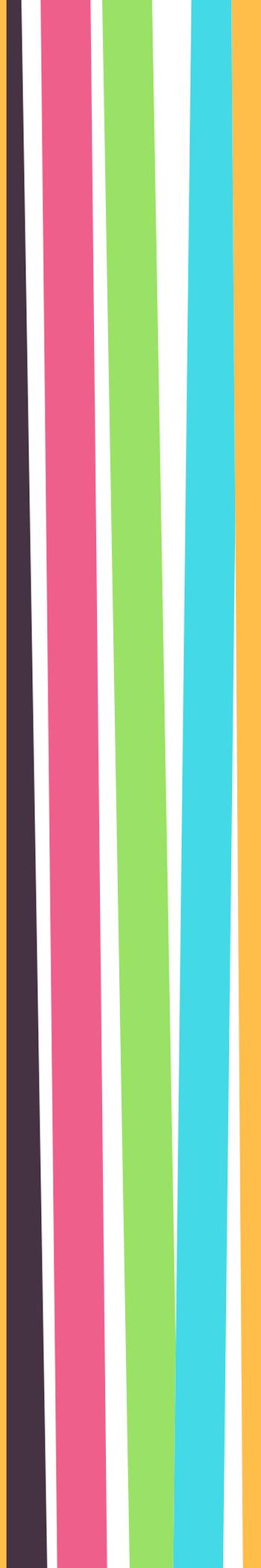# M.

TAYLOR
MARKETING

branding & nonprofit fundraising

NINE STEPS TO CREATING YOUR NONPROFIT COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

MTAYLOR MARKETING

Nine Steps to Building Your Nonprofit Communications Plan

Nonprofit success hinges on the strategic efforts of multiple stakeholders: staff, the board, volunteers, supporters, clients, regulatory groups, and the community. Communications to these critical partners encompasses everything from telling the organization's story to the community to thanking donors and sponsors. A communications plan establishes the framework to create compelling and effective messaging, tailored to the organization's constituencies, and delivered through optimum channels.

The important step of creating a plan is often overlooked or neglected by nonprofits, as the process can be overwhelming. Instead, resist the temptation of avoidance and focus on these five guiding thoughts:

(1) Your mission is worth investing the time to build key, basic blueprints for your organization.

(2) Start with something simple.

(3) A Communications Plan does not have to be perfect.

(4) This is a road map, a working document. Adjust and refine as you move forward.

(5) A simple plan is better than no plan at all.

Step One: Foundational Messaging

To get started, write or review your foundational messaging. Foundational messaging includes your:

- Mission statement
- Vision statement
- Case statement
- Core values
- Core services
- An external marketing message

Step Two: Communications Plan Purpose

What do you want to accomplish with your Communications Plan?

- Start with your high-level objectives.
- Quantify the plan's objectives. How will you know when you've met your goal or need to pivot?
- Establish a timeline for fulfilling these objectives.

Tip: When establishing communications objectives, ensure they closely align with your organizational objectives.

Example of how to align communication objectives with operational objectives.

Operational Objective	Communication Objective
Build Strong Relationships with Grantors	Provide regular updates to key stakeholders
Train staff to effectively work with our clients	Ensure staff knows and understands standards and code of conduct
Increase our Donors	Regular features of agency success in the local media Share compelling impact stories
Increase Board Engagement	Create comprehensive board member onboarding information and agency overview

Step Three: Identify Your Audience Attributes

Each organization has multiple audiences (e.g., donors, staff, and partners). While your nonprofit's mission, values, and case statement always remain the same, the wording and selected channels varies by audience. To consistently deliver the right message to the right audience, create personas.

Personas are general representations of the constituents of your organization. The personas should include their demographics, behaviors, desires, and other key factors you believe will influence how they perceive your messaging.

Stakeholder Attributes Chart

Audience	Age	Gender	Profession	Hobbies	Family Structure	Attributes	Primary Communications Methods	Education
Board Member								
Donor								
Grantor								

Step Four: Evaluate Current Communications

With goals and audiences defined, the next step is to evaluate current communications.

- Ask yourself, "How effective are our communications strategies in reaching our objectives? Are we reaching our intended audiences?"
- Evaluate the organization's communication strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges/threats (SWOT Analysis).

This step identifies:

- o Well performing communications
- o Weak performing communications
- o Missed communications opportunities
- o Obstacles and challenges to successfully executing the communications plan

For example, a strength may be the agency's successful and compelling annual campaign letters. A challenge may be limited staff time, or lack of funds to send out a desired additional mailer.

SWOT Analysis of Current Communications

Current Activities & Communications	Strengths	Weaknesses
E.g. Board Engagement	List what is working well.	List weak areas.
	Opportunities	**Challenges**
	What communication opportunities are you overlooking or under-delivering?	Obstacles that might interfere with your ability to execute plan.

Step Five: Assign Messaging by Audience

In addition to the core mission statements established in Step One, there are other communication messages and organization shares. These include information to service recipients and partners for the purposes of financial reporting, policy, research, conveying success stories and expressing gratitude.

An easy way to pair audience-to-information is to create a Message Map.

Example of a Message Map

Audience	Services	Advice	Policies	Financial Information	Success Stories	Gratitude
Staff	√	No	√	√	√	√
Board	√	No	√	√	√	√
Donors	√	No	No	√	√	√
Grantors	√	No	√	√	√	√
Partners	√	No	No	√	√	√
Volunteers	√	No		√	√	√
Clients	√	√	√	No	√	√

Now that audiences and the information pertinent to their role is defined, outline specific messages for each group.

Audience and Message-Match Example

Audience	Information	Key Messages
Clients	- Services Provided - How to access services - Policies	- We provide ___ to help you ____ - How we impact your life - - Our guidelines for service
Supporters	- Our organization effects change with your help - How you can help - Services we provide and our impact	- Call to action for support with time element - Steps to take to help - Description of services, impact and success stories
Board Members	- Services and impact - Board role and responsibilities to support mission	- Overview of services, those served and impact - Expectations to assist in executing mission

Step Six: Identify Key Communications Channels

The next step in building a communications plan is identifying key communications channels. This matrix defines potential communication channels / platforms for each audience. To effectively structure this, think of the following:

- Recall the audience personas.
- Envision where they live, work, play, etc.
- Identify where and how they receive most of their information in their daily lives.

Example

Audience	Information	Key Messages	Key Channels
Clients	- Services Provided - How to Access Services - Policies	- We provide ___ to help you ____ - How we impact your life - Our guidelines for service	- Brochure, website, and referral partners - Online information, referral sites, and website - Onboarding policy manual
Supporters	- Our organization effects change with your help - How you can help - Services we provide and our impact	- Call to action for support with time element - Steps to take to help - Description of services, impact and success stories	- Website; mailings; Newsletters - Pamphlet; website; social media - Mailings; E-newsletter, events - Press announcements
Board Members	-Services and impact - Board role and responsibilities to support mission	- Overview of services, those served and impact - Expectations to assist in executing mission	- Brochure, website, and personal contact - Onboarding manual

Step Seven: Communications Calendar & Budget

Now you are ready to build a comprehensive calendar of specific timelines, activities and costs.

(1) List your key dates and events
- Go "old school" and print a 12 month calendar.
- Begin with a high level overview of what you know.
- Include specific campaigns, annual reports, special events, open houses, etc.

(2) List communications for each event, activity, or task.

- Create a list of necessary and appropriate messaging and channels related to each item.
- Estimate cost for each communication.

(3) Create step by step action items and associated deadlines for each communications activity.
- Establish specific action items and deadlines.
  For example, the Annual Report must be mailed by July 15th. Work backwards to define key action items and target dates (e.g., mail date, final edits deadline).

(4) Review your communications calendar for missed opportunities or gaps.

- Evaluate the calendar to identify gaps, opportunities or periods of communication overload or duplicity.

(5) Avoid content creation mayhem

- Create a shareable online calendar that includes a version with less detail for staff.
- Designate critical contribution deadlines relative to team's contribution requirements.

Step Eight: Content Creation

Congratulations, you have established your organization's communication guidelines, messaging, and audiences! You're now ready to create engaging content.

When producing content, review how aligned your messaging is with the organization's

- Target audience(s)
- Core values
- Message-match table
- Calls to action

TIP: Use Communication Partners

Nonprofits soar when they successfully leverage 'soft partners'. These are individuals or entities that can effectively produce or share the nonprofit's messaging with target audiences.

Here are some examples of great partners to get your message out there!

- Press
- Other nonprofits
- Corporate groups
- Free event platforms
- Bloggers
- Places of worship, special interest groups, leadership councils, civic groups, etc.
- Elected officials

Step Nine: Benchmarks & Measurement

Measurement provides critical feedback on the success of your communications plan. Here are a few tips to effectively evaluate your work.

- Establish and record baseline numbers at the start (e.g., social media followers, email open and click through rate and total # of donors).
- Remember to monitor benchmarks regularly.
- Adjust and optimize ongoing communications platforms.
- Track progress of established key performance targets relative to expense. This clarifies the return on investment of the expenses associated with the communications plan.

Congratulations in advance! Creating an effective, targeted, communications strategy will streamline your messaging, engage your key constituents, and empower your nonprofit to grow.

 Morgan Taylor is the CEO & Founder of MTaylor Marketing, a branding and nonprofit fundraising firm. Morgan's passion is using her 30+ years of marketing experience to create successful marketing and branding solutions for nonprofits. As a former nonprofit Development Director building a small nonprofit, she understands the challenges nonprofits face in successfully marketing their organizations. www.mtaylormarketing.com

Nonprofit communications, communications plan, nonprofit planning, nonprofit audience mapping, nonprofit messaging, messaging