



Community Media Workshop
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Nonprofit communications: half a glass, either way you see it

Snapshot of communication capacity at Chicago nonprofits from Community Workshop's Survey of grantees of The Chicago Community Trust

Summary & Introduction

Only a third of Chicago-area nonprofits appear to have full-time communications staff. On the other hand, nearly half have received some news coverage in the past year or two. These are two key findings from a survey of 212 grantees of The Chicago Community Trust that we undertook earlier this month, informed by several years of baseline studies of many who access our services. We found that:

- Only one in three nonprofits surveyed said communications, marketing, or outreach staff handled communications for their organization;
- About 40% listed recent news coverage as a significant communications success from the past year; learning to better reach journalists was rated the highest priority out of four typical communications strategies for those surveyed;
- Some 96% of nonprofits surveyed had a Web site and 75% had a printed brochure
- Some 42% reported using one or more of Community Media Workshop's services; 37% were familiar with but had not accessed the Workshop, and 21% had never heard of the Workshop.

At the Workshop we define communications as the process of developing specific messages and disseminating them to specific audiences via a range of mass media techniques; nonprofit communications is a specialty all its own that is typically less concerned than for-profit communications with the selling of goods and services. Public relations, media relations, outreach and marketing, internal communications, publications and web site development, and other on-line strategies are all examples of common nonprofit communications strategies.

Community Media Workshop is a 19-year-old Chicago-based nonprofit whose mission is to diversify the voices in the news to build a stronger democracy in Chicago and across the Midwest by providing communications coaching that enables nonprofit staff and volunteers to share their stories with a range of audiences. It also provides journalists with context and sourcing guidance and connects nonprofit communicators and journalists to ensure all voices have equal access to public debates. It serves about 2,000 individuals a year through its coaching, and consulting work and through sales of its media guide, *Getting On Air, On-line, and Into Print*.

Recently Community Media Workshop was asked to provide four nonprofit communications workshops to other grantees of The Chicago Community Trust. We took this opportunity to survey the grantees, a cross-section of nonprofits in the Chicago region from Lake County on the northeast to Will County on the southwest, on their communications capacity. Our goal was both to check what we have learned from baseline surveys in recent years and to gain a sense of the content that these groups would find most useful in the upcoming workshops.

The surveys were mailed September 5, 2007 along with an announcement of the workshops. They were returned on-line and via U.S. Mail by September 19, 2007 (print surveys were entered into our SurveyMonkey online survey form by Workshop staff). Respondents were not asked to identify themselves. The surveys were instructive, and tallied with Community Media Workshop’s experience of the capacity and sophistication of mostly smaller Chicago-area nonprofits around communications.

The goal of this brief summary of findings is primarily internal but we felt it might help philanthropists and other nonprofits, particularly locally, to share what we’ve learned about nonprofit communications in our region, both from the survey and as reflected by our accumulated experience across 19 years of coaching and consulting many of these organizations and their peers.

Quantitative Responses

This survey again confirmed what we’ve previously observed: a lack of dedicated communications staff and lack of awareness or understanding of communications standards is quite common among Chicago-area nonprofits in our experience. Respondents were unclear about what comes under the heading of communications. For example, one respondent reported “I spend 75% of my time on communications (assuming that grant writing is considered a type of communication).” Another commented, “You haven't really defined communications.”

Respondents tended to be organizational leaders, and with some exceptions most had been at their organizations for more than four but less than 10 years. CEOs and Executive directors accounted for 60%, other staff for 32%, and board members accounted for 8%, several were undeterminable from the response.

Tell us your title: (answered=103)				
CEO/Exec. Director	Other Staff	Board	Other/not clear	Total
60.2% (62)	31.10% (32)	3.8% (4)	7.8% (5)	103

Average length of time at organization was 7 years; median time was 4.5 years, indicating that while some have served many years with their group, most are relatively new.

How many staff/how much time

Also indicative of a wide range in capacity to engage in communications, only about a third of respondents appeared to have communications staff at their organization. This is consistent with what we have previously found in baseline surveys of individuals accessing our services. For the past several years we have generally found that a third of nonprofit communicators work on communications full time and another third are in development, the balance work as executive directors, board members, and community organizers, among other roles.

Who handles communications for your organization? (check all that apply, answered=103)						
CEO/Executive Director	Development staff	Communications, marketing, outreach staff	Board member or other volunteer	Consultant	Not sure	Other staff
85.4% (88)	42.7% (44)	34% (35)	32% (33)	7.8% (8)	1% (1)	16.5% (17)

Given the small number of dedicated communications staff, the next thing we might look to see was one or more individuals designated to lead on communications for an office or an organization.

In fact, many respondents reported large numbers of staff engaging in communications. For example, 21% of groups reported five or more staff shared responsibility for communications or some variant on “all of us.” Our experience is that “all of us” when it comes to communications often means “none of us” have the specific responsibility to handle communications work. The average number of communications staff was 2.36 and median was 2.

Furthermore, while all respondents indicated they share some responsibility for communications, on average they spent 27 percent of their time on communications (i.e., a day or two a week). The median—that is half of all respondents spend more than this and half spend less than this—on communications, was just 17 percent, or less than a day a week. Another witness to the under-resourced nature of communications from respondents was the eight or 10 respondents who told us they spend “Whatever [time] I can spare” on communications.

Communications Priorities

Respondents online were forced to categorize their communications needs to help us determine their most urgent needs; print respondents were able to choose. A low rating average indicated high interest in learning more about a given topic.

We would like training on: (answered=93)					
	Urgent	Important	Not a top priority right now	Not sure	Rating Average
Media outreach strategies	37.5% (24)	42.2% (27)	15.6% (10)	4.7% (3)	1.77
Using the Web	25.6% (11)	32.6% (14)	16.3% (7)	25.6% (11)	1.88
Creating/improving print materials (e.g., newsletter, brochures)	24.5% (13)	37.7% (20)	30.2% (16)	7.5% (4)	2.06
Spokesperson skills	17.3% (9)	26.9% (14)	42.3% (22)	13.5% (7)	2.29

Respondents often wanted to work on all areas of communications. This was reflected in print surveys, where respondents checked all boxes. On-line, where respondents were required to

prioritize their communications needs, this was reflected in comments such as “All areas urgent,” and “This question isn't working,” evidently from respondents who wished to check all boxes.

Existing Capacity

While lack of capacity and confusion about terms might suggest that groups are challenged around communications, responses to a question about existing capacity suggest that we could just as easily see the situation as a glass half full. Most nonprofits we surveyed appeared to have most of the communications platforms we might expect.

Currently we have: (check all that apply; answered=103)	
A web site/other on-line presence	96.1% (99)
A print newsletter	53.4% (55)
An on-line newsletter	24.3% (25)
A brochure	74.8% (77)
News coverage (print/broadcast/on-line) about our work or our organization from the past year	47.6% (49)
Other	31.1% (32)

Of those who answered “other” at least half cited an email newsletter (i.e., an on-line newsletter—probably the true number of these users is closer to 35%); one cited YouTube videos, while others cited annual reports and program flyers.

There is a sense that in terms of communications strategy—i.e., not just what the groups know how to use, but their understanding of why to employ communications, the respondents had a good grasp of communications essentials and how communications fits into their overall work, or at least how it potentially could fit in.

We use/would like to use communications for: (check all that apply; answered=103)			
	Currently use	Would like to use	Not sure
Recruiting people to participate in our programs	46.5% (46)	45.5% (45)	8.1% (8)
Engaging more supporters/fundraising	42.0% (47)	57.1% (64)	0.9% (1)
Advocacy, educating public/elected officials	41.0% (43)	52.4% (55)	6.7% (7)
Raising awareness of our organization	53.0% (61)	46.1% (53)	0.9% (1)

Respondents may be under- or over-reporting some of their own efforts, to judge by some of the comments in this area. One respondent wrote, “We use the media on a very limited basis even for raising awareness, so when I checked would like to use, I meant would like to use it more.” Other comments indicated very broad communication goals, mostly related to raising awareness,

such as, “To create communications for a wide range of audiences (community, funders, clients, public/elected officials, etc.)” or “promoting better understanding of the nonprofit sector.” With communications as with anything, our experience is that the bigger the goal, the greater effort required and given the lack of capacity there may be some mismatch between respondents’ desires and current communication desires and goals.

Accessing CMW

We were pleased to learn how many respondents have previously accessed our services as well as with the opportunity to reach out to the significant number who had not heard of us.

Have you previously accessed the services of Community Media Workshop? (check all that apply; answered=73)	
I have used the CMW 'yellow book' directory of reporters, Getting On Air & Into Print	37.00% (27)
I have attended the CMW Making Media Connections conference	19.20% (14)
I have attended a CMW training session at their office on the Columbia College Chicago	24.70% (18)
I have attended a CMW custom workshop at my office	1.40% (1)
I am familiar with them but have never used their services	37.00% (27)
I have never heard of CMW	20.60% (15)

Many phone calls came in after the survey was disseminated asking if it would be possible to bring multiple staff and/or to attend all the sessions despite the wide range of workshop locations (northwest suburbs, South Side, Pilsen, and Joliet).

Qualitative Responses

We also asked three qualitative questions to help us in planning for the four communications workshops. These were the questions we asked:

What one thing would you want more people to know about your organization?

This is a challenging question because it requires us to boil down all of our work into one essential point, a tall order given the range of work most of us do at nonprofits do as well as the challenge of shortening and condensing our messages.

Specificity, clarity and framing our work by describing how it is in the public interest that it be done help to create the most successful organizational statements. Responses to this question fell into three categories:

- **Unclear or generic statements**, such as: “*services we provide.*” Adding a geographic service area is one way to focus audiences’ understanding of our work and to make one

nonprofit stand out from another; defining a service area can also help to give audiences a sense of the nonprofit's size and scope of its work.

- **Technical descriptions** that might be difficult for some audiences to grasp, such as *“We provide in-school support to improve the academic achievement of freshman students transitioning into Hispanic-serving high schools with the support of their parents and teachers. We work on improving high school course performance and graduate rates.”* In this case, terms that may have special resonance in the field of education, can confuse outsiders. The need to balance technical completeness with messages that inspire or engage audiences with a nonprofit's mission creates a difficult tension. Avoiding anything that could remotely be construed as jargon is one way to decrease the risk of confusing an audience.
- **Classic “public benefit” formulations** that offered useful information, such as *“GrandFamilies is the only grandparent resource and support center in Chicago and Illinois solely dedicated to meeting the needs of grandparents raising grandchildren. We work to provide one stop access for services supporting these families.”* Another: *“CCAC is the only place in Chicago dedicated to investigating child sexual abuse and healing its victims.”* Spelling out the name in the latter sentence would make this even better.

Being the only or the first of something can make it easier to craft “one thing we want others to know about us” sentences but is not required. Instead, including your name, providing plain-English definitions of your work, and offering a sense of place plus the size and scope of the organization are good starts. Additional desirable components include a sense of how the organization does its work and a sense of how much work it does, which provides a fuller sense of the outcomes of the nonprofit.

What's been your best communications success from the past year? Biggest challenge? (96 answers)

About 30 respondents reported communications successes from the past year that included media coverage, ranging from extensive community news coverage to a single spot in a daily newspaper or on TV news to one or more national coverage items. A fairly typical response was this:

Depends on how you define success... year end newsletter which included year end appeal (fairly successful for us) or a news article for our benefit concert (organ recital. I know several people came because of the article...) ... Biggest challenge, getting our message out...seems to take one on one communication before people "get it" or believe we are really here and do what we say we do. Probably from a funding perspective, communicating with potential larger donors has been an area that is most lacking. Also, I don't know how to develop relationships with the different media outlets, whether it be print or radio or web based...and even if I did how much help would it be to our organization?

Nearly all the respondents indicated that staffing communications was a challenge.

What's a programmatic or organizational goal you expect to achieve in the next year (e.g., recruit X number of participants to a program, raise X more dollars, pass a specific piece of legislation/change a specific regulation)? (93 answers)

Because communications strategy nearly always involves setting communications goals that will help an organization to achieve its larger programmatic or organizational development goals, we asked groups to identify goals and objectives for the coming year (i.e., it's necessary to have a strategy before you have a communications strategy).

Nearly 60 or two thirds of the answers focused on or included a fundraising component, for example, "Raise \$500,000" or "raise \$5,000 through year-end annual appeal," or "raise funds to build our community center building."

There were about 10 each of two other common types of goals:

- The first were **advocacy-oriented**, such as "*change governance leadership and tax money for Cook County Bureau of Health Services*" or "*File slam dunk lawsuit against city for police misconduct.*" Others were program-related, such as "*Graduate 50 Pilsen resident/stakeholders from Pilsen Alliance leadership workshop trainings*" or "*Recruit a group of volunteers to man the two airport USO's overnight shifts (12-8 am)*" or "*We expect to serve 5,500 youth through our teen dating violence prevention program.*"
- About 15 answers were unclear or dealt with communications specifically.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Based on our survey results, Community Media Workshop looks forward to providing core communications support to Trust grantees, focusing on four components – limited by the available time and the size of the groups expected at each workshop:

- Basic to intermediate communication concepts review;
- On-line strategy;
- Awareness-raising strategies such as two stories every organization must be able to tell: "Who We Are" and "Why We're Here," and
- Media relations, e.g., pitching and developing relationships with journalists.

Perhaps due to a relative lack of support for nonprofit organizational development and general operating support, we have found little readily available data on nonprofit communications and a lack of norms and standards for this kind of work. In addition to informing our own work with these groups, it's our hope that this information provides a good briefing for funders and other interested parties on the state of nonprofit communications capacity in the Chicago area.