5 Key Mistakes Non-profits Make When Building A Donor Base (And What To Do Differently)

LINDA BUCHNER
MARKETING CONSULTANT

5 Key Mistakes Non-profits Make When Building A Donor Base (And What To Do Differently)

Having started an educational non-profit organization, I understand everybody wears a lot of hats, especially in the beginning. For me, I kept thinking that it was just going to be something we had to deal with “at first”, but in reality it became a constant. When you’re passionate about something, you may believe that you have to have your fingers in every aspect, even when it may not be your strong suit.

Marketing strategy for a non-profit is an essential aspect of the organization’s ability to communicate with their key stakeholders. It’s the vehicle for gaining and maintaining volunteers and individual donors, as well as high-potential donors and foundations. Each requires some change in tone for key message points, and each wants their information delivered in a slightly different way. This is what makes strong brand messaging and a messaging guidebook for board members and staff so important.

Here are five key mistakes that non-profits make and easy ways to get beyond them.There are many more aspects to creating meaningful content to deliver the message of your organization’s impact, so by no means is this a comprehensive list. We all have room to grow in different areas. My hope is that if something listed here resonates with you, the advice given becomes an easy “tweak” you can take action on immediately.

Engagement Matters

Easy tip! Most people, when given the option of $25, $50, or $100 will choose the middle amount. If you make yours $25, $60, and $100, you have increased giving by 20%.

Key Mistake #1:

Having a website that is a glorified brochure. So many non-profits feel it's important to tell every single aspect of their programming along with details about their impact. Less can mean more. Especially if there's "engagement". You want to create a back-and-forth dialog with your audiences to make them feel they are a part of your organization.

What to do differently:

- Report your impact with the "humans you serve" in mind. Data points on a graph can be cold and un-relatable. Make sure that there are anecdotal stories to accompany the information around the impact your program is creating. Real lives, real impact = real engagement.
- Make your donation page inviting - let the potential donor know why you've chose the donation amounts. Randomly choosing financial levels of support without any idea of how that amount can help, is a shot in the dark. It lands flat. (See easy tip above)

Don't Be ~~Boring~~

Key Mistake #2:

Design matters and it's just as easy to create good design as it is to settle with bad design. Keep things fresh and updated, especially with your programs. It's just like going into a restaurant that you can tell has not been updated for years. No matter how good the food is, you really don't want to spend your time there, or even come back. Same is true with sad, old content delivered in the same old mundane way.

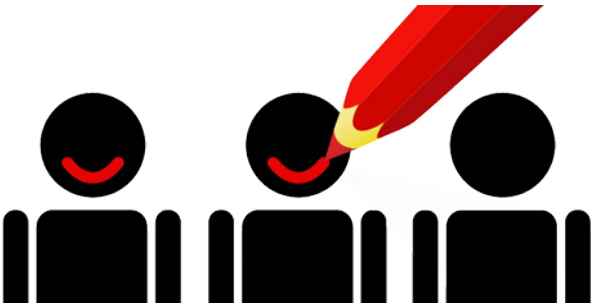
What to do differently:

Create easy updates that can be repeated with new and fresh content each and every month. Things like:

- Student Spotlight
- Teacher Interview
- Volunteer of the Month

Including a photo and a short write up are easy to do, and this approach goes a long way in terms of making people feel appreciated and part of the conversation. Inviting people to send the student, teacher, or volunteer from your "spotlight" a note of congratulations is a good way to engage your audience, drawing them even closer into your program.

NO Retention Strategy



Key Mistake #3:

This is an important operational strategy that dictates how an organization interacts with the people who've decided to become involved in the work of the organization. Donors and volunteers like to know that what they've done has made a difference. Let them know how they matter to the organization. Thank them, engage them, ask them to weigh in on key changes or additions to your program. Make them feel important.

What to do differently:

- Hand-written notes are a good way to add a human touch. These should be more than just signatures on a purchased card. Having a student share a moment that meant something to them is very impactful and creates a great feeling of good will toward the program. You might even consider including a photo.
- Networking events and thank you happy hours are a great way to get volunteers together, in community. Everyone wants to feel a part of something, so create the opportunity to facilitate that sense of togetherness.

Key Mistake #4:

Don't forget to make "the ask". But, don't do all the talking. When you're in a potential donor meeting or presenting in front of a current funder's board of directors it's easy to assume that you're there to report, report, report. It's equally important to listen and hear what it is they care about, why they invest in the organization or program and what they would love to see next. Make it a conversation, not a monologue.

What to do differently:

- After the overview of the organization, or current state of affairs, ask for questions, feedback or concerns. Be open up to hearing what's on their minds because often you will uncover what it is they truly care about, which is more than likely what they would (if asked) offer to financially support.
- Ask for their input. Many philanthropists have reached their success by doing something remarkable. Their personal stories can be enlightening and provide conversation points to make note of and ask about at the next meeting.

Everyone is Replaceable

Key Mistake #5:

Leaders are not indispensable! When an organization is top heavy or when one person is in charge of creating and managing the key programming, it's easy to become overly dependent on what that person thinks, wants to do, and how they present the organization in the community. The truth is, everyone is replaceable. Once someone in the position of over-leadership leaves, the organization has the breathing room to grow and expand in the natural way that it's meant to.

What to do differently:

- Always have a succession plan as part of the discussion at the annual or semi-annual strategic planning sessions. An easy question is, "what would happen to the organization if _____ was hit by a bus"? If there is ever a time when the majority of the board thinks the organization would fatally or severely suffer - let that be your cue. It's time to pivot!
- Use a "board matrix" when deciding on new leadership to add to the mix. Having the organization's needs, length of service, financial requirements, etc. match up with what the candidate brings to the table is a must!