COMMUNICATE YOUR MISSION

Effectively brand your organization to engage donors, volunteers and the media.

By Jeff Stein

Crafting an effective and impactful brand has never been more important for nonprofit organizations. In an increasingly globalized world, getting your nonprofit noticed by donors, volunteers and media heavily relies on the ability to effectively brand your nonprofit, engage your community digitally, and relate your story to the masses through media outlets.

On March 18, New York Community Trust hosted its workshop “Pathways to Excellence: Excellence in Communications” to discuss best practices for nonprofit communications and branding.

THE ART OF REBRANDING

Panelists agreed that sometimes an organization’s brand must be completely reworked to best convey its mission. Ken Small, development director of BronxWorks, discussed the organization’s successful rebranding from Citizens Advice Bureau to BronxWorks in 2009.

“The name didn’t help us tell our story,” Small explained, and it often prompted more confusion than interest in the organization’s mission.

So began a process of settling on a new brand with which potential donors and volunteers could more readily connect. After much deliberation, and the retention of a communications firm, the organization settled on BronxWorks, a name that captures the
positive and community-specific spirit of the institution.

“For those of us who have lived and worked in the Bronx,” explained Small, “it has been a generational struggle to overcome negative associations with our community.”

The results were swift and irrefutable. The institution’s Internet searchability skyrocketed and community engagement improved. Small highlighted this point by sharing an anecdote about a Fordham University student who Googled “Bronx nonprofits” and found BronxWorks within a couple of clicks, leading the student’s church group to host a holiday toy and clothing drive in partnership with BronxWorks.

“That’s 18 bags of toys and clothes that never would have made it to children in need were it not for our rebranding,” said Small.

**DEFINE YOUR BRAND**

In many ways, a pre-existing, recognizable brand can present its own host of challenges. Steve Streicher, director of communications for New York Cares, stressed the importance of building a well-defined brand to ensure the entirety of an organization’s work is communicated to the public. Streicher noted the 26-year-old New York Cares coat drive, which can be a double-edged sword for the organization because the mission of New York Cares is much larger than its annual drive.

“[The coat drive is] a brand in and of itself, an image that really speaks to the goals and mission of the program,” he said of the drive’s iconic logo featuring a shivering Statue of Liberty.

“But quite honestly,” he continued, “the coat drive is not what we do 365 days per year, and the challenge becomes getting that larger message across.”

To convey that message, New York Cares has instituted a well-orchestrated online presence, including a dramatic overhaul of its website. Streicher underscored the necessity of clarity in website design. New York Cares, like many volunteer-based nonprofits, hinges on its ability to engage an ever-growing pool of volunteers. To fulfill this need, New York Cares redesigned its website homepage to feature volunteer sign-up almost as prominently as the organization’s logo.

“Hurricane Sandy really brought all of this into focus,” Streicher noted. “Everyone was off of their computers and needed to get information from our website on their phones. Designing the website with smartphones in mind was key.”
Streicher also noted that social media sites should be used to engage the public, given their unique ability to cultivate an active online community and provide a forum for people who are invested in an issue and want to get involved.

“Given that it is extremely difficult to redirect social media users to our website,” Streicher explained, “our focus with pages like Facebook and Twitter became engaging our community in conversation.”

Additionally, nontraditional media sites which often gain traction on Facebook and Twitter can be extremely helpful in building an online brand. Taeko Frost, executive director of the Washington Heights CORNER Project, cited the unexpected success of a recent article about the organization on BuzzFeed, a popular online platform.

“The article ended up getting over a million views and was one of the most read articles of the year for BuzzFeed,” Frost said, which dramatically increased traffic to the CORNER Project website.

**PUT YOUR BEST MESSAGE FORWARD**

A nonprofit organization’s passion for its work is rarely called into question, but unfortunately an abundance of passion doesn’t always translate into the most inclusive messaging. Frost explained that the CORNER Project had difficulty engaging a broad range of donors due to its unique harm-reduction mission, which offers services like providing clean syringes to drug addicts.

“You can imagine that our work is not always the easiest pitch to big donors,” Frost said.

But the problem, according to Frost, was not necessarily the lack of understanding with regards to the importance of the CORNER Project’s work. Rather, Frost said that their vehement, yet abrasive initial messaging was limiting the potential reach of the organization.

“We really had to figure out how to tell our story to a broader audience,” Frost said.

Part of that strategy became seizing upon relevant stories in news media, such as the overdose death of actor Philip Seymour Hoffman.

“While incredibly tragic,” Frost said, “it really did become an opportunity for educating the public about what we do and why it’s important.”
This more inclusive approach led the CORNER Project to connect with the families of overdose victims, some of whom have become continual supporters of the organization.

“I had no idea that we would be able to tap into this community,” Frost said, but they have now become a cherished part of the organization’s base.

**PITCH THE RIGHT STORY**

Placing stories in larger traditional media outlets like The New York Times or Washington Post can offer incredible exposure, but pitching your nonprofit so that it will rise to the top of the pile can seem like a gargantuan task.

Streicher said that the most successful media pitches are often those that tie an organization to a topical discussion or debate. He urged nonprofit directors to look outward and find ways to connect their work to hot-button issues on both local and national levels.

Small noted that BronxWorks has found media success in highlighting its clients, citing a New York Times feature of a swim team based at a BronxWorks-sponsored community center which led to donations from as far away as California.

“The clients are the ones who have stories that resonate with the general public,” Small said. “They’re not going to cover your gala. They want a story that really shows that what you’re doing is touching lives in the community.”