

# Trends in Nonprofit Communications

by Kivi Leroux Miller

Nonprofit communications and fundraising are changing so fast that it's hard for staff to keep up—and to know what “keeping up” really means.

To help nonprofits better understand what their colleagues are doing, Nonprofit Marketing Guide.com surveyed 780 nonprofits across the United States and Canada. We asked them to identify which communications tools would be most—and least—important to them in 2011. We also asked to them to share what excited them most and scared them most about the coming year.

Without question, nonprofits believe that their websites and email are the two most important communications tools today. But what surprised many is the third most important tool: Facebook. When you combine the “very important” and “somewhat important” rankings by nonprofits, Facebook follows websites (96%) and email (94%), with 79% identifying it as a very or somewhat important communications tool. This trio of online marketing tools trumps more traditional forms of nonprofit communication, such as in-person events (67%), print marketing (67%), and media relations/PR (57%).

As nonprofits embrace email marketing in particular, they often wonder how much is enough, or too much. Many are accustomed to quarterly print newsletters (the most popular frequency for print communications, according to the survey), but the conventional wisdom is that you need to email online supporters much more often. The survey results show that nonprofits understand this. Monthly emailing is the most popular frequency for nonprofits at 43%, followed by every other week at 17% and quarterly at 16%. In total, three-quarters of nonprofits (75%) plan to email their typical supporters at least monthly.

What excites nonprofit communicators...

Much like moviegoers watching the latest thriller, nonprofits are excited by and scared by the same thing, in this case, new opportunities. Whether it's new approaches to social media, new programming, or connecting with new supporters, nonprofit communicators are excited about the changes around them. Many participants are excited that their nonprofits are “finally” embracing marketing, while others are excited about their ad hoc communications maturing into more fully integrated strategies.

Here are a few sample responses to the “what excites you” question:

- “Creating content that excites our donors in new and inventive ways.”
- “Establishing and deepening relationships with newly targeted segments of our mailing list.”
- “We finally have a team to focus on marketing!”
- “I think we will finally be allowed to send emails to our donors for the first time.”
- “A consistent social media plan for the Foundation that works across all platforms.”

## At a glance

Kivi Leroux Miller reports on a recent survey of nonprofit communicators.

- 96% rate web sites as very to somewhat important
- 94% rate email as very to somewhat important
- 79% rate Facebook as very to somewhat important

Traditional tools (events, print, and media relations) are now viewed as less important than electronic media. Nonprofit communicators report being excited about the changes going on, and the opportunity to fully embrace marketing. But they are frustrated by the length of their to-do lists and the difficulty of making progress toward an integrated communications strategy.

- “Getting consistency in the organization’s editorial calendar and communications, improving the web presence, and more fully integrating social media.”
- “We are going to plan out our communications a year in advance and follow a plan for the first time.”

...And what scares nonprofit communicators

Unfortunately, many organizations aren’t making the kind of progress you see in the enthusiasm above. Many nonprofit communicators are frustrated by long to-do lists. They fear that they don’t have the information, tools, or skills they need to effectively implement their plans. With the variety of communications options available now, and without a realistic, integrated strategy, many nonprofit leaders and staff feel overwhelmed.

Look at what nonprofits say scares them...

- “Feeling overwhelmed with all the possibilities and different things we could be putting energy into.”
- “There are so many channels to consider, evaluate, and decide to pursue (or not)—it is overwhelming.”
- “My organization is so far behind in electronic communications.”
- “I’m an operation of one and there’s so, so much to do.”
- “There is never enough time to do everything we need to, much less what we’d like to.”
- “We are spread so thin already and our workload is increasing.”

There’s no single marketing plan, or combination of communications tools, that will work for every nonprofit. But when you don’t have the time or resources to create a customized marketing plan (and only 51% of those surveyed said they had a written plan), following what others are doing is a good place to start.

Download a free copy of the 2011 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report at:  
<http://www.nonprofitmarketingguide.com/2011>



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