



For Nonprofits, Uncertainty Equals Opportunity

Posted by [Matt Brown](#) on Dec 8, 2020 12:15:00 PM

At the risk of beginning this post with a completely unoriginal and obvious point, the country is currently experiencing a level of cultural, political, and economic turmoil not seen in many decades. In fact, I would argue that today's combination of a worldwide pandemic, political unrest, and racial tensions have left most of us reeling.

These issues can all be seen through the lens of a broader breakdown in the cultural and economic norms established just after World War II, when a strong federal government, combined with a strong, reasonably well paid middle class, created an environment where the majority of American citizens enjoyed a growing level of education, prosperity and material consumption. This was the time of the great flowering of the nonprofit community, whose role has been to "fill the gaps" where government and industry have been unable or unwilling to serve. In the nonprofit sector, we meet the unmet needs. We fix problems through creative solutions.

The crises we all face today is partly a breakdown of the post-WW II established order of which our nonprofit sector is a crucial part. (There are more than 1.5 million nonprofits in the U.S. contributing more than \$1.5 trillion dollars to the economy each year. Source: Urban Institute, Nonprofit Sector Brief, 2019.) Does this mean that the value of nonprofits as a sector is diminishing? I believe the opposite. I feel strongly that the change we are experiencing is a good thing; that the racial and economic inequality must end. I also believe strongly that the nonprofit sector must assert itself even more forcefully as an agent of change and good. As the cultural norms adjust to new economic and social realities, the nonprofit sector is being looked to as an example of what has always been good about our nation: justice, fairness, creativity, and compassion. Let us seize that opportunity.

As a sector, we depend on success primarily through fundraising. But fundraising is one of the final steps in the process of strengthening an organization. First, all nonprofits, regardless of sector, must have a clear vision for the impact they are making and will make in the future. The best way to shape this vision is by creating a strategic plan. Whether you believe in the value of a detailed strategic operating plan or not (and I have met nonprofit leaders over the years with widely varied views on this), codifying

an impactful Vision that informs the way in which you carry out your mission is essential. Without that basic understanding of where you are going as an organization and why you are going there, you simply do not have the framework for expanding your impact or articulating a compelling case for support to your donors.

I would argue that just as important as planning is a commitment to effective communication. Communicating our success is vital to our sustained impact and underlies our ability to raise money to fund programming. Now is not the time to pull back on your communications budget. On the contrary, constituents are desperate for positive signs that there are people and organizations “out there” who really care and are working even harder to make things better in these anxious times. Be in front of your donors on a constant basis – not to ask for money, but to reassure and to encourage.

Donors will not, I believe, be giving less in 2020 and 2021. But they have already shown clear signs that they are giving to fewer organizations. That means you must be a number-one or number-two priority for your donors. If you do not reach out to them on a regular basis now, you may be forgotten. The cost you will face later to re-acquire donor priority will be much higher than investing in stewardship communications now.

Most of us in the nonprofit sector are unabashed optimists. Whether we are volunteers, donors, staff, or serve on boards, we believe that we have a responsibility to make things better by harnessing collective strength. Indeed, today’s turmoil and uncertainty provide an opportunity for the nonprofit sector to assert itself in new, creative, and more productive ways. Let’s utilize the reliability and trust that have forged so much productivity from our sector to become an even greater pillar of strength.

Our donors are looking to the nonprofit community for answers, for reassurance, and for leadership in very trying times. This presents an unparalleled opportunity for the entire sector to assert itself, to grow, and to have an even greater positive impact on our communities and those who benefit from the services only we can provide. To do this, we need to be smart and bold enough to allocate the resources now towards strategic planning, communications, and donor stewardship.

Matthew Brown is a Vice President at Schultz & Williams, with more than 30 years of communications, fundraising and strategic planning experience in both the profit and nonprofit sectors. Prior to joining S&W, Matt served nonprofits as a chief development officer and director of external affairs and worked for nearly ten years in the advertising business. He is also a member of the D.C. Board of Directors for the Association of Fundraising Professionals, and has Co-Chaired the Bridge to NonProfit

Marketing & Fundraising Conference. Matt has also co-produced award-winning public television documentaries with Maryland Public Television, New Jersey Network and Great Museums Television.

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