mission. Some of the most used and least expensive communication strategies that promote relationships with foundations and corporate donors include, "direct mail, telephone and email contact, attendance at special events, personal visits and peer-to-peer networking" (CASE, 2015, p.1).

According to Nonprofit Works (2014), a training and consulting firm, organizations must follow five steps to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with funders. These steps include:

- conducting research to obtain basic information like funding priorities and maximum funds awarded (Dawson, 2008);
- making contact and introductions with the funder (Dawson, 2008);
- showing that the organization both understands and respects their application process (Mitchell, 2008);
- Cultivating mutually-beneficial relationships (Dawson, 2008); and
- maintaining those relationships across time.

Adhering to these steps and strategies helps to establish a shared vision between donors and prospective grantees, especially as conversations regarding a foundation's mission and the agency's ability to meet it naturally emerge (Mitchell, 2008). Such communication shows funders that an organization is first interested in relationship building and secondly in the transaction. The sustainability of fledgling relationships between donors and grantees is further enhanced through *integrated marketing communications* (IMC).

Using Traditional Media to Build Relationships

Historically, advertising through traditional media like radio, TV and websites allows nonprofits to disseminate messages that often reach foundation leaders. For instance, non-profit organizations commonly submit press releases or public service announcements for broadcast on select radio and TV stations at no cost. Some stations also offer community-service programming, including interviews on topics of interest to local communities. Other strategies like donor appreciation events, giving clubs, face to face communications and recurring newsletters work best when complemented through direct mail (Perkins, Algren & Eichhorn, 2010).

By the Numbers: Growing Use of Social Media by Foundations

In today's increasingly technological environment, however, email and social media campaigns must also be considered as a vital component of integrated marketing communications (IMC). Social media platforms used by foundation leaders represent yet another modern-day venue for grant professionals to promote greater awareness of their organizations' good works. A growing number of foundations use tools like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn to keep stakeholders informed. Based on its recent survey of 1,153 large foundations, The Foundation Center (2015) reports that 45 percent of foundations use social media. Among the 522 foundations that use social media, 65 percent are on Facebook, 40 percent Twitter, and 32 percent utilize YouTube videos. Additionally, 88 percent of these users are community foundations, followed by 55 percent representing corporate, and 34 percent are family and independent foundations.

Increasing Transparency of Foundations: A Growing Trend

The Foundation Center (2015), a leading authority on information pertaining to foundations, established Glasspockets. The goal of its website, www.glasspockets.org, is to showcase how foundations maintain transparency through IMC, thus ensuring that information related to foundations is articulated. Nonprofit leaders who regularly visit the site also receive insider information about how to engage in meaningful conversations with potential grantors based on their giving priorities.

Using Integrated Marketing Communications to Build Relationships

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is defined as “a planning process designed to assure that all brand contacts received by a customer or prospect for a product, service, or organization are relevant to that person and consistent over time” (West Virginia University, 2015, p. 1). In essence, IMC involves the usage of a variety of communication tools, like social media, brochures, websites, and even interpersonal communication, to deliver an identical message. For example, grant professionals frequently arrange for initial meetings with donors either face to face or via teleconference. Follow-up communication may occur via email, mail, invitations to special events showcasing clients or program achievements, and/or other communication methods. Such updates should be occasional yet substantive by focusing on the agency’s programmatic and leadership achievements in areas that mirror the funder’s own mission and giving priorities. Significantly, IMC necessitates the transmission of consistent messages using a variety of communication tools, including but not limited to social media, across time.

Research on the impact that integrated marketing communications has on building relationships between grantees and foundations is extensive. According to research presented in an article titled, *The Use of Integrated Marketing Communications by U.S. Non-profit Organizations*, nonprofits that use IMC should engage in relationship building across 18 months or longer in order to forge effective rapport with funders (Perkins, Algren & Eichhorn, 2010, p. 1). The authors further imply that finding the best communication strategies for each prospective funder builds a foundation’s trust. The study also posits that newer non-profit organizations are more likely to take the role of relationship building seriously (Perkins, Algren & Eichhorn, 2010, p. 5).

Using Social Media to Build Relationships

According to The Council on Foundations (2015), there are four reasons that foundations should use social media. They include, “to reach and interact with a new audience, make your foundation more accessible and approachable, promote a culture of transparency and openness, and listen to and join the conversation” (p. 1). These foundation strategies in turn allow proposal developers the opportunity to review information in real-time, then to respond strategically. For example, a grant seeker might respond by posting to a Gates Family

Foundation Facebook column on natural resources (one of their funding priorities). The post might include an image and brief summary of a recent program in the same field that is both managed by your organization and achieved measurable results.

Foundations often create “Philanthropy Pages” on LinkedIn and/or Facebook to enhance their visibility and connect with current and potential collaborators. More specifically, Facebook allows foundations to post and share information and images while networking with grant seekers and other groups that align with their mission. Through Twitter, proposal developers can follow a particular foundation and receive frequent, albeit brief, updates concerning funder initiatives and priorities. Grant professionals can also identify messages on Twitter concerning a particular funding priority or program by reviewing messages preceded by a hashtag or pound sign (#).

Further, approximately 33 percent of foundation leaders use Facebook regularly, while 30 percent read blogs through sites like Huffington Post, Beth’s Blog and Intrepid Philanthropist (Foundation Center, 2010). The key to maximizing a grant seeking organization’s return on investment for these and other blogs is to find ways to publish critical information on them. Towards that end, develop a schedule to review postings on key blogs, or establish an alert system for new postings, and respond to the most relevant ones.

As foundations continue to blog about their recent efforts, tweet the successes of their current grantees and even share updates on LinkedIn, nonprofits too must get involved in these conversations through targeted and timely communication. Thus, it is vital that grant professionals research and understand the varied communication channels of foundations. This is especially true of foundations being targeted by one’s own organization for support. However, according to Kotler (2012), when joining these discussions, grant professionals are effective only when posting responses that include information about their own program outcomes that align with a foundation’s strategic priorities.

Keeping Apprised of Allowable and Required Communication Methods

Furthermore, grant professionals should remain abreast of foundations’ limitations and eligibility requirements concerning interpersonal communications, like in-person meetings, teleconferences, or even submittal of LOIs in lieu of full proposals. By closely following application guidelines and restrictions, grant professionals avoid having their applications rejected by foundation gatekeepers and board members before they are reviewed for possible funding. This is an unfortunate, though common, occurrence in the foundation and corporate funding arenas.

Conclusion

In a highly competitive fundraising environment, it is imperative to tailor messages that capture a foundation's attention. Understanding the varied communication platforms used by giving foundations, then, is essential to building relationships with them. Responding in a strategic and impressionable way is one strategy that sparks better communication with foundations. Grant professionals who utilize IMC consistently build mutually-beneficial relationships with funders, by creating goodwill that last a lifetime.

Biographical Information

Dr. Janell N. Harvey is an Associate Professor of Marketing at DeVry University with fifteen years of proposal development experience. Dr. Harvey is the 2015 Esther Award winner for community service within Christian communities. The award is given by the National Coalition of Women in Ministry. Dr. Harvey's research and publications focus primarily on faith-based organizations. Contact Dr. Janell Harvey at: jharvey2@devry.edu .

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