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Nonprofit Marketing Strategy

By

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Science in Business Administration in Marketing**

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Abstract

This paper explores the new and vague idea of nonprofit marketing. From studies comparing traditional marketing to nonprofit marketing and surveys analyzing the current status of organizations' marketing plans, we see the gray area that is nonprofit marketing and the lack of research to enlighten us what a successful marketing strategy looks like. Then, I talk about my first-hand experiences working for a nonprofit, what I learned, and what questions and ideas I have regarding the future of nonprofit marketing strategy.

Literature

Nonprofit Organizations (Definitions and Examples) by Kate Luckert, Graduate Student, Case Western Reserve University

There are many theories as to why nonprofit organizations were created and why we still need them in today's world. One theory is governments have failed to provide so many services due to "high cost or limited interest by the public" (Luckert 2). Governments make changes when there is a lot of pressure from a large group of people to do so. When there aren't a significant number of people pushing for change, "a small group of individuals can create a nonprofit organization" (Luckert 2). Nonprofit organizations solve problems and provide services that the majority of people might not be aware of or aren't passionate enough about to support.

Another theory behind nonprofit organizations' ongoing relevance in society is that they "provide an outlet for pluralism and solidarity" (Luckert 3). Nonprofit organizations give people the opportunity to come together to make a positive change and lasting impact on society. People love the fulfillment that goes along with giving, helping, and volunteering, so there will always be people to support nonprofits in one way or another.

Lester Salamon's book, "America's Nonprofit Sector", talks about the critical functions of nonprofit organizations. Nonprofits are meant to "react to a community need not being met by the government" (Luckert 3). They have the flexibility to be able to react to the needs of society a lot faster than the government if they have the sufficient resources. Nonprofit organizations are also necessary for "drawing public attention to societal issues" (Luckert 3). They are critical in raising awareness and bringing to light issues that so many people aren't mindful of.

Nonprofits gain funds from multiple sources: donations, fees, product sales, investments, and the government. It is a common misconception that majority of funds come from private donations. In reality, "private giving is merely the third highest source of income" (Luckert 3).

Developing a Marketing Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations: An Exploratory Study

This study used surveys from nonprofit organizations in Michigan and interviews with their employees to examine issues that nonprofits face regarding marketing strategies. The amount of nonprofit organizations is constantly growing, creating "more competition for the limited amount of funds available to NPOs from individual donors, the government, corporations, and foundations" (Pope 2). The growth of NPOs and competition means that having a successful marketing strategy is more important now than ever before. Nonprofit marketing is a relatively new concept, and there is not much evidence of what an effective marketing plan looks like for the nonprofit sector.

The definition of traditional marketing includes the profitability of the company, contradicting the point of nonprofit organizations. In the for profit sector, marketing strategies are deemed successful based on financial metrics. For nonprofit organizations, success cannot necessarily be measured through financial metrics, creating a gray area of what metrics should be used to measure success.

NPOs typically have "three target markets to which they must appeal: clients or customers, volunteers, and donors and funders" (Pope 186). Each of these target markets plays a completely different role in the organization causing NPOs to need to "develop multiple marketing strategies aimed at radically different markets" (Pope 186). Having to develop and implement multiple marketing strategies only adds the need for more time and resources, the two things that most nonprofits are already in a constant battle to steadily obtain.

Typically, finding customers is not an issue for NPOs because they provide something of value that the government or for-profit sector does not, or that neither do well. Research shows that “NPOs lack a customer orientation in their marketing practices” (Pope 186). Nonprofits tend to focus more on the donors in their marketing practices.

Volunteers are a truly vital segment for a majority of NPOs, but “most of these organizations do not understand volunteer recruitment and management as a marketing function” (Pope 187). Nonprofits need to realize that volunteers are their own, unique target market, and an essential one at that. NPOs can successfully market to volunteers if they “determine not only what drives an individual to volunteer... but also what motivates [them]... to volunteer for a particular NPO... and what keeps them coming back” (Pope 187).

When it comes to donors, it is also important to understand what motivates people to give to a specific charity. Evidence shows that people are influenced by “personal values... age, income, and education” (188) when it comes to choosing a charity. An issue that nonprofits regularly face with donors, especially large funders, is that they get a say in where their money goes. Funders “often do not see the importance of marketing and view marketing expenses as a waste of money” (Pope 188). This is yet another issue nonprofit organizations have to face when it comes to developing and implementing successful marketing strategies.

Since the Millennium, more and more businesses and nonprofit organizations have turned to the Internet and heavily rely on it to stay relevant. NPOs can potentially use the Internet to “raise funds, improve relationships, increase their advocacy efforts, and keep their publics well-informed” (Pope 186). Research shows that NPOs aren’t using the Internet to its fullest potential. NPOs seem to be “focused only on one-way communication, instead of using the Internet as a method to develop client and donor relationships” (Pope 188). The Internet is a great place for NPOs to start revamping their marketing strategies. They are already using it, so there is no added cost.

The issue that hinders NPOs from successfully utilizing a resource they already have is the lack of knowledge and experience among its employees and not taking the time to learn and train others. The interviews and surveys in this study found the major limitations that nonprofit organizations face are money, time, and resources. The first setback when it comes to nonprofit marketing is the unclear definition of marketing. “One hundred percent of the interview subjects and 62.1% of the survey respondents said that marketing was important to their organization, but often they were less clear about what marketing meant” (Pope 191). Most nonprofits focus their marketing efforts on fundraising, and neglect to see customers and volunteers as target markets.

According to the interview results, 100% of respondents viewed marketing as important, but only 57.9% had a marketing plan in place. From the surveys, 62.1% viewed marketing as important and 34.6% had a marketing plan in place. 100% of respondents felt that they lacked resources for marketing. All respondents mentioned, “lack of staff, time, funding, a clear marketing message, or basic knowledge of what to do” (Pope 192) as the main reasons they aren’t successfully marketing their organization. A big issue with money is that “donors specified that their funds must go toward the NPO’s cause” (Pope 193). Nonprofit organizations have a hard time showing donors the importance of marketing in the operations of the organization.

The first step to initiating a new marketing strategy is to “gain a broader understanding of what marketing is and why marketing is important to all aspects of NPO management” (Pope 196). There is more to marketing than just fundraising. Bringing in customers and volunteers is also an important element of marketing. In order to offset the current lack of marketing

knowledge and experience, nonprofit organizations should look to close the gap by selecting board members with a marketing background rather than just a passion for the cause. “Passion for the NPO’s cause is important, but by itself it does not help run an effective organization” (Pope 196).

The next step is to take the time to find funding specifically for marketing. This can be done by adding marketing to the budget and using donations for general operations of the organization towards marketing efforts. “It is imperative that NPOs recognize marketing as an operational requirement” (Pope 196). Finally, nonprofit organizations need to use the resources already available to them to their full advantage. Use the Internet to research what other successful NPOs are doing, to communicate to the public, to market to volunteers and donors, and to build relationships with customers.

Nonprofit organizations themselves need to realize the importance of marketing so that they can express the necessity to donors. They need to understand that they have three very distinct and unique target markets they are catering to that require different strategies. They can start by bringing people in to the organization with marketing experience. They should also look into dedicating more time to research and training on ways to implement a nonprofit marketing plan.

Whizz-Kidz

Whizz-Kidz is a children’s charity, headquartered in London, UK, that works to better the lives of physically disabled young people across United Kingdom. Whizz-Kidz was created to fill a need that has been neglected by the National Health Service (NHS). The NHS continues to struggle to fulfill the needs of wheelchair users. There are outrageous wait times, and once it is finally their turn, it is very likely that a child will receive a standard wheelchair that requires them to depend on someone else.

Whizz-Kidz’s mission is to “transform the lives of disabled children by providing the equipment, support and life skills they need, when they need them – giving them the chance to develop their full potential”. The goal is for every disabled young person to have the same opportunities as other children and to live full and happy lives. Besides providing adequate equipment, Whizz-Kidz hosts clubs and camps all year long for young disabled children to hang out together, learn important life skills, and learn how to be more independent. They also provide wheelchair training and athletic training for those who want to play sports. Whizz-Kidz differentiates itself from other children's charities because it does more than raise money and provide the proper mobility equipment for disabled children; they are also out campaigning for the rights of disabled people and raising awareness to how many people are affected daily by their disability. Whizz-Kidz is a children’s charity, so they stop working with young people once they turn 18. By campaigning, they are hoping to make long-term changes that will benefit disabled people of all ages.

My Internship

This summer I had the opportunity to spend 8 weeks in central London working as a Marketing Communications Intern at Whizz-Kidz. As the marketing communications intern, I worked closely with the Head of Communications to develop written content for the charity. My main responsibilities included writing case studies, press releases, assisting with the blog, and keeping up with various social media accounts. I will further discuss the importance of each of these projects, which will then be followed by examples of content I created for each category.

Case Studies

I was given spreadsheets containing information about young people who had received mobility equipment from Whizz-Kidz within the last six months. I contacted about one hundred families asking if they would be interested in sharing their child's story. I drafted questions to ask parents during phone interviews. These questions aimed to learn more about the struggles these children and their families faced before they sought out help from Whizz-Kidz, and the positive changes they've seen in their lives since. The goal of each case study was to showcase how children had benefited from their experiences with Whizz-Kidz. Even though each family was asked the same questions, every story was somehow unique. After interviewing families, I would then write up their story that included direct quotes from family members and photos of the children. These case studies would be documented and saved in a database to be published on the organization's website or distributed in newsletters for donors and corporate partners as seen appropriate.

Press Releases

In my eight weeks at Whizz-Kidz, many big and exciting things happened. The charity created more partnerships, started new campaigns, joined a coalition of nonprofit organizations, received over half a million pounds in grant money, and provided many services to young people through funding from corporate partners, grants, and charitable foundations. As these events and milestones took place, I gathered quotes and pictures and wrote up press releases. Press releases were either distributed directly to specific partners and donors or they were published externally to the general public.

Blog Ghostwriter

Whizz-Kidz' CEO, Ruth Owen, had the goal of posting weekly blogs on the organization's website. They had been falling behind on this goal for a couple months before I got there. There were big transitions happening in the organization, which led to the blog being put on the back burner. The goal of the blog posts was to stir up conversation regarding current events in the news affecting disabled people and talking about the exciting things Whizz-Kidz has been up to. By the end of my internship, I had drafted two blog posts, which ended up being published after I had left.

Miscellaneous

Writing case studies, press releases, and the blog were my main projects for summer, but I worked on other smaller projects on the side. I went through pictures from all events and decided which pictures would be best for each of the different social media platforms including twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. I created media lists to simplify the task of sending out press releases. I researched disability awareness in the UK. I stayed on top of current events and news regarding disabled people, especially children, to be shared through social media or mentioned in the blog. Throughout the summer, I was also able to meet with people from each team to learn more about what they do and stay updated with other projects going on in the organization.

The Importance

Case studies are important for any company or organization providing a service or product. Case studies are used to showcase the success and satisfaction that comes from using a

specific product or service. They are testimonies of the benefits and advantages that result from using the product or service. Case studies are meant to be unique. They show how one thing can affect a wide variety of people or companies in completely different ways, while serving its one true purpose. For example, the Whizz-Kidz case studies were used to show the lives of disabled children and their families before and after they received mobility equipment from Whizz-Kidz. Each child and family has a distinctive story. Each case study shows the reality of the struggles that disabled young people and their families face. They reveal the more emotional side of Whizz-Kidz' story. The case studies get up close and personal with the intent of promoting the services that Whizz-Kidz provides and showcasing the benefits of working with Whizz-Kidz. They are also used to raise the overall awareness of disability and how complicated daily life can be for families with disabled children.

According to business2community.com, case studies are the most effective business-to-business marketing tool. I think Whizz-Kidz has successfully used case studies to attract and ensure donors and corporate partners that their donations are truly making an impact. Whizz-Kidz, as a children's charity has no problem finding customers. Almost one in five people in the UK are disabled (dfl.org.uk). The National Health Service actually refers children to Whizz-Kidz to get the proper equipment. Whizz-Kidz' main issue is competing with all the other charities for the big donors, corporate partnerships, and grant money. Case studies are all about telling a story, and each child truly has their own. Sharing these with the public helps put the emotional touch on what the charity does. Whizz-Kidz provides more than just a wheelchair; they give the opportunity for disabled children to live happier lives.

With my help, Whizz-Kidz was able to create a database of case studies to pull from as needed. They have a specific page on their website dedicated to case studies called "Meet The Kidz" and they are also sent out in monthly email newsletters. They could improve by implementing their case studies in various ways through multiple platforms. For starters, the case studies could be featured on the homepage of the website along with "recent news" and fundraising links, rather than making people search for them. They could also look into creating videos. This idea might be a little more far-fetched, since the case studies involve disabled minors and release forms. However, if they could eventually get people on board, they would be able to create very powerful and moving content. They should also look into referencing case studies and incorporating them in the CEO's blog posts. Lastly, they could share and reference case studies on social media profiles. By incorporating case studies across multiple platforms, Whizz-Kidz is more likely to share its success with more people and even reach people across multiple target markets.

Companies typically write press releases in hopes that other media sources will pick it up and share it, post it, write an article or start a conversation about it. Press releases are a great way to gain exposure in the media, convey the company's message and mission, reach a wide variety of viewers, and show expertise in a specific industry or topic. In this case, Whizz-Kidz shared some press releases internally and others externally. Press releases were used to show who the charity works with, what services it provides, and what it is accomplishing. Press releases were written to announce partnerships with corporations or other nonprofit organizations, to share when they were awarded grant money, and to talk about events involving young disabled people. Internal press releases were shared specifically to one corporate partner to keep them involved and aware of how their donations are impacting the lives of disabled people. For example, one of the press releases I wrote was about how groups of disabled high school students had a workshop to improve their ability to cope with being different and the emotional toll that can have on

young people. This class was made possible by funding from one of the biggest donors, Jardine Motors Group. That press release was initially only distributed to Whizz-Kidz and Jardine Motors Group employees and was later shared with the general public to show that Whizz-Kidz does more than just provide mobility equipment. External press releases, also known as “for immediate release” press releases, are sent out by Whizz-Kidz to the public and through media lists. They are sent to loads of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television stations with the goal of catching the eye of a news outlet and creating buzz about the organization and raising awareness.

Press releases are significantly easier to publish and distribute in today’s electronic world. They are also a very cost-effective way to spread the word and gain buzz. Whizz-Kidz had many newsworthy events take place in my short time there. However, there was always a struggle to get a press release out in a timely manner. I had no previous experience with writing press releases, so I followed examples from other press releases they had published. Using the template, press releases required photos and quotes from multiple people, which were hard to gather in one day. They also need to be fact checked, especially if mentioning a corporate partner. This definitely holds Whizz-Kidz back from getting the news exposure it deserves. News outlets do not want to report old news, so getting press releases out more efficiently is definitely an area of improvement.

Corporate blogging is becoming more and more popular as companies have seen the benefits of what a blog can do for business. Blogs are a cost-effective way for companies to drive traffic to their website, establish expertise, and create relationships with customers. Blogs are also a good opportunity to add a personal touch to the company or organization. Blogs are intended to have a voice for the company that shares thoughts, feelings, and opinions rather than facts and figures. Blogs are useful for facilitating conversation, showing effects of the company’s work, driving donations, and can be shared via the company’s social media platforms. For Whizz-Kidz, the blog was a great platform to strike up conversations and increase awareness of the struggle disabled people face. The blog shared opinions and expressed feelings about current events involving disabled children and showed gratitude and appreciation to those who are helping make a positive impact.

Whizz-Kidz does a great job of tying in current events and popular news articles into the conversation they are trying to start. The blogs include links, facts, opinions, and then what the charity is doing to make a difference when it comes to that particular topic. The biggest improvement would be to blog more consistently. Consistency keeps people interested and has them excitedly waiting for the blog post each week. Inconsistency makes it harder to build relationships with readers and create a strong community. Another area of improvement would be to utilize keywords and search engine optimization. This could be helpful for press releases as well. This would require employees with a deeper understanding of SEO.

Case studies, press releases, and corporate blogs are all important nonprofit marketing strategies. Each is intended to reach different target markets and they are very low cost methods of marketing. The main disadvantage of these tactics is that they can be extremely time-consuming. They require a lot of communication with other people, research, and approval before being published. With all that in mind, it is easy for these to get put on the back burner.

What I Learned

Before my time at Whizz-Kidz, I had no prior experience working for a nonprofit. I have only ever been a volunteer or donor. I also had no previous experience writing case studies, press

releases, or corporate blogging. Besides learning these new skills, I learned a lot about the inner workings of nonprofit organizations and more specifically their marketing strategies and practices.

One of my first observations was that there was not a single team dedicated to marketing. Instead, marketing efforts were spread amongst multiple teams including fundraising, volunteers and events, and communications. I was a part of the communications team. However, I had to communicate a lot with people on the other teams to coordinate who would be covering which events and get information for my projects. Having marketing practices spread across multiple teams made our days really inefficient. So much of my time was spent waiting for replies to emails or playing phone tag with people for a simple quote or information request.

It eventually became apparent to me why the marketing functions were assigned to different people throughout the office. The Fundraising team worked with donors, corporate partners, and charitable foundations to keep funds coming in. The Volunteers and Events team focused on promoting events and recruiting volunteers. The Communications team dealt with the general public and bringing awareness to the charity's cause. I learned that there was not a stable marketing plan in place. Each week, there was a rush to meet another deadline while also handling random tasks that get thrown at you. I also learned that a lot marketing-type tasks get pushed to the bottom of the to-do list and passed along to volunteers or interns with minimal experience, or are forgotten altogether because they are seen as too consuming and not a priority when it comes to the daily operations of the organization.

Conclusion

After my hands-on experience in the chaotic world of nonprofit organizations, I learned that nonprofits are struggling to find the time and resources to create and implement a marketing plan. It is also really hard for nonprofits to put funds towards marketing functions since most donors specifically donate their money to the service or product that the organization provides. Because of the lack of time, money, and hands on deck, it is hard to have a group of people to be fully dedicated to the marketing functions of a nonprofit organization. There is also a lack of knowledge and training of what the marketing needs of a nonprofit are and how to go about implementing a marketing plan.

While I was at Whizz-Kidz, they joined the Wheelchair Alliance, a coalition of nonprofits and charities that all supported physically disabled people and wheelchair uses in some way. They came together to create campaigns with the intent of reaching more people and raise disability awareness. By the time I had left London, the Wheelchair Alliance was still fairly new. I'd be curious to know the results of the coalition and if they did see benefits and an increase in effective reach.

What makes the world of nonprofits even more inefficient is the growing amount of NPOs. With so many more nonprofits coming to fruition, there are going to be less volunteers and money to go around. This is a major problem for those nonprofits that are all supporting the same cause. Rather than competing for the same, scarce resources, nonprofits with common goals should put their brightest minds together and conquer their missions. This is even more important on a local scale. The established national and global charities probably have no desire to join other charities because they have constant funds and volunteer involvement. However, there are tons of local organizations with common goals and are all performing at less than desirable efficiency.

The idea of nonprofit marketing is in its infant stage. There is nowhere near enough research to defend what a successful nonprofit marketing strategy looks like. Nonprofits are lacking marketing knowledge within their organizations, but there is also a major misconception from the general public and donors when it comes to the marketing functions of a nonprofit. People do not realize that nonprofits are marketing themselves to customers, volunteers, and donors. There is not enough awareness and education behind the importance of each of these groups to the success of nonprofits to do what they promise.

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