The Intersection of Digital Communication & Non-Profit Organizations

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Abstract

Non-profit organizations are actively addressing prevalent issues in society, seeking to benefit

the public and those in need through various forms of intervention and programming. Non-

profits have unique leadership and culture, requiring models of communication that fit these

unique qualities. Communication is vital to the success of non-profits, particularly in a digital

age. This thesis synthesizes the current research on non-profit culture and leadership with data on

donor trends, online giving, social media practices, and more points of interest for non-profits

when it comes to digital communication. Additionally, a connection is made between strong

digital communication strategies and ongoing donor retention, as non-profits seek sustainability

moving forward.

Keywords: Digital communication, non-profit organizations, donor retention, social

media strategy

The Intersection of Digital Communication & Non-Profit Organizations

Non-profits vary in size, mission, scope, and purpose, among other variables. However, one key factor remains the same for any non-profit: if their cause is not communicated effectively, it is going to be very difficult for the nonprofit to find donors or for individuals to become aware of the non-profit. Communication in and of itself can be a challenge for any nonprofit, particularly for smaller organizations that do not have the bandwidth to hire staff with expertise in this area. In addition to this preexisting dilemma, many non-profits have not fully harnessed the power of digital communication, which is ever-changing but carries massive potential for growth in organizations. The digital world opens up doors for non-profits to increase funding, sustain their efforts for future programming, and become better at changing the world. Researchers and marketing experts alike state that communicating on a digital level is no longer optional for non-profits.

This thesis has three main goals. The first goal is to explore the background and impact of non-profits and their leaders, which in turn gives context to the needs of non-profits at large. This first section of the thesis will also address how the cultures set within non-profits acts as a compass for all external communication efforts. Second, this thesis aims to showcase why digital communication matters for the success of non-profits, as well as share the barriers that keep non-profits from clear and strategic communication. Using current research, specifically regarding the state of non-profits during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis will explore online giving trends and data about donors that point to a greater need for non-profits to have a strong digital communication strategy. Additionally, this section of the thesis will present overarching themes that can practically help non-profits create more strategic digital communication plans, as well as offer case studies that show how digital communication efforts make a difference in

society. Finally, this thesis will address the growing need for non-profits to focus on donor retention. The ultimate goal of this section will be to connect the presented data on donors with digital communication strategies: is it possible for non-profits mobilize audience to give on a regular basis through digital communication tactics? The goal of communication must not only be gaining an entirely new audience, but also retaining the audience to be active participants in the work of non-profits. Essentially, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a resource for non-profits to begin to think of their online audiences as potential advocates for causes that can impact social change.

Non-Profit Organization Background & Impact

Non-profits address some of the most pressing issues in society. Of the individuals that are already donating to non-profit organizations, 96% believe that non-profits "are essential for creating social change" (Funraise & Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2020, p. 18). This statistic is significant, especially the word *essential*. The people who are on board with the mission of non-profits are actively hoping for and expecting social change to come from the organizations' efforts. Beyond donors, Faulk et al. (2021) found that 55% of non-profits' programming benefits the "general public," with the remaining 45% specifically aiming to help those who are "below the federal poverty level" (p. xii).

Individuals and groups may be marginalized for a variety of reasons and the factors are complex, but non-profits seek to meet people wherever they are. Non-profits benefit people both directly and indirectly; someone may be a direct beneficiary or have access to improved education or living conditions due to the impact of a non-profit (National Council of Nonprofits, 2019). These organizations can provide benefits in everything from public museums, parks, places of worship, community centers, arts and entertainment, to name just a few areas. Cynthia

Gibson, as quoted by National Council of Nonprofits, connects the work of non-profits with the concept of democracy, stating that "it's nonprofits, after all, that spurred some of the most significant and sweeping changes in modern history" (p. 9). Non-profits enable everyday citizens to take an active role in helping their neighbors and members of their communities. Additionally, non-profits can have remarkable global impact, working in countries where human trafficking is rampant, or addressing issues like hunger, poverty, and orphaned children. The vast majority (97%) of non-profits are operating with under $5 million as their annual budget, meaning they serve local communities or operate with low overhead costs (National Council of Nonprofits).

Even though the amount of non-profits in the United States has risen from under 1 million to around 1.8 million total between 2000-2021 (National Council of Nonprofits, 2019; Faulk et al., 2021), the demand on non-profits is increasing at a pace that is difficult to keep up with. It is more necessary than ever for non-profits to share their mission and needs with audiences who are ready and willing to help. An encouraging statistic is that 74% of non-profits have seen an increase in constituents' desire to help with their causes over the past five years (Salesforce.org, 2020). Individuals and groups who are willing to help, whether through volunteering, spreading awareness, or donating, exist in the world. It's up to non-profits to reach them through communication.

Additionally, there is an opportunity for non-profits to capitalize on donors who are willing to give on a monthly basis, which will be explored at length later on in this thesis. Communication is not simply about selling a product or even a message for non-profits, it's about "saving the world" (Kanter & Paine, 2012, p. 9). From these statistics, the conclusion can be drawn that people are willing to support the causes of non-profits, perhaps more than ever before, and they believe that non-profits are positively impacting the world. The remainder of

this thesis will explore more factors that put non-profits in a unique position when it comes to

communication, beginning with an examination of non-profit leadership and culture.

Non-Profit Leadership

In order to gain a complete understanding of non-profit culture and background, a study

of historical and current non-profit leadership styles was necessary. It was essential to have a

thorough understanding of the nuances of non-profit culture, leadership, and structure, in order to

greater inform the recommended practices for effective digital communication.

To begin with, many factors make non-profit leadership unique. First of all, non-profit

leaders themselves have traits and skills that stand out. There are studies that offer some

perspective on the distinctive traits seen in non-profit leaders. One such study was conducted by

Sargeant and Day (2018). They surveyed over 1,000 non-profit leaders with an average of nearly

18 years each in the non-profit sector, looking for common themes and similarities looking into

the future of non-profit leadership (Sargeant & Day). The methodology of this study

implemented questionnaires to help those surveyed conduct an objective self-assessment to

determine their leadership styles. They found that the most common styles of leaders are servant

leadership and transformational leadership (Sargeant & Day). Servant leadership, making up

53.7% of those surveyed, is a leadership style marked by compassion and desire to meet the

needs of others (Sargeant & Day). Transformational leaders, making up 34.8% of those

surveyed, are leaders that cast extraordinary vision and are dreamers at heart (Sargeant & Day).

They see a future for their organization, and see themselves as a part of the transformation that

can happen in order to get there. Taking into consideration the statistics shared previously about

the beliefs donors and the general public hold about the importance and impact of non-profit

organizations, it is noteworthy that the leaders of non-profits themselves believe societal

transformation is possible.

One of the styles of leadership addressed in Sargeant and Day's (2018) study is known as

transactional leadership, which is seen in the for-profit world quite frequently. Transactional

leadership style is driven by objectives and results (Sargeant & Day). A low percentage of non-

profit leaders identified with this leadership style: just over five percent (Sargeant & Day). This

data indicates that non-profit leaders operate more out of a posture that seeks to both meet the

needs of others and dream for the future. There are always exceptions, and non-profit leaders are

certainly diverse both in leadership style and personality traits. However, the top two leadership

styles seen in non-profit leaders are ones that operate from a heart-forward posture, and it could

be argued that this is necessary, particularly in social justice and philanthropic work.

Interestingly enough, the style of leadership driven more from a "heart over results"

posture often leads to *better* overall results. Seargant and Day (2018) describe the impact of

servant leadership on culture: "Servant leadership may help drive a culture of philanthropy in a

non-profit organization, thereby facilitating fundraising and income generation" (p. 6). A "culture

of philanthropy" is extremely important for non-profits, just as culture is key in any organization.

This especially informs the general desires of the leaders within non-profit organizations.

Marketing or self-promotion is seldom their area of expertise. They are instead focused on the

welfare of others, in the specific way their non-profit addresses that.

Non-profit leadership brings unique challenges and responsibilities, but also provides

unique benefits and opportunities. The ability to impact others for good through an organization

is not something that should be taken lightly. The individuals at the helms of non-profits around

the world carry enormous responsibility to care for the welfare of others. They also carry the

weight of communicating the mission and vision of their organization to those who follow them. While it can be intimidating for these leaders to effectively communicate their vision, it simply takes the decisiveness to lead through truth and transparency. Sargeant and Day (2018) state that the word "leader" could be replaced with the word "steward" in non-profit contexts, since others-focused leaders (such as those who lead non-profits) "are increasingly seen as individuals who steward the talents and human resources of their organizations" (p. 37). If non-profit leaders can grow in viewing their role as stewards of a vision, they will set themselves up to communicate this vision with humility and power. While every organization is different and every leader is different, the current research that has been done on non-profit leadership can be useful in determining communication tactics moving forward.

Culture-Setting from Non-Profit Leaders

Non-profit leadership requires a specific and unique kind of culture-setting. Non-profits deal with issues that generally seek to improve the world, which means that the culture, established by leadership within non-profits, would often take a selfless direction. An organization's culture may be defined in many ways. An employee may describe their workplace's culture as "toxic," "encouraging," "challenging," "open to ideas," "performance-based," "compassionate," or "driven," just to name a few descriptions out of perhaps infinite options. While many types of cultures have their benefits and downsides, Simon Sinek (2017) has identified certain cultural standards within organizations, set in motion by leaders, that do not encourage commitment and trust from followers:

> When cultural standards shift from character, values or beliefs to performance, numbers and other impersonal dopamine-driven measurements,…our will to trust and cooperate dilutes. Like adding water to a glass of milk, eventually the culture becomes so watered

down it loses all that makes it good and healthy, and by then it only looks like or vaguely

tastes like milk…In this kind of weak culture, we veer away from doing "the right thing"

in favor of doing "the thing that's right for me." (p. 163)

Sinek (2017) is making a case for a culture based on strong values, established with

meaning by leadership, arguing that this can make individuals more focused on the common goal

rather than their own gain. Certainly this is the desire of leaders within non-profit organizations.

Non-profit leaders have some level of control over the culture they are setting; as David Marquet

(2020) succinctly shares from his own leadership experiences: "Changing the way we

communicated changed the culture" (p. 15).

Non-profit leaders are continually learning and evaluating how to communicate in a way

that spurs those under them toward action on behalf of others. Followers look to their leaders as

the "thermostat," indicating how the actual organization is functioning, as well as establishing

the vision of the organization. Communication impacts the culture of an organization, and culture

can "transform [the] results" of an organization's efforts (Marquet, 2020, p. 15). On first

inspection, it may seem that this is relevant mainly to employees or volunteers within a non-

profit. However, the argument of this thesis is that non-profits are communicating matters of high

emotional and social importance; they are communicating from the heart, to the hearts of those

who may be inclined to give. Non-profit leaders are not just the thermostat for those within their

organization; they have the capacity to set the tone for the external communication of the

organization as well. Non-profit leaders have the unique ability to impact society through their

communication both within and outside of the organizations that they lead.

Non-profit leaders are challenged to set a remarkable culture, often based in servant-

hearted and transformational leadership styles. They hold a significant position within their

organizations to impact society, and it follows that they would need to communicate their values in a powerful and effective way. One way to evaluate the communicated messages within an organization (which can translate to the messages sent to those *outside* the organization) is to simply look at the mission statement of the non-profit. What is the goal? What do all of the staff, leadership, donors, and beneficiaries look towards as the compass of the organization?

Identifying the mission can help inform decisions both on a macro and micro level. This can be seen firsthand in the results of a recent study on non-profit mission statements. The study, conducted by Paxton et al. (2020) studied IRS 990 data from 90,000 non-profits between the years of 2012-2016, as well as analyzed the mission statements from these non-profits. The goal was to evaluate the positive or negative emotional words or sentiments associated with the missions statements, and link these emotions to increases or decreases in donations and volunteers (Paxton et al.). This study is a rarity in the field of non-profit research, as stated by the researchers themselves. The findings of the study "demonstrate that, whether positive or negative, emotions matter," in relation to the messaging used in the mission statements of non-profits (Paxton et al., p. 1074). The authors argue that a focus on only rational non-profit practices is "incomplete," making it more difficult to learn how to harness every resource available for non-profit marketing and fundraising (p. 1054). Furthermore, "emotion is relevant to all types of organizations, but it is particularly significant in the nonprofit sector—a sector rife with emotion-laden issues" (Paxton et al., p. 1055). Thus, a case study on the mission statements of non-profits has led to further analysis on the use of emotion in non-profit communication and common practices.

Though non-profits may vary in size, scope, focus, mission, intent, vision, and strategy, it is a "normative expectation" for non-profit leaders to have an emotional component to their

leadership (Paxton et al., 2020, p. 1055). This is what makes structure and tactics sometimes more difficult to navigate than an organization dealing with more straightforward issues. While there is a need for both rational and emotional logic in any form of leadership, it is noteworthy that there exists a bias toward emotion in non-profit vision-casting and leadership. Non-profits serve the most underprivileged and oppressed in society. The top non-profit organizations within the United States include massive charities such as Feeding America, Salvation Army, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, and Compassion International (Barrett, 2021). Everything from hunger to children's cancer to disaster relief is addressed through these organizations. Non-profits often meet individuals at their most vulnerable point, and are raising funds so that they can continue to do so on a larger scale. With this in mind, it would be more remarkable if emotion was *not* a meaningful part of non-profit leaders' communication methods. Paxton et al. pointedly state that "whether nonprofits recognize it or not, the frames they choose to use in their mission statements and promotional materials, or the visual imagery they use on their websites, trigger emotional pathways and guide donor/volunteer decision-making" (p. 1075). This translates particularly to digital communication in today's world, which will be addressed in the remainder of this thesis.

Non-Profits & The Digital World

In this exploration of non-profit background, leadership, and defining cultures, it is clear that non-profits are an essential piece of a healthy society. Non-profit leaders are challenged to set a tone and culture that aligns with their own leadership styles that are centered on serving others. This tone will also ideally align with the mission of the non-profit organization. The digital world represents a vast challenge and a massive opportunity for non-profits to connect with both the people they desire to serve and those who desire to help in the mission. Where does

digital communication intersect with non-profit values, missions, and goals in a way that is

powerful and effective? Where do non-profits even begin when it comes to this issue? The

research on this issue is still unfolding, and has shown rapid developments even in the months

post-pandemic in 2021 and 2022. The remainder of this thesis will seek to show the importance

of digital communication for non-profits, as well as some practical steps organizations can take

to find a thriving relationship with the digital world.

Digital communication is defined, for the purposes of this study, as the efforts an

organization makes to share their messages online. This could apply to social media platforms

such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and the like. In this thesis,

opportunities such as websites, online giving tools, and email newsletters were also included. For

non-profits, communication efforts are consistently driving audiences toward some form of

action, whether that is volunteering, donating, or building increased awareness of issues.

The concept of digital communication, then, is the connecting piece between constituents

and non-profit. Leaders set the tone, non-profits have clear vision and purpose, and it all must

connect to communication tactics: "Putting your communications work in the context of the

program work and vice versa is an incredibly important milestone in the marketing maturity of

an organization. You must clearly connect the dots between communications, fundraising, and

program work" (Miller, 2018, p. 29). Sixty-seven percent of donors are inspired to give through

the influence of a digital communication medium such as email, social media, or website

(Funraise & Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2019). Non-profits' constituents expect a "personalized

and real-time [experience]" on a digital level (Salesforce.org, 2020, p. 2). It is no longer

considered an optional thing for non-profits to be active in the digital world, but "cultural,

logistical, and financial barriers to acquiring technology still hold nonprofits back [from digital

integration]" (Salesforce.org, p. 21). Individuals who are ready and willing to support the causes

of non-profits are engaging with them through digital communication platforms, demonstrating

how critical digital communication is to the success of non-profits.

In regards to donations specifically, the online world is incredibly relevant and growing

daily. Especially in light of the year 2020 and all that the COVID-19 pandemic entailed, online

giving is a necessity for the survival of non-profits. The generosity of individuals specifically

through online giving was massive in 2020. Blackbaud Institute (2021) reported an increase of

20.7% in online giving from 2019. Of all fundraising, 12.9% of donations were online in 2020,

which was the highest percentage ever measured (Blackbaud Institute). In a chaotic, stressful

year, 40% of nonprofits reported "losses in total revenue for 2020" (Faulk et al., 2021, p. xiii);

however, online giving was growing. Blackbaud Institute summarized it this way:

> During the ups and downs of 2020, it was online giving that kept climbing higher. It was
>
> online giving that, once again, showed its importance as the first response channel of
>
> choice for donors. During the sharpest lows of overall giving, the data shows that online
>
> giving was reaching the highest peaks. Online giving was up 36% in the second quarter
>
> of 2020 compared to 2019. The double-digit growth trend through the rest of 2020. (p. 4)

This growth in the online giving space is quickly evolving, and seems to be linked to

digital communication as a whole. The platforms that are essential for non-profits' success can

be measured in some ways and are ever-changing in other ways. For example, very little growth

was observed in non-profits' Facebook reach in 2021, while "Instagram followers increased by

25%" (M+R, 2022, p. 11). In 2021, M+R (2022) found 100% of surveyed non-profit were

utilizing Facebook, 97% were using Twitter, and 95% were using Instagram. These are

incredibly recent statistics that show non-profits are doing their best to keep up with the rapidly-

changing marketing landscape. On average, an unpaid Facebook post created by non-profits reached only 4% of followers (M+R, 2022). Even so, 2021 saw a 23% increase compared to the previous year for Facebook engagement (M+R, 2022). Video and photo are the most engaging posts on Facebook, scoring at .31% engagement for photo and .32% for video (M+R, 2022). M+R (2022) also reports that the views and engagement with non-profits' website came largely from mobile devices, indicating a relevant need for mobile optimization in websites. However, donors gave more frequently and in larger amounts when giving on a desktop versus a mobile device (M+R, 2022).

The research on this topic is still developing and varies year-by-year, which is why it is extremely important for non-profits to take a proactive approach to their accessibility for mobile users— how can they increase donations on mobile devices? Creativity and a willingness to try new strategies must be employed in this area as further studies show what is effective. Classy (2022) found that "Organizations see an 11-14% increase in mobile conversion rates when digital wallets are enabled" (p. 14). Something as simple as enabling additional payment methods for non-profits' websites could help bridge the gap between mobile and desktop donations.

Obstacles for Non-Profit Digital Communication

There exists a general awareness of the importance of digital communication within non-profit leadership; however, it is more difficult for organizations to actually implement strong digital communication. Non-profits are faced with the challenge of becoming adaptable and effective in the ever-changing digital landscape, while still having very limited resources. The digital world requires non-profits to be proactive thinkers. Since programming is usually the first priority for non-profits, branding and marketing strategy can easily be rushed or fall to the

wayside (Suh, 2020; Durham, 2009). This can lead to inconsistent messaging and an online identity that is misaligned with the visions of non-profits, despite their presence or efforts on social media platforms.

Non-profits know they should be using digital tactics such as social media, websites, email lists, and other digital communication tools (Salesforce.org, 2020). However, sharing content with the world is more complicated than simply posting photos on Instagram and hoping for the best. It requires time, expertise, energy, strategy, and patience, all of which are difficult to come by when working with the limited budget of small or medium sized non-profits. The communications company Big Duck also found that non-profits showed "a lack of understanding of the basic principles of effective communications," revealing that while non-profits lack tangible resources, the deeper issue is their lack of understanding *why* communication is critical to their success (Durham, 2009, p. 10). This does not just apply to smaller non-profits: "Regardless of their staff size, budget, or the surrounding economy, nonprofits rarely have the resources to communicate as much as they would like…all organizations grapple with one ongoing question: *How can we do more with less?*" (Durham, p. 25). Finances can be a helpful solution in gaining more traction with digital communication (Suh, 2020), but part of the beauty of non-profit organizations is their creativity and ability to impact society even within their limitations. The special position that non-profits have in the digital world is their heart and resilience. For any organization, "communication is essential for…long-term success" (Suh, p. 17). Thus, there exists a need for realistic education for non-profit leaders to help them understand the essentials of strong, strategic digital communication and how to practically implement these essentials.

Building Communication Strategy: Objectives, Vision, Metrics

While some elements of successful digital communication can be identified with ease, it is important to recognize that the definition of these terms ultimately depends on an organization's definition of success, or their objectives. What are the short-term and long-term objectives of the organization? For example, an anti-trafficking organization could have the short-term objective of generating more donations for an annual Giving Tuesday campaign. On the other hand, they may be looking to establish 30 new children's homes over the next three years. Though these objectives are both important in the organization's overarching communication strategy, they are different and require different types of digital communication. Therefore, the tactics of each communication campaign will also differ. What is deemed as "success" for the Giving Tuesday campaign may not be successful for the three-year goal, or vice versa. Another factor that makes narrowing tactics a challenge is the fragmented nature of non-profits' target audiences (Durham, 2009). Non-profits are not just targeting a predictable donor base; they are working with program beneficiaries, board members, business partners, and volunteers. Thus, it is nearly impossible to systematize digital communication tactics for all non-profits, since each non-profit has different objectives and different audiences helping them reach those objectives. However, research seems to indicate that above specific tactics, proactive communication *strategy* is what sets non-profits up for success over a longer period of time (Miller, 2013). Strategy cuts through the nuances of tactics and creates a clear vision that all communication efforts can be channeled through.

What constitutes an effective digital communication strategy for a non-profit? There may be many examples of this on a microscale, such as the copy that is written for posts, imagery that

is used, branding elements, emails sent to subscribers, videos, or interviews, to name a few. However, virtually *any* digital communication tactic has a voice, namely the voice of the non-profit. Thus it is critical for non-profits to take responsibility for the overarching voice, mission, and direction of their organization, which will inform all other communication tactics. As Paxton et al. (2020) point out, non-profits "are inherently mission driven and held accountable by the extent to which they fulfill their stated mission" (p. 1052). This greatly simplifies the direction non-profit leaders take with their communication efforts, and allows for a more focused approach. At the end of the day, both the staff of a non-profit and the donors need vision above all else from their leaders. Vision can then lead to more effective communication strategies moving forward.

Only 40% of NPOs in the United States & Canada have a written social media strategy (Funraise & Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2019). Twenty-nine percent have a system in place to track and report return on investment on social media campaigns (Funraise & Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2019). In order to create realistic steps non-profits can take to gain some footing in the world of digital communication strategy, it's critical to identify where the root issue lies: core understanding of what strategy means and how to create a plan that operates proactively, not reactively.

Strategy does not exist without clear recognition of what has already proven to be successful for organizations. Recognition in the digital world could be classified as metrics or measurement of results. This can be accomplished by identifying key performance indicators (KPIs). These are "specific quantifiable metrics that an organization agrees are necessary to achieve success. They are the mileposts that tell a data-informed organization whether it is making progress toward its goals" (Kanter & Paine, 2012, p. 31). Essentially, metrics enable

non-profits to see the impact of their communication efforts in real time, informing future

strategy. A data-informed culture should be something non-profits aim to achieve (Kanter &

Paine). Only 45% of non-profits surveyed by Salesforce.org (2020) are actively measuring their

marketing goals, and 43% are measuring their fundraising goals. These numbers could be

interpreted alongside the data about the presence of a written social media strategy within non-

profits to suggest that strategy and measurement are both lacking, to some degree, within the

field of non-profit communication.

How can these problems be alleviated? What are the key steps to creating a sustainable

digital communication strategy that helps non-profits accomplish their objectives—and be able

to *measure* how well they accomplished them? As Durham (2009) stated, "the impact of

communications is measured in terms of the ability of those communications to support and

advance the mission" (p. 5). Thus, strategy should be intentional, data-informed, and relevant.

Garsten & Bruce (2018) describe digital strategy as an element that "should be fully integrated

into organizational masterplans and operating modes," because digital tactics are meant to be

built upon a foundation of strong vision and strategy (p. 58). Based on the research of experts in

this field, a strong digital communication strategic plan should contain at least three main

components: consistent vision, clear objectives, and audience connection. These elements work

together in a proactive, top-down structure. Vision informs objectives, and objectives are

connected to specific audiences through digital tactics.

First, a vision must be established for the communication plan. Most non-profits already

have a mission statement and clear goals for the programming within their organization. Creating

strategic vision for an organization involves taking this mission statement and using it as a

standard for the language used in communication. Then, all messaging from an organization is

aligned with their mission, leading to consistency across all communication platforms. Having

consistent messaging is critical to non-profit communication. Consistent messaging allows target

audiences to have a clear vision in mind of where the organization is headed and what part they,

as an observer, play in the process. This is also beneficial for positive image-building, brand

recognition, and standing out during difficult economic times (Durham, 2009).

In the situation of the Giving Tuesday and the three-year goal for an anti-trafficking

organization, while the specific objectives of the *tactics* of those campaigns can and will differ,

the messaging surrounding those campaigns should be aligned perfectly with the mission of the

non-profit. Consistent vision removes any questioning about how something should be presented

to the public, since guidelines have been established for the non-profit. While the target

audience, communication platforms, and other specific tactics and metrics may differ at times,

messaging can remain consistent, as "each piece [created] fits into the larger story [non-profits]

are telling" (Miller, 2013, p. 31). Practically, consistent vision can be accomplished by laying the

foundation for all communication channels, ideally managing them all together. The staff who

are assigned to different areas of the organization, such as fundraising and programming, work

with communication and marketing staff to enable further consistency (Miller, 2013). Miller

(2013) goes as far as describing strategic communication efforts in this way as "consistent, like a

promise made and kept" (p. 31). Consistent vision aligns purpose with efforts, allowing for a

more seamless connection between where non-profits are and where they want to be.

Second, defining clear objectives within an organization is vital to a strong digital

communication plan. Objectives will often come in a wide variety, but that should not keep an

organization from defining them nonetheless. Non-profits can work within any existing

limitations as far as staff, budget, and expertise if they can establish measurable objectives

through the filter of the organization's overarching mission. An organization should identify

their long-term, medium-term, and short-term goals. Miller (2013) summarizes how

communication can apply to the success of an organization over a long timeframe:

> Communication work is judged, at least in part, on the extent to which it helps the
>
> nonprofit reach short-term program or fundraising goals. But communications are also
>
> recognized and valued for their contribution to the long-term success of the organization:
>
> for example, by building brand recognition, increasing the size of mailing lists and
>
> engaged communities online that might be asked to support the organization more
>
> directly at a later time, and strengthening relationships within the community. (p. 42)

Measurement becomes even more important when it comes to objectives that take place

within different time frames. In order to measure objectives clearly, the objectives must first be

defined clearly. This can take place within the leadership of a non-profit; there are usually

preexisting programming goals that can be paired with digital communication objectives.

Objectives for non-profits can often fall into three main categories: impact on income or

fundraising, impact on programs, and impact on advocacy (Durham, 2009). Sixty percent of

digital ad expenditure for non-profits in the United States and United Kingdom went toward

direct fundraising, indicating a trend toward fundraising overall in non-profit digital

communication (M+R, 2021). Communicating with a strong objective in mind can lead to more

direct and impactful fundraising, support, and advocacy from an organization's target audience.

If an organization can harness the power of clarity in their goals, their communication will align

not only with their mission but also with what they want to accomplish in the world at large.

Third, messaging and objectives must eventually be connected to an audience in a tactical

way. While it is true that tactics should not be seen as the first aim of a strategic digital

communication plan, they are critical to the success of an organization since tactics *are* the way

messaging is ultimately shared with the world: "At the tactical level, messaging becomes much

more relevant and targeted, as contact lists are segmented and communications are customized

by channel" (Miller, 2013, p. 42). Non-profits should begin to identify audiences, based on

objectives, and determine where that audience is spending their time online. For the majority

donors, email is still the way they are being reminded to give to non-profits (Funraise &

Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2020). However, effective tactics also included Facebook, Instagram,

and Twitter (Funraise & Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2020). Generational shifts are always

happening; while older generations may be giving more to non-profits in 2021, this will likely

change to put more of the giving responsibility on Millennials and Gen Z in the next decade or

two.

   With that being said, it is more important than ever for non-profits to be in tune with *who*

their audience is and tracking what tactics will be most effective. This can be accomplished,

again, through measurable objectives aligned with the mission of the organization. KPIs are an

excellent way to establish what digital tactics are yielding the best return for the organization.

Establishing tactics for distinct objectives is a process that requires time and patience, but when

every post, tweet, or video being shared by an organization has a purpose, that consistency is

beneficial to the audience and creates a trustworthiness within the brand.

   Non-profits address the issues that are most relevant and impactful on individuals in

society today. They have a catalytic effect on society, and 96% of individuals who donate to non-

profits believe these organizations "are essential for creating social change" (Funraise &

Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2020, p. 18). It follows, then, that leaders of non-profits are faced not

only with the expected challenges of heading up an organization, but also with the nuanced

challenges of leading organizations that are philanthropic in nature. Communication strategies for non-profit leaders must accommodate these nuances. This thesis explores the types of cultures and values that are unique to non-profit leadership, as well as examines the effects these unique characteristics have on communication as a within an organization. Finally, this thesis will explore how non-profit leaders can harness digital communication to encourage trust and support from their followers.

The Real World Results of Strong Digital Communication

Behind vision, strategy, metrics, and tactics for success from the perspective of digital communication, there are individuals around the world whose lives are deeply impacted by the success or failure of a non-profit. For example, a small non-profit called Remember Nhu has impacted thousands of children worldwide who will never enter into the sex slave trade. This should fuel digital communication strategy even more. It matters that people know about and understand the cause of Remember Nhu and organizations like it; this can be accomplished through the tactics of Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, once a vision is cast and objectives are created. Digital communication can and does translate to real-world results, despite the challenges that may come with it, particularly for non-profits. The factors that affect the success of any non-profit, large or small, could be listed endlessly, but lead researchers and communicators to arrive at the same conclusion: digital communication connects audiences to the causes that matter locally, nationally, and globally, allowing them to become advocates alongside non-profit leaders.

Over the past five years, social justice movements on a global level have been not just influenced, but *set in motion* through digital communication. The Ahmaud Arbery or George Floyd cases in 2020 would have played out very differently had the Internet and digital

communication tactics not been in existence. While it was not planned in a strategic fashion, digital communication tactics such as video sharing and livestreaming were foundational parts of these cases being brought to the public eye. This is a dramatic shift from the world of former generations. Anyone can be a social activist, and non-profits can position themselves to mobilize audiences for action. Cunningham et al. (2020) draw attention to how "today's social movements are characterized by technology and the use of social media," giving users the ability to become active participants in causes (p. 19). The effect of digital communication may not always have the scale of the cases mentioned, but digital communication can rally audiences to have other significant impacts. Sharon McMahon, a government teacher and educator on social media, has succeeded in raising over $4.2 million in the past 15 months, with this number increasing every day (Baker, 2022). These donations have gone to feed refugees fleeing Ukraine, reduce medical debt for American citizens, as well as offer aid for crises happening in the lives of McMahon's followers, among other areas (Baker). McMahon may not be a leader of a non-profit, but she demonstrates the power of leveraging leadership in digital communication to create social change. Over the past two years, she has consistently built trust with her followers, enabling her to gain massive support in real time for global causes.

The example of Sharon McMahon gives communicators an important framework in the digital world: audiences crave honesty. Simon Sinek (2017) states, "Building trust requires nothing more than telling the truth. That's it. No complicated formula" (p. 192). The best communicators, online and offline, understand the value of truth and transparency. These qualities can exist alongside strong strategy; often, truth is what draws attention to the true needs of individuals all around the world. Ultimately, developing digital communication strategies that revolve around facts and ethical transparency is a way to create sustainability for non-profits.

Transparent and truthful communication benefits non-profits in the short-term and the long-term.

Changing Our World and ONE HUNDRED (2019) found that "Millennials and Gen Zers want

hard facts on funding before donating money, while emotional stories and videos of people in

need are more effective in driving volunteer engagement" (p. 14). Digital communication

systems can be set in place by non-profits in order to present consistent messaging, these "hard

facts," to their followers on various platforms to drive both donations and engagement. Sargeant

and Day (2018) stress the concept that developing clear and effective communication processes

is a way to "foster the stewardship of supporters," and this "is at the heart of what it means to

have a truly philanthropic culture" (p. 37). Leaders of non-profits are challenged not only to

steward their vision and goals for the organization well; they are also presented with a group of

followers, whether large or small, engaging with them on digital platforms. This indicates a need

for effective communication strategies to show potential donors the trustworthiness of the

organization.

Reaching Younger Audiences: Digital Communication & Donor Retention

An issue that non-profits all over the country are faced with is the reality of the average

United States donor being 64 years old (Blackbaud Institute, 2021). Younger audiences are

statistically giving less (Generosity for Life, 2019), but will quickly become the foundational

donor bases for non-profits across the world. Audiences such as Millennials and Gen Z have

been proven to give less than older generations such as Gen X and Baby Boomers, for many

reasons, not least of which the fact that the younger generations do not have the same financial

resources as older generations. These younger generations are digital natives, and are extremely

passionate about a variety of causes. While they do not give as much in monetary amounts,

research continues to show that Millennials and Gen Z are increasingly generous in the way they

give their time and in the amount of charities they give to (Enthuse Intelligence, 2021). There is

great potential within these younger generations; if non-profits can be proactively addressing

younger audiences with their messages through effective digital communication, it is an

opportunity for increased sustainability for non-profits in many capacities. The final section of

this thesis will address the relevance of digital tactics as it applies to these younger audiences and

their likelihood to engage with non-profit organizations. Additionally, it will explore how these

younger donors can be retained through ongoing communication strategies.

Focusing marketing attention on the need for monthly donations is a relevant and

necessary action for non-profits. The non-profit world reflects the for-profit world in many areas.

Monthly subscriptions or programs are one great example of this. The model of paying monthly

is seen in subscription services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, meal plans like Hello Fresh, or

even monthly razor deliveries from businesses like Dollar Shave Club. Classy (2021) makes the

argument that consumers are already receptive to this model, making it all the more important for

non-profits to take advantage of this in their communication. M+R's (2022) findings from the

year after the pandemic suggest a move towards monthly giving as donors begin to find financial

stability again. Additionally, having a monthly donation option makes giving feel more

approachable for the younger generations with less financial stability (Classy, 2021). Having the

option for smaller donations over longer periods of time is a large factor for Gen Z individuals

deciding whether or not to donate (Changing Our World & ONE HUNDRED, 2019). Their

recommendation is that non-profits focus intently on monthly giving campaigns and donor

retention for sustainability moving out of a chaotic and tumultuous season (M+R, 2022). While

the next generation of donors gives in smaller amounts currently, if non-profits can be aware and

strategic in tracking data, they can monitor when "a small donor models behavior of future major gift donors" (Changing Our World & ONE HUNDRED, p. 18).

Classy (2021) reported the top factor that contributes to an excellent donor experience is when "a nonprofit clearly explains the impact a donation will have" (p. 12). In everything from the copy on a non-profits' website to their social media posts, there is an opportunity for clear connections to be made between a donation and its impact; thus, encouraging audiences to donate on a recurring basis because they realize they are making a last impact. The main factor that prevents a Gen Z individual from giving to a non-profit they are researching is a "poor social media presence" (Qgiv, 2021, p. 5). Gen Z donors are also more receptive to monthly communication from non-profits, as opposed to quarterly or even less often from older generations (Qgiv). Additionally, they are often prompted to give through social media campaigns; they are more likely to respond compared to past generations (Qgiv). This data is consistent with the findings that younger audiences desire to see a narrative or story of how their donation is making a difference in the world: "To improve donor retention rates, focus on showing donors how their money was used and how they made a difference" (Qgiv, p. 8). The key driver for gaining support and donations through social media at this point in time, then, is for non-profits to harness the power of a compelling and sustainable story. Gen Z is very philanthropically minded as a group, which is promising for the future of non-profits' causes (Enthuse Intelligence, 2021).

Engagement on social media platforms can mean more than likes and comments for younger donors; social media engagement is what reminds Gen Z that a non-profit exists and needs support. Generation Z donors "will stop giving if they aren't asked for another gift, if they never receive an impact update, or if they can no longer afford their support" (Qgiv, 2021, p. 23).

It is critical for non-profits to stay on top of digital communication tactics, even if it means making small shifts towards growth strategies. Ultimately, engaging younger donors is a matter of staying in the forefront of their minds, and reminding them of the change and greater story they are a part of (Qgiv).

Conclusion

The options for communication and growth in the digital world for non-profits can seem unending and overwhelming. Non-profits are operating with a purpose, and often without a massive budget. With the research on these topics still developing in the wake of a global pandemic, non-profit leaders may not know where to begin when it comes to improving their digital communication strategies. The aim of this thesis has been to condense the existing research on this topic in order to gain a clearer understanding of how non-profit organizations can harness the power of digital communication for increased success and sustainability for the future. The digital world contains rapidly evolving opportunities for non-profits such as mobile donations, monthly donations, data-driven communication methods, and many more; future research on digital communication for non-profits is necessary and will be critical for the success of the non-profit sector in the years to come. Hopefully, the research presented in this thesis enables non-profits to take advantage of the opportunities in front of them as far as digital communication, converting audiences to advocates in a powerful way.

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