

How Foundations Can Help Grantees Communicate More CLEARly

Communicating for Leadership, Effectiveness And Results, or CLEAR, is a year-long skills-building program that helps nonprofit leaders drive change for better communications inside and outside their organizations. The program includes classroom teaching, online learning, direct one-on-one support and strategic communications counsel. Featured speakers include Kristen Grimm, president of Spitfire Strategies, Chip Heath, coauthor of *Made to Stick*, and many other communications experts (including me.)

Participants in CLEAR are generally sponsored by one of their current

funders (which helps nonprofits focus their spending on programming). This approach also enables foundations to support individuals whom they have identified as current or future leaders in their respective fields. The fee for the program is \$22,000 per student, which covers tuition, materials, most meals and a tailored consulting package valued at \$7,800.

If you are interested in sponsoring one or more of your grantees in the CLEAR 2008 program (and there are only a few slots left), please contact Holly Minch via email, holly@communicationsleadership.org, or by calling 415/227-4200 x210. ■



a goodman

GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

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Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 323.464.3956.

Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com.

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Sometimes, It Is About Us

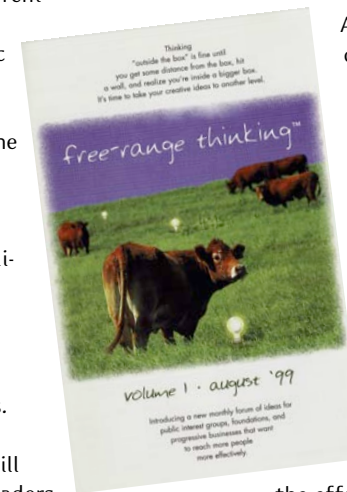
An open letter to public interest professionals on the occasion of the one hundredth edition of this humble journal.

Dear Doer of Good:

When I started as a communications consultant to nonprofits in 1998, I was determined to stay current with the most creative thinking in my specific field. I couldn't find much in the major publications serving the sector, so eventually I stopped looking, started researching, and launched this publication. In August 1999, I mailed issue #1 of *free-range thinking* to about a hundred colleagues and friends.

This month's edition will reach roughly 2,600 readers at nonprofits, foundations, government agencies and educational institutions across North America (with some progressive businesses sprinkled in as well.) Impressive growth, and further

testament, I suspect, to the power of free subscriptions. But this edition is slightly different from its ninety-nine predecessors.



After eight years of profiling communication success stories and publicizing helpful resources, I'd like to take a moment of your time to share a concern. Despite the worthiness of our causes and the incredible passion we bring to them, there is a problem affecting our day-to-day work. As my travels have carried me to virtually every corner of the country, I have seen it undermining

the efforts of public interest groups large and small. The good news: the problem is entirely within our ability to correct. First, however, we have to acknowledge it exists.

I may be more sensitive to this problem because of my work *outside* the sector. In the 1980s, I ran a division of a broadcasting company with an almost old-fashioned zeal for customer service. At annual retreats, management consultants would drill us on the principles of “customer focus,” and one of those principles has stuck with me to this day. When it comes to serving the customer, you have more competition than you think. *Everyone* who walks into your customers’ offices and provides a service is a competitor: the UPS deliveryman, the office supplies sales rep, even the guy who hauls in the bottled water.

At first, this didn’t make sense to me, so I pushed back. “My division sells comedy features to radio stations,” I told the high-priced consultants. “The UPS guy may be funny, but unless he’s selling his jokes, he’s not *my* competition.”

Wrong, they shot back, reminding me that I was still providing a service to my customers. And where *service* is concerned, customers tend to lump all vendors together. So when Mr. Brown from UPS is prompt, courteous, and remembers his customers’ birthdays, that sets a certain standard. If my

division cannot do the same, then my service will be viewed as *substandard*. And when customers sniff something substandard in one area, they tend to believe they’ll find it in other areas, too.

Your organization may not have customers, but I’m guessing there are people out there with whom you’d like to have a relationship (e.g., donors,

members, volunteers, et al.) And when you have that kind of goal, you have more competition than you think, too.

Right now, your cause is battling for share of mind, and your opposition is not just other nonprofits in your field, nor is it limited to good causes in general. It’s *every-one* who’s competing for the public’s attention. And today’s information-saturated

public doesn’t have time to differentiate among the competitors or to cut special breaks for good causes just because you have less money to spend. You may be trading in *ideas*, but you still get lumped together with all the other vendors, just like my former self and the UPS guy.

So, in those increasingly rare moments when you *do* have someone’s attention—whether they’re reading your direct mail,

Studies in 1998 and 2003 showed that only one in ten Americans could name a charitable foundation. On Capitol Hill, nearly 40% of Congressional staffers were unable to name any.



scanning your website, or just talking to one of your canvassers—you have to make the most of that opportunity. At the very least, you have to meet the standard set by other web sites, direct mail, and face-to-face communicators. Too often we’re not, *and that’s the problem*.

I’m confident on this point because I’ve spent most of the last five years collecting evidence. Consider how we advertise, for example. My first book, *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes*, looked at audience response to hundreds of print advertisements run by nonprofits between 1990 and 2000. The research showed that most of those ads fared poorly when it came to attracting attention, convincing people to read the text, and motivating them to act.

Or consider a less expensive and more common attention-getting device: the face-to-face presentation. For my second book, *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes*, we surveyed 2,501 public interest professionals to learn what they thought of the presentations they were attending. Collectively, the respondents gave the average public interest presentation a grade of C-.

Sometimes, the problem isn’t that we’re making a bad impression—we’re making no impression at all. Separate studies in 1998 and 2003 focused on charitable foundations showed that only one in ten Americans could name a private foundation. And in one arena where it really counts, Capitol Hill, nearly 40%

of Congressional staffers *could not produce a single name*.

So why are some of the smartest, most dedicated and most caring people you’ll ever meet producing such lackluster communications? My theory: we don’t take communicating as seriously as we should. Start a conversation with public interest professionals about marketing, organizational identity, or (heaven forbid) branding, and you can almost feel the temperature in the room drop. Those terms, I’ve been told, smack of “corporate thinking” and are out of step with values held most dearly by good causes.

“It’s not about us,” is a common reply when nonprofits are asked why such scant resources are devoted to telling their own story. Such modesty has its charms, but it’s a lead weight in the race for attention. Like it or not, your organization has a brand, projects a visual identity, and must compete in the marketplace of *everything*. How you look in print and on the web, how you answer the phone and speak in public, even how you dress and observe such niceties as showing up on time—it all says something about your organization and your cause.

Serving the public interest does not automatically earn us the public’s interest. We have to work for it. And right now, especially now, we all have to work harder.

Respectfully,