free-range thinking

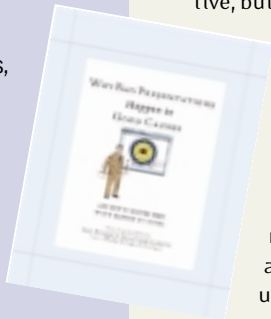# Telling Your Truth—Take Two

IN THE DECEMBER 2004 issue of *free-range thinking,* I recommended using composite characters to convey the human impact of your organization's efforts. The article generated many negative responses, such as these comments from Rachel Pohl, who reviews grant proposals from nonprofits:

"I couldn't disagree more with your message regarding composite characters and influence. One has to go no further than the media to see how stories created from patchwork to illustrate a story or get ahead of the competition have led to disaster regarding public trust and honest reporting. I feel similarly regarding proposals and other forms of education and communication going on throughout the world of work. I need to know that when I am reviewing a proposal about homeless women working toward improving their families' lives through education and family supports, that these are real women, not creations that reflect what the writer wants me to focus on."

A fair and thoughtful response, so let me clarify my recommendation: when you can tell stories identifying real people whom you serve, that is always best. When confidentiality is an issue, or if your program is new and results may be years away, creating characters that represent those served (or yet to be served) can be a legitimate alternative, but it's essential that you clearly identify your use of composites. Sample language to consider: "Individuals depicted in this report are composites. While they are not real people, their circumstances and the outcomes reported are all drawn from actual case histories. We have used composites to protect the privacy of the people we serve." ◼

Battle Against Boredom Is On. Have You Joined?

Since it was posted online January 3rd, the survey that will help us write *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes* has been completed by over 1,500 people. Many thanks to those who participated and especially those who have helped spread the word on listservs, websites, and in e-newsletters. If you haven't taken the survey yet, just go to *http://surveys. edgeresearch.com/ goodman/andy logn/htm.* It only takes 10-15 minutes, and you can guarantee yourself a free copy of the book. (Remember: this offer is for full-time staff of nonprofits and foundations only, and books will be sent to the first 5,000 respondents.)

Know Your Tools

The just-released *Communications Toolkit* can help nonprofit newbies, veterans, and anyone in between find the resources they need to wage more effective campaigns. And best of all: it's free.

LOOKING FOR A BOOK with big ideas for changing the world? Not such a tall order: I heartily (and regularly) recommend *Diffusion of Innovations* by Everett Rogers. Want to learn more about the power of narrative? Another easy call: start with *Tell Me a Story,* by Roger Schank. Or maybe you're wondering how all those tables, charts, and other data you need to present tomorrow can be turned into something visually compelling. No problem: *Visual Explanations,* by Edward R. Tufte, will give you plenty of good ideas.

On the other hand, let's say you're an executive director of a small nonprofit who is responsible for communications (among a dozen other things) but your experience in this field is minimal. Or perhaps you're a communications director at a medium or large nonprofit who simply wants to know more about all the tools currently at your disposal. In both cases, you'd need a more comprehensive overview of public interest communications, but that can be difficult to find for such a rapidly changing field.

Spin Works! A Media Guidebook for the Rest of Us, by Robert Bray, has been one of the best overviews available since its release in 2000, and Spitfire Strategies' Smart Chart is a first-rate tool for planning communications campaigns. But for public interest communicators seeking a contemporary A-to-Z summary of available resources, the *Communications Toolkit: A guide to navigating communications for the nonprofit world* is the must-have book of the moment. ▶

Know Your Tools

► **Who created the *Communications Toolkit*?**

R. Christine Hershey wrote it, and her team at Cause Communications (CC) handled the editing, design and research (with assistance from Campbell Research.) For the past 25 years, Chris's marketing and design firm, Hershey Associates, has been developing communications materials for corporate clients including AT&T, The Walt Disney Company, and Wells Fargo Bank. In 2000, she launched CC as a nonprofit division to handle her expanding work in the public interest arena, and her team has done exceptional work for ACLU, Council on Foundations, and the World Health Organization among many others. (CC was also my partner for *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes,* and that partnership continues for the coming book on presentations, so I do not claim to be an impartial observer.)

What was the reason for writing this book?

"I'm asked little bits about a lot of things," says Hershey, "and I have nowhere to point people. So I've felt the need for some tool that provides an overview of all the tools that are available." Hershey and CC vice president Andrew Posey also noted the wide gap they kept seeing in attention paid to communications by corporate clients as opposed to nonprofits. While for-profit businesses will almost always have more absolute dollars at their disposal for communications, research conducted by CC showed 60% of nonprofits surveyed spent *less than 1%* of their budget on communications.

What topics does the book cover?

Research, branding, message development, direct mail, capital campaigns, guerilla marketing, web sites, and measurement are only some of the subjects addressed. (The featured excerpt on blogs is a good example of the concise style and useful content in each section.)

CC surveyed 300 nonprofits around the country and conducted one-on-one interviews with 150 more to ensure that the *Toolkit* would speak to their needs. But Hershey is quick to caution potential readers that this is *not* an encyclopedia. "It's a quick read, an overview," she notes. "A page on advocacy won't make you an expert, but you will learn where to go to become an expert." Each subject comes with "Roadside Assistance," a list of websites, books, and other resources that even veteran communicators should find valuable. And the book's back pocket is filled with templates intended for photo-copying, from a photo/video release form to an event-planning checklist.

So how do you get a copy?

Thanks to underwriting by The Annenberg Foundation, The California Endowment, The James Irvine Foundation, and the Marguerite Casey Foundation, copies are free for staff members of nonprofits and other public interest organizations. To request a copy (one per customer, please, asks CC), visit www.causecommunications.org. ■

BLOGS are one of the hottest trends on the Web today. Short for weblogs, blogs are proliferating because they're among the least expensive, easiest and fastest ways to share information. Blogs send your content directly to your audience whenever new information is posted on your site. They also allow for instant feedback, making them invaluable in building relationships with your key audiences. And because content is frequently updated, blogs can increase your ranking in Internet search engines.

To build awareness of your blog's existence, post its headlines on your organization's Web site, send out an e-mail and/or announcement of your blog, and ask partner organizations to link to your site.

To blog or not to blog

Free automated publishing systems, such as www.blogger.com, can help you set up a blog in just a few minutes. Free news readers also are readily available, although you need to choose the right one for your computer operating system. For the Mac, try http://ranchero.com/netnewswire/; for Microsoft Outlook, www.newsgator.com is a good option; www.feedreader.com is a freeware application for Windows; and www.bloglines.com is a Web-based reader.

But before you launch a blog, be sure you will have enough regular new content to make it worthwhile. To be effective, a blog must be updated regularly—at least two or three times per week, if not daily.

Be aware that whoever writes your blog will effectively be speaking for the entire organization. Proceed with caution. Just because blogging is a new trend doesn't mean it's right for your organization.

— FROM *COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT*