Dialing In, Logging On, Nodding Off

The True Costs of Teleconferences, Videoconferences and Webinars

A report by **The Goodman Center**
based on a survey of more than 1,200
public interest professionals.

the goodman center

Dialing In, Logging On, Nodding Off was written by Andy Goodman
Director of The Goodman Center.

The Goodman Center (www.thegoodmancenter.com) is an online school
offering classes and resources in communications and marketing for
public interest professionals at nonprofits, foundations, educational
and cultural institutions, and government agencies. The Goodman Center
is a partnership of Andy Goodman and Lipman Hearne, Inc.

Cover photo by Adam Remsen.

Even More Ways to Have Bad Meetings

When holding a meeting isn't just a matter of summoning staff to the nearest conference room, "telemeetings" — via phone, video or the web — can be an alluring option. Enter a PIN, type a passcode, and faster than you can say Skype, you've assembled colleagues from around the world for a meeting or training of just about any size or shape. And in the process, you've traded travel costs (which can add up quickly) for nominal networking fees, making the whole package a CFO's dream — particularly these days.

Little wonder, then, that more and more organizations are meeting this way. But while hours and dollars may be saved, do we fully understand what's lost in the transmission? Running a good meeting is difficult under the best of circumstances. What happens when you take away eye contact (among other visual cues) and introduce cameras, mute buttons, and a variety of technical hurdles?

There's no shortage of anecdotal evidence that telemeetings can be trouble, but we wanted a more complete picture. So in the spring of 2009, The Goodman Center invited public interest professionals from across the US and Canada to evaluate their experiences. Over the course of three weeks, more than 1,200 people completed our online survey – not a rigorously scientific sample, but enough to suggest that even when everyone dials the designated toll-free number and enters the correct access code, you shouldn't assume they are actually *connecting*.

Who Took the Survey?

Employees of nonprofits, foundations, educational and cultural institutions and government agencies across North America were invited to participate in the survey. Between March 16 and April 6, 2009 the questionnaire (designed by The Goodman Center and hosted on SurveyMonkey) was completed by 1,218 people from the following sectors:

RESPONDENTS BY SECTOR

NONPROFIT	58.4%
GOVERNMENT	13.7%
FOUNDATION	12.6%
EDUCATION	6.7%
OTHER	8.6%

The vast majority of these respondents were full-time employees (85.7%), although we did hear from part-timers (9.9%), volunteers (4.9%) and board members (4.2%) as well. (The total exceeds 100% because respondents were allowed to select more than one category.)

Respondents represented a wide array of issues in the public interest sector, with education, health, children/ youth, and environment leading the way.

Finally, the experience level of respondents (i.e., number of years worked) was fairly evenly divided. It's worth noting, though, that nearly 40% of respondents can be considered "experienced" having logged more than ten years in their respective sectors.

RESPONDENTS BY ISSUE

EDUCATION	35%
HEALTH	34%
CHILDREN/YOUTH	32%
ENVIRONMENT	29%
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT	19%
POVERTY	19%
SOCIAL JUSTICE	18%
HOUSING	12%
ARTS	11%
WOMEN'S RIGHTS	8%
EMPLOYMENT	8%
HUMANITARIAN AID	7%
IMMIGRATION	5%
CIVIL RIGHTS	5%
REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS	4%
GAY & LESBIAN RIGHTS	3%
ELECTION REFORM	2%
ALL OTHER	34%

(As above, the total exceeds 100% because the work of many respondents encompassed several issue areas.)

RESPONDENTS BY EXPERIENCE LEVEL

5 YRS. OR FEWER	37.8%
6-10 YRS.	21.9%
11-20 YRS.	26.5%
21+ YRS.	12.9%

Dialing In, Flying Blind

Going into this research, we assumed telemeetings were a fact of life in most public interest organizations, and that due to the economic downturn their use would probably increase. Both assumptions were confirmed: nearly 60% of respondents reported participating in teleconferences "frequently or very frequently," and while not as many were regularly participating in webinars (25%) or videoconferences (8%), almost everyone had some experience in these kinds of meetings.

When asked if their organizations would be scheduling more telemeetings in the future, approximately half of respondents said yes for all three kinds. A nearly equal number estimated the amount would stay the same, while only 5% thought the amount would decrease.

Which leads to what may be the most telling finding from the entire survey. When asked, "Have you had any training on how to conduct successful meetings (or classes) when using these three technologies?" *over 70% of respondents reported no training.*

RESPONDENTS WHO...	TELECON	VIDEOCON	WEBINAR
PARTICIPATE FREQUENTLY OR VERY FREQUENTLY	59%	8%	25%
BELIEVE USAGE WILL INCREASE	49%	46%	56%
HAVE NO TRAINING IN HOW TO USE EFFECTIVELY	75%	71%	72%

In short: telemeetings are an integral part of our daily operations, we'll probably have more of them in the months to come, but most of us have never been taught how to deal with the problems that inevitably arise. If you've been lucky enough to avoid bad meetings so far, your luck is probably about to run out.

The Report Card: Room for Improvement

Given an across-the-board lack of training, it's no surprise that respondents assigned average to slightly above-average grades when asked to rate specific aspects of telemeetings:

	TELECON	VIDEOCON	WEBINAR
ACCOMPLISH OBJECTIVE OF MEETING (OR TRAINING)	B-	B-	B
INVOLVE ALL THE PARTICIPANTS	C+	C+	B
SKILL OF MEETING (OR TRAINING) LEADER	B-	B-	B

When asked the open-ended question, "What makes a teleconference a waste of your time," respondents cited poor time management (20%), noise and technical problems (16%), insufficient interaction (13%) and too much information for the allotted time (13%) as foremost among a long list of problems.

For videoconferences, the leading time-waster – by far – was an assortment of technical problems (33%), followed by poor time management (12%), lack of agenda or clear objective (11%), and boring or irrelevant topics (11%).

And for webinars, the most frequently cited problems were poor leadership or facilitation (24%), noise and technical problems (20%), title not matching content (18%), and too much information for the allotted time (16%).

While there were complaints aplenty about mute buttons that didn't mute, movable cameras that never moved, and other technical glitches, many respondents were reluctant to lay all the blame on the equipment. One person who spoke for many wrote, "In general, meetings can be a waste of time whether done in person or done on a teleconference. I don't see the medium as the issue. Useless meetings are useless meetings."

The Take-Away

In a climate where cost-cutting is the order of the day, scheduling telemeetings instead of booking airline reservations, hotel rooms, etc. can seem like a no-brainer. But if this study told us anything, it's that too many organizations are turning off their critical faculties too soon.

Meetings conducted via telephone, video, or the web demand more from participants than face-to-face meetings. They require a thorough understanding of the technological interface as well as the special protocols that help make the interface "disappear" so participants can focus on *why* they are meeting and not *how.*

For telemeetings to yield a net benefit for any organization, nonprofit or otherwise, managers must first ensure that their people master the techniques for running these meetings. Otherwise, the value of staff time that is wasted will surely outweigh the travel dollars saved, and the only thing your meetings will accomplish is discovering even more ways to have bad meetings.

Common as a Cold (And Just as Much Fun)

By far, teleconferences are the most common form of telemeetings, with 59.1% of respondents reporting that they dial into conference calls frequently (defined as "a few times a month") or very frequently ("at least once a week"). The typical teleconference lasts somewhere between 45 and 60 minutes, a length that the vast majority of respondents (72.4%) felt was "about right."

When asked to evaluate specific aspects of teleconferences, respondents assigned above-average grades, but the report card is nothing to write home about:

TELECONFERENCES REPORT CARD	GRADE
ACCOMPLISH OBJECTIVE OF MEETING (OR TRAINING)	B-
INVOLVE ALL THE PARTICIPANTS	C+
SKILL OF MEETING (OR TRAINING) LEADER	B-

Prior to conducting the survey, we spoke with colleagues in the public interest sector to get a better sense of the most common problems encountered during teleconferences. We also consulted numerous websites that offer best practices for conducting teleconferences since these recommendations have arisen in reply to recurring problems.

Based on this research, we identified six problems and asked respondents to rank them in two ways: first, by the frequency with which they occur; and second, by how negatively they impact a teleconference whenever they occur.

Through this process, we learned that lack of participation (i.e., individuals who dial in but don't say anything) is the most commonly reported problem, while poor leadership/facilitation has the most negative impact.

COMMON PROBLEMS RANKED BY FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE

1. PEOPLE ON CALL DIDN'T PARTICIPATE

2. COULDN'T HEAR OTHER PEOPLE SPEAKING

3. POOR LEADERSHIP/FACILITATION

4. LACK OF AGENDA OR CLEAR OBJECTIVE

5. TOO MANY PEOPLE ON THE CALL

6. DIDN'T RECEIVE SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR MEETING OR CLASS

COMMON PROBLEMS RANKED BY SIGNIFICANCE OF NEGATIVE IMPACT

1. POOR LEADERSHIP/FACILITATION

2. LACK OF AGENDA OR CLEAR OBJECTIVE

3. COULDN'T HEAR OTHER PEOPLE SPEAKING

4. DIDN'T RECEIVE SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR MEETING OR CLASS

5. PEOPLE ON CALL DIDN'T PARTICIPATE

6. TOO MANY PEOPLE ON THE CALL

The Respondents Speak

Left Out of the "Real" Meeting
"The conversations that happen among those people that are physically together, leaving out those on the phone — these always seem to be the 'real' meeting."

To ensure that we didn't completely overlook any common or seriously damaging problems, we also asked the open-ended question, "Besides the six factors listed above, what else makes a teleconference a waste of your time?" While there was no shortage of answers, the most frequently cited problems are:

PROBLEM	RESPONDENTS CITING
POOR TIME MANAGEMENT	**20%**
NOISE AND TECHNICAL PROBLEMS	**16%**
INSUFFICIENT INTERACTION	**13%**
TOO MUCH INFORMATION FOR THE ALLOTTED TIME	**13%**
POOR PLANNING/LACK OF FOLLOW-UP	**12%**

Finally, we asked the open-ended question, "What makes a teleconference a good use of your time?" Again, there was a wide variety of responses, and the five most common are below, but what we find particularly notable here is that four of the five could describe *any* kind of meeting, while only one relates specifically to telemeetings:

ATTRIBUTE	RESPONDENTS CITING
FOCUSED AGENDA/CLEAR OBJECTIVE	29%
WELL ORGANIZED/GOALS ACHIEVED	27%
CONNECT WITH COLLEAGUES WITHOUT TRAVEL	21%
GOOD FACILITATOR/MODERATOR	19%
LEARNED NEW INFORMATION	18%

One respondent summed up this sentiment well when he answered the question this way: "Much the same as any meeting: a solid agenda, clear roles and responsibilities, decisions made or identified for follow-up discussion, action items identified, discussion brought back to agenda items when it drifts off-course.

The Respondents Speak

Not Good for Wrestling

" [When] the purpose of the meeting is to wrestle with a difficult issue with opposing positions represented, the phone is too impersonal to allow for constructive dialogue."

Rare and Rarely Without Problems

V ideoconferences are the least common form of telemeetings, with only 8% of respondents reporting that they participate frequently or very frequently. In fact, over half of the respondents (55.5%) reported that they have *never* participated in a videoconference.

As with teleconferences, the average videoconference lasts somewhere between 45 and 60 minutes, and again, most respondents (72.4%) feel that this length is "about right."

When asked to evaluate specific aspects of videoconferences, respondents assigned the identical grades in each category that they gave to teleconferences, indicating room for improvement here, too:

VIDEOCONFERENCES REPORT CARD	GRADE
ACCOMPLISH OBJECTIVE OF MEETING (OR TRAINING)	B-
INVOLVE ALL THE PARTICIPANTS	C+
SKILL OF MEETING (OR TRAINING) LEADER	B-

Once again, we asked respondents to rank six commonly observed problems in two ways: first, by the frequency with which they occur; and second, by how negatively they impact a videoconference whenever they occur. In both cases, "technical problems" earned the dubious #1 ranking.

COMMON PROBLEMS RANKED BY FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE

1. TECHNICAL PROBLEMS
2. PEOPLE IN VIDEOCONFERENCE DIDN'T PARTICIPATE
3. POOR LEADERSHIP/FACILITATION
4. LACK OF AGENDA OR CLEAR OBJECTIVE
5. TOO MANY PEOPLE OR SITES CONNECTED
6. DIDN'T RECEIVE SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR MEETING OR CLASS

COMMON PROBLEMS RANKED BY SIGNIFICANCE OF NEGATIVE IMPACT

1. TECHNICAL PROBLEMS
2. POOR LEADERSHIP/FACILITATION
3. LACK OF AGENDA OR CLEAR OBJECTIVE
4. DIDN'T RECEIVE SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR MEETING OR CLASS
5. PEOPLE IN VIDEOCONFERENCE DIDN'T PARTICIPATE
6. TOO MANY PEOPLE OR SITES CONNECTED

The Respondents Speak

Stop Looking at Me!
"I hate that your image is always on the screen even though you are not actively speaking — I feel like I'm always under the microscope."

Frustration with technical problems was so deep, in fact, that it surfaced in both open-ended questions. When we asked, "Besides the six factors listed above, what else makes a videoconference a waste of your time?" respondents ignored the word "besides" and lamented technical problems above all others:

PROBLEM	RESPONDENTS CITING
TECHNICAL PROBLEMS/BACKGROUND NOISE	33%
POOR TIME MANAGEMENT/LATENESS	12%
LACK OF AGENDA/CLEAR OBJECTIVE	11%
BORING OR IRRELEVANT TOPICS	11%
POOR LEADERSHIP/FACILITATION	7%

When we asked, "What makes a videoconference a good use of your time?" respondents focused on the equipment one more time, citing the *absence* of technical problems as the most desired virtue. In fact, all of the five most mentioned qualities are simply the inverse of the problems noted above:

ATTRIBUTE	RESPONDENTS CITING
NO TECHNICAL PROBLEMS/BACKGROUND NOISE	34%
GOOD TIME MANAGEMENT/ETIQUETTE	13%
FOCUSED AGENDA/CLEAR OBJECTIVE	12%
INTERESTING/RELEVANT TOPIC	12%
GOOD PRESENTER/FACILITATOR	7%

In theory, respondents appreciate the added value that visuals bring to these kinds of meetings, and the comment, "Being able to see the other participants helps me to connect better with them" was echoed by many.

But videoconferences aren't held "in theory." When the equipment proves too difficult to master or simply doesn't function properly – which clearly is the case for the majority of respondents who participate in videoconferences – then form overwhelms function, and the meeting fails as a result.

The Respondents Speak

Start Looking at Me!
"Cameras must move to capture the image of the person speaking. A talking head off-screen is wasteful and counter to building relationships."

PowerPoint, Meet the Internet!

Webinars are not as common as tele-conferences, which is to be expected for the newest form of telemeetings, but this could change in the near future. Roughly a quarter of respondents (24.6%) are already participating frequently or very frequently in web-based meetings and trainings, and almost twice that number (44.2%) participate at least "occasionally" (defined as "a few times a year").

Respondents appear confident that they will be logging on for more webinars in the future, with 55.7% anticipating slight to significant increases — a higher percentage than for teleconferences or videoconferences.
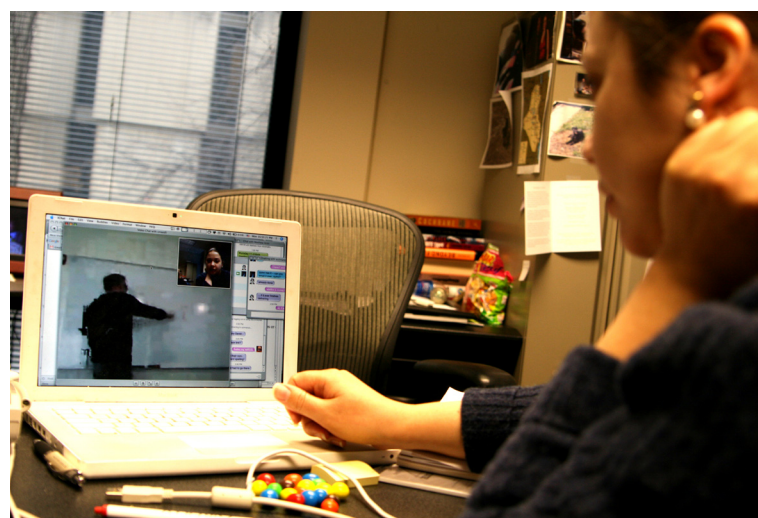

Photo by Quinn Dombrowski

As with teleconferences and videoconferences, the average webinar lasts somewhere between 45 and 60 minutes, and more than three quarters of respondents (77.6%) feel that this length is "about right."

Given the opportunity to evaluate specific aspects of webinars, respondents gave slightly higher grades across the board than they did to the other forms of telemeetings:

WEBINARS REPORT CARD	GRADE
ACCOMPLISH OBJECTIVE OF MEETING (OR TRAINING)	B
INVOLVE ALL THE PARTICIPANTS	B
SKILL OF MEETING (OR TRAINING) LEADER	B

When asked to rank six commonly observed problems by frequency of occurrence, respondents cited "boring visuals" as the most commonly occurring problem. "Some webinars I have been part of feel like they could have accomplished the same thing via teleconference," one respondent wrote. "The visuals add nothing, so why waste time and energy on that technology?"

When ranking the same six problems by how negatively they affect the webinar, respondents cited "poor leadership/facilitation" as most damaging. As one respondent put it, a webinar is a waste of time when "…it's all lecture and the facilitator has not thought of creative ways to make it interactive, giving participants a way to engage/apply the material."

COMMON PROBLEMS RANKED BY FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE

1. BORING VISUALS

2. PEOPLE IN WEBINAR DIDN'T PARTICIPATE

3. POOR LEADERSHIP/FACILITATION

4. DIFFICULTY HEARING OTHER PEOPLE IN WEBINAR

5. LACK OF AGENDA OR CLEAR OBJECTIVE

6. DIDN'T RECEIVE SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR MEETING OR CLASS

COMMON PROBLEMS RANKED BY SIGNIFICANCE OF NEGATIVE IMPACT

1. POOR LEADERSHIP/FACILITATION

2. LACK OF AGENDA OR CLEAR OBJECTIVE

3. BORING VISUALS

4. DIFFICULTY HEARING OTHER PEOPLE IN WEBINAR

5. DIDN'T RECEIVE SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR MEETING OR CLASS

6. PEOPLE IN WEBINAR DIDN'T PARTICIPATE

The Respondents Speak

Typing into the Void
"It's very frustrating to be typing questions and wondering if they are going to Never Never Land and weren't received or are just being ignored because [they're] not enough help for the presenter."

As we observed with videoconferences – where frustration with technical problems spilled over into the open-ended questions — respondents complained about boring webinar leaders and lousy facilitators even when given the chance to go beyond the six factors listed above. The five time-wasters mentioned most often include:

PROBLEM	RESPONDENTS CITING
POOR LEADERSHIP/FACILITATION	24%
TECHNICAL PROBLEMS/BACKGROUND NOISE	20%
MISLEADING DESCRIPTION OF TOPIC	18%
TOO MUCH INFORMATION FOR ALLOTTED TIME	16%
BORING/UNINTERESTING/IRRELEVANT TOPIC	14%

When asked, "What makes a webinar a good use of your time?" respondents' answers were notably consistent: the absence (or opposite) of the problems above is what they seek most:

ATTRIBUTE	RESPONDENTS CITING
GOOD PRESENTER/FACILITATOR	24%
NO TECHNICAL PROBLEMS/BACKGROUND NOISE	20%
TITLE MATCHES TOPIC	18%
EXCELLENT VISUALS	17%
RELEVANT/INTERESTING TOPIC	14%

Finally, it's worth noting one last time that many respondents — whether talking about teleconferences, videoconferences, or webinars – expressed the Seussian sentiment, "Meetings are meetings no matter what kind." If you don't know how to run a good meeting in person, adding the prefix tele- isn't going to help you and, in fact, will probably make life even more difficult.

The Respondents Speak

**David Byrne
Not Welcome Here**

"In too many cases, a webinar ends up being a 'talking head,' and there are many distractions and attractions to multitask. The speaker must make it interesting enough for participants to concentrate."

Let the Learning Begin

f you want to start improving the quality of your telemeetings, there are free resources on the web and numerous workshops (both web-based and in-person) devoted expressly to this arena. We hope you'll consider the recommendations below and explore other possibilities for training. On this point, the survey numbers were clearest: the need is there.

(Full disclosure: The Goodman Center currently offers a webinar on conducting more successful meetings and is developing a new class on how to run better webinars, so we don't claim to be entirely objective in all our recommendations.)

Teleconferences

Most of the problems that arise in teleconferences can be avoided with a few common sense rules, and there are several articles on the web that offer useful guidelines. Three of the best are:

 "Teleconferencing Tips for Effective Meetings"
(www.usaconferencing.com/tips.htm)

"Ten Tips to Tune Up Your Teleconferences"
(www.bnet.com/2403-13056_23-61203.html)

"Telephonitis" (Sasha Dichter's blog)
(www.sashadichter.wordpress.com/2009/04/07/telephonitis/)

Videoconferences

For advice on running better videoconferences, we recommend Dean Freedman. As Director of New Technology for the Human Services Education Network (better known as EdNet), Freedman has spent over ten years designing and implementing videoconferencing systems.

Besides designing and installing the physical hardware, Freedman also conducts workshops to help people interact more effectively in videoconferences. He has shared some of his best advice on the web, and we highly recommend Freedman's "A Videoconferencing and Distance Learning Primer," particularly the "Top Ten Tips." (http://www.pipeline.com/~freedean/videoconferencing/index.htm)

Webinars

While we have attended a few webinars that purport to teach principles for conducting good webinars, we have yet to find any that we can recommend. As noted above, The Goodman Center is currently developing a webinar to meet this need which we anticipate offering for the first time in fall 2009.

Meetings in General

As we saw in the survey responses, many organizations still struggle with meetings no matter where or how they are held. The Goodman Center offers a two-hour webinar, "Meetings: Less Pain, More Gain" that can teach you
• How to create an agenda that lays the groundwork for a productive meeting
• How to be a more effective meeting leader
• How to improve the quality of a meeting when you're not the leader
Please visit our website (www.thegoodmancenter.com) to learn more about this class and to register online.

We also offer an in-person version of this workshop entitled "Dramatically Better Meetings." To learn more, visit www.agoodmanonline.com/workshop/meetings.htm.

About Andy Goodman

Andy Goodman is a nationally recognized author, speaker and consultant in the field of public interest communications. Along with *Storytelling as Best Practice,* he is author of *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes* and *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes.* He also publishes a monthly journal, *free-range thinking,* to share best practices in the field.

He has been invited to speak at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs at Princeton, as well as at major foundation and nonprofit conferences. In 2007, he was selected by Al Gore to train 1,000 people who are currently conducting presentations on global warming throughout the US and around the world. In 2008, he co-founded The Goodman Center to offer online versions of his workshops. To learn more about his work, please visit www.agoodmanonline. com and www.thegoodmancenter.com.

About Lipman Hearne

Lipman Hearne brings unmatched experience guiding strategic marketing and communications projects for nonprofit institutions. Lipman Hearne's clients include membership organizations such as Lions Clubs International and Volunteers of America; environmental organizations such as Chicago Climate Action Plan and The Nature Conservancy; public policy institutions that include RAND Corporation and Brookings Institution; public advocacy organizations such as Achieving the Dream and The First Five Years Fund; and higher education institutions including University of Washington, Harvard University, Trinity University, Northern Arizona University, and Wheaton College. To learn more, please visit www.lipmanhearne.com.

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Good Reading for Good Causes

Publications Available at The Goodman Center

Storytelling as Best Practice

A good story can help advance your cause in many ways. It can rouse an audience to action, compel donors to give, attract the right people to your board and staff, and it can encourage the people who are already on your team to fight even harder. But do you know how to tell a good story? And can you identify the kinds of stories that can move you forward the fastest? Since 1999, Andy Goodman has been writing about storytelling in his popular monthly journal, *free-range thinking.* The best of these essays and articles are now collected in the fourth edition of *Storytelling as Best Practice.*
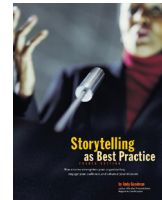
Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes

Whether your work involves creating print ads from scratch or reviewing finished products, *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes* can help you work smarter. Based on an unprecedented 10-year study of public interest advertising, and incorporating inter-views with leading practitioners in the field, this book will help you understand once and for all what readers are looking for and whether or not your ads are giving it to them.
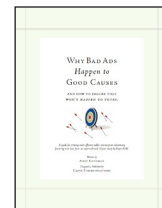
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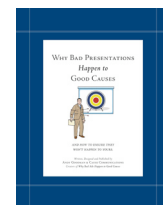
free-range thinking

A free monthly journal of best practices, resources, and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact.

All publications are available at www.thegoodmancenter.com
and www.agoodmanonline.com.