



COUNCIL *on* FOUNDATIONS

SOLUTIONS BRIEF

Strategic Communications

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Strategic Communications

Whether it's the effect of billion-dollar philanthropists like Warren Buffet and Bill Gates or because of an increasingly socially conscious public, philanthropy has become more top of mind in U.S. society than ever before. Today, it seems that everywhere you turn there's news coverage of an innovative cause marketing campaign, a collaborative public-private partnership, or a new social networking initiative. There's no question that philanthropy has reached a new level of public exposure. In fact, between 2000 and 2005, more than 16,000 articles on nonprofits and philanthropy were featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*; this reflects a more than three-fold increase from the 5,000 articles on those subjects that appeared in the same periodicals between 1980 and 1985.¹

A study of senior executives by Boston College and the Hitachi Foundation revealed that dialogue between companies and their stakeholders about their corporate citizenship roles and activities is not as open as companies might think.

- **65% of executives say the public has a right to expect good corporate citizenship.**
- **29% report discussing citizenship outside the company with stakeholders and only 21% of companies report to the public on corporate citizenship issues.**
- **72% believe their company does more for their communities than is known.**

Source: [Time to Get Real: Closing the Gap between Rhetoric and Reality \[pdf\]](#)

With more attention being paid to philanthropy, the public has developed an increased appetite for information about it. And corporate philanthropy is no exception. Today, customers, employees, and shareholders consider a company's corporate citizenship when deciding where to do business, where to work, and where to invest.² Millennials (the generation born between 1980 and 2000), a key target group for many corporations, place an especially high value on a company's social engagement. One recent study found that 79% of Millennials want to work for companies that care about their impact on and contribution to society.³

So, how do the increased attention and higher expectations affect corporate philanthropy? They mean that companies must not only build focused [strategic philanthropic programs \[pdf\]](#) that bring value to the business and the community, but must also ensure that key internal and external stakeholders are well informed about the purpose and results of community involvement activities. Yet this critical activity—communications—is often lost amid competing priorities.

Using promising practices from leading practitioners, this solutions brief offer tips and suggestions to help you maximize communications about your corporate philanthropy program. Key strategies include **developing a strong plan; leveraging internal and external resources; using branding to strengthen your messages; and learning (and using!) new communication techniques**, particularly those that harness the power of Web 2.0 tools.

¹ Frequency counts conducted by Changing Our World, Summer 2007.

² Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability Communications: "Who's Listening? Who's Leading? What Matters Most?" Edelman, Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and Net Impact, 2008

³ 2006 Cone Millennial Cause Study

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You will learn how strategic communications can strengthen your philanthropic program on a day-to-day basis as well as during times of **crisis and change**.

Plan It

A solid, well-conceived communications plan is key to a successful communications effort. It will help create a framework, a focus, and a direction that connect corporate philanthropy activities back to a larger strategy. An effective plan must consider the target audience as well as the purpose, vehicle, and timing of every message. And, above all, it must be flexible and nimble enough to change when those “expected unexpected” circumstances arise.

- **Identify the individuals or groups you wish to target** with your communications. They will likely include both internal and external stakeholders of your company, including current and potential employees, C-suite executives, middle management, consumers, suppliers,

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE MESSAGES

- **Be authentic and sincere. Link what you support to the company's strategy, values, and vision.**
- **Keep it simple. Minimize information overload.**
- **Promote your good works, but be mindful of the difference between communications and advertising.**
- **Provide impact statements to demonstrate the true social benefit of your efforts.**
- **Tailor messages to suit your diverse audiences and speak to their unique needs.**
- **Test your messages to ensure they meet your goals; refine them as necessary.**

nonprofits, and shareholders. Once you have segmented your audiences, you can more easily prioritize them, determine what information they want or need, and tailor your messages accordingly.

- **Develop the messages** you wish to convey, ensuring that you capture the appropriate level of detail, tone, and content. This is where having a strategic program really helps, since a clear focus makes it easier to create crisp and concise messages about how and why the company has invested in particular initiatives.

Ameriprise Financial: Tailored Communications

Ameriprise Financial often develops multiple versions of the same press release so that its financial advisors can tailor announcements of philanthropic activities to their own local markets. Headquarters then uses a more comprehensive version that conveys the company's perspective nationally.

- **Use an array of vehicles** to deliver and promote your messages—from press releases and newsletters to events, meetings, websites, email, and other electronic media—in order to reach as many individuals as possible in fresh and interesting ways. Which of these are most effective? It all depends on the company. In an informal poll of 52 corporate philanthropy practitioners, 47% selected email as the most effective vehicle for sharing information internally about their company's philanthropic efforts. On the flip side, they found external communication tough to master; more than half reported mixed satisfaction with their external communications efforts.⁴

⁴ Philanthropy Solutions teleconference on communications, October 1, 2008



Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation: Raising Awareness through Public Television

When the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation shifted its community health grantmaking to an “upstream” strategy that examined social determinants of health, it looked for a way to share its new non-traditional programs and outcomes. [Read about the effective partnership the foundation developed with Twin Cities Public Television to raise awareness.](#)

- **Establish the timing** of your communications. Leverage specific moments in time (e.g., employee giving campaigns, volunteer events) to send the right mix of messaging. Develop a calendar to organize your stories for the year and share it with executive leadership and other internal stakeholders so that you can secure their buy-in and involvement in advance.

III Leverage It

It is important to cultivate a network of “believers,” both internally and externally, and use them and their resources to develop and promote your key messages. When it comes to relationships, don’t forget to target these individuals and groups:

- **CEO/president:** Gaining buy-in for your program from many stakeholder groups is critical, but most important is buy-in from your CEO. Having his or her endorsement will help to legitimize your work and spread the word about it rapidly and widely. However, CEOs should be used selectively to deliver information, so think strategically. Not every message will need top-down delivery, but in certain cases it may be beneficial. At **Rent-a-Center**, the CEO holds town hall sessions with employees nationwide to speak about the importance

of community activities. One memo from the president to vice presidents and department heads asking them to rally their departments to participate in a foundation fundraising event resulted in greater than expected employee involvement. If you don’t have access to the CEO, find a champion for your work among his or her inner circle. Your champion can be an important advocate in the C-suite and inspire the engagement and support of the CEO.

- **Employees:** This group has tremendous potential to create and sustain excitement about your programs. Connect with them on an emotional level and they can become loyal ambassadors and storytellers. Use employees as examples to inspire others. Highlight personal stories and images throughout your messaging and materials. Use posters, lobby banners, videos, website testimonials, photos, and more to capture the spirit of employees. **Target** uses in-store kiosks to present information about its community relations activities to reach employees whose jobs do not primarily involve computer access.
- **Mid-level managers:** This group has a reputation for being difficult to reach. Because they typically carry the direct mandate to produce for and focus on the business, philanthropy can fall off their priority lists. However, they are a critical target group since they are often best positioned to distribute messages to front-line employees. Before **Thrivent Financial for Lutherans** went to the community to share changes in their charitable giving program, the foundation engaged managers—especially those serving on nonprofit boards who interface externally—to get them on message about upcoming changes.

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- **Internal departments:** Consider ways to leverage the expertise of other functions within your company to boost communication efforts. Ask the marketing team to help craft and test messages or the IT team to help build a grants management platform. Your organization likely has many talented professionals willing to lend their skills to assist the company's philanthropic efforts.
- **Nonprofit partners:** Grantees and community opinion leaders can provide critical third-party endorsements of your community efforts that help authenticate your commitment to or leadership in a particular area and enhance your credibility as a good corporate citizen.⁵ They also can supply human interest stories from company-supported projects that you can use in your messaging and serve as resources to help test those messages.

Be sure to consider ways to leverage other company resources to help deliver or promote your messages. Use company building space to host a community meeting or a "meet the grantees" night. Or follow in the footsteps of **Boston Scientific**, which uses quarterly management meetings as an opportunity to report about the company's community programs and upcoming events in which employees can engage.

Brand It

Having a plan and developing solid messages are critical components of effective communications, but to really bring those communications to life, branding can be a huge help. A strong brand can create emotional connections with internal and external stakeholders as well as develop unity and consistency in communications. It can create a distinct identity for your program that will help your audiences recognize you, trust you, and understand your unique role in the company and in the community. Think of **Avon's** pink ribbon. How can you build your brand?

- **Create a tagline or logo** that conveys images or ideas you want associated with your program. Put it on all internal and external communications, such as your intranet site, public website, letterhead, email signature block, and grant materials. Make it visible at meetings with employees and at events in the community.
- **Partner with the corporate brand managers.** Make sure you stay within the corporate guidelines. This will help employees and management see community involvement activities as an integral part of the business. Brand managers can come up with highly creative ways to keep you in the corporate fold while making your citizenship brand distinct.

Securian Financial Group: Creating a Memorable Brand

While the Securian Foundation had a long history of supporting its communities in a wide variety of social issues, it did not have a brand that tied its activities together or communicated its work to employees. Read how the foundation leveraged internal resources from the company's communications, marketing, and HR departments to develop their brand and tagline "Doing Good Works" to unify and raise awareness of its efforts.

⁵"Communicating CSR: Talking to People Who Listen." A Global CSR Study by APCO Worldwide, 2004

- **Adopt a consistent language and tone** to talk about your program. Words carry a lot of underlying meanings and associations. They should reflect your institutional values and culture. Don't be too informal if your company operates in a button-down environment. An effective brand, however, is never static. As your program's story changes, whether as a result of new priorities, leadership transition, or simply time, the way you talk about it should change along with it.

Remember that branding is more than words and images. It is how others perceive you in terms of reliability, trust, and reputation. Keep your communications open, learn what your communities need, and educate yourself on the relevant issues to maintain your credibility as a funder.

Learn It

Get on the information superhighway! It not only presents rich communications possibilities, it can help streamline tasks such as distribution of guidelines, submission of applications, and exchanges of information. Just as corporate philanthropy approaches have evolved in response to public expectations, communication methods have evolved in response to new technologies. Standard electronic fare, such as websites and email, has been surpassed by user-content generated Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, social networking sites, blogs, and RSS feeds. Consider the following uses:

- Set up a wiki (a type of website that allows visitors to add, remove, and edit content) to foster collaboration among grantees or a blog to collect thoughts from employees. At blog.Google.org, the **Google** staff shares news and notes about the company's philanthropic initiatives.

- Create a podcast so that employees in scattered locations can hear the CEO talk about company giving decisions. [Listen](#) to **Salesforce Foundation's** executive director explain how her company created their model of integrated philanthropy.
- Form a Facebook group to serve as a forum for employees and community members to connect around a cause or a company-supported project. **Verizon** uses its corporate [Facebook](#) page to inform the public about HopeLine, its domestic abuse prevention program.

These new technologies offer interactive and innovative ways to flip the information funnel. The essence of Web 2.0 is about creating value and enabling its users to be better informed, engaged, and aligned. It's a natural fit for corporate philanthropy.

VIRTUAL COMMUNICATIONS AND SELF-DEALING

Charities often offer hyperlinks from their website to a corporate foundation's site to recognize a foundation's grant. Visitors to the charity's website usually see a headline that thanks the charity's sponsors. Underneath may be the company foundation's logo. A click takes the visitor to the company website. Self-dealing? As long as the benefit to the sponsoring corporation is incidental or tenuous, communicating via that hyperlink would not trigger self-dealing violations. Current guidance on older forms of communication suggests a foundation can allow its name or logo (which may be similar to the sponsoring corporation's) to be placed on a charity's website. A hyperlink can also connect to a website that describes the foundation's activities and other corporate charitable activities. It may cross the self-dealing line if the link is to an area of the company's website that promotes its goods and services. Keep a watchful eye to ensure that the hyperlink continues to connect visitors to non-promotional material.

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Communicating during Times of Crisis and Change

Changes to philanthropic programs are inevitable. The promising practices outlined in this brief are important to keep in mind all the time, but even more so during times of crisis and change. They will help keep your stakeholders in the loop, maintain trust, and minimize any disruptions or uncertainty.

When crisis strikes: During crises, such as the economic disaster of 2008, good communications is an invaluable asset. Top management needs to know that, despite bad economic news, philanthropic initiatives will help maintain the company's reputation in the community. And corporate reputation is critical to a corporation's viability and the public's perception of its charitable work.⁶ Employees need to know that programs that make them feel good about where they work, such as community grantmaking and volunteerism, will remain part of the company culture. Nonprofit partners need to know that the company will continue to stand by them. (You may have to overcome an impulse to keep a low profile. In an informal poll of 56 corporate practitioners conducted during a teleconference in October 2008, nearly 90% admitted they had not been communicating with either employees or community partners about the impact of the economic crisis on their philanthropic programs.)⁷

As Chris Park, president of **New York Life Foundation**, points out, "This is a time to remain visible. Don't duck and hide." So visit top management early and often. Highlight your most important contributions. Assure nonprofit partners that you will honor financial commitments. Make information available to employees about giving decisions and community outreach programs.

When change comes: More than likely, change will come as the result of events such as mergers and acquisitions, company restructuring, leadership transition, or geographic growth. Applying key communications principles can help you maintain credibility as a funder, both within the company and in the community. When Travelers Companies underwent its second major merger in six years, the foundation applied lessons learned about the need for incremental, measured, and transparent communications. The foundation staff created key messages about the merger to share internally, including with employee grantmaking committees. They then took a grassroots approach in the community, meeting with grantees and key opinion leaders individually or in small groups to share the key messages and to hear questions and concerns. Using highly visible, personal communications, the foundation reassured all involved that changes in the business structure would not diminish the company's philanthropic tradition.

6 Bae, Jiyang and Glen Cameron. "Conditioning Effect of Prior Reputation on Perception of Corporate Giving." University of Missouri School of Journalism, 2006

7 Weathering the Storm: Corporate Philanthropy and the Financial Crisis, a joint webinar of the Council on Foundations and the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy, October 15, 2008



Conclusion

Just as corporate philanthropy continues to innovate and evolve, so must your efforts to communicate. Information is a key asset of any corporate foundation or giving program—information about your company’s commitment to socially responsible action as well as to its employees, shareholders, consumers, and nonprofit partners. Communicating

strategically will heighten the effectiveness, increase the value, and strengthen the impact of your corporate foundation or giving program, within both the company and the community. By developing a strong communications plan, leveraging the right resources, branding your program, and using the full breadth of communications tools, you will be well equipped to send a strong message to those who matter most to your company.



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