

Public Relations, Marketing and Fundraising in Canadian Nonprofits: Who is better at relationship?

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The nonprofit landscape in Canada is extremely competitive and organizations looking to be successful for the long term will need the ability to build effective relationships with their key audiences.

Over the last 30 years, the quality of relationship between an organization and its public has been measured by a number of public relations scholars, notably Hon and Grunig (1999).

This research examined public relations, marketing and fundraising organizational structures in the human services (those focused on one's welfare) nonprofit sector in Canada, against effective relationship measures.

- **115 public relations, marketing and fundraising professionals nationwide**
- **11 in-depth interviews with CEOs and senior leaders**
- **Content analysis of 6 organizations**
- **A mix of organization sizes based on annual donations:**
 - **less than \$100K, \$100K-\$1 million, \$1 million +**



KEY FINDINGS



Financial sustainability is a primary concern

80%+ of senior leaders spent most of their time and visited most frequently with the fundraising function. Survey data showed that it was one of the top indicators of engagement effectiveness.

Public engagement is everyone's job

7/11 senior leaders said it was mainly the CEO's responsibility, while 3/11 said it was Communications'. A cross-cutting theme showed that relationship management should be part of almost every role – from advocacy, to research and development, to staff and volunteers.

The SLT includes Fundraising and Communications

75% of survey respondents had fundraising at the senior leadership table, 72% had Communications, and 52% had Marketing. Team sizes for all functions were usually 1-3 people. 35% had public relations and marketing teams blended, as well as public relations, marketing and fundraising together.



In organizations that raised more than \$1 million in annual donations, the separate-but-equal functions of fundraising and strategic communications made the important decisions. There was no clear link between organizational structure and successful engagement, but it became clear that organizations should focus their efforts more on **approach, rather than structure.**

Key audiences need more influence

The practitioners in this sector were an optimistic group, believing they had high levels of engagement, trust (92%) and commitment (84%) from their key audiences. But they fell short in mutual influence (46%), a form of two-way engagement that is essential in building trust, engendering loyalty and enhancing an organization's reputation.

A CHECKLIST FOR EXCELLENCE IN RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT FOR NONPROFIT LEADERS © *Julia Rim Shepard*

Practical steps to foster trust, commitment and mutual influence:

- ❑ Ensure that the senior leadership team includes a functional leader who understands communications and engagement in its holistic sense, and is able to engage with a range of publics in addition to donors, such as employees, government, media, board members, and other publics.
- ❑ Help equip all external communicators with training so they understand how not only to promote messages, but also how to take feedback and escalate it to key decision-makers to affect change.
- ❑ Ensure communication touchpoints are frequent. Research suggests those who are aware of an organization's activities will give them higher ratings on trust, commitment, and mutual influence over those who are unaware.
- ❑ Communicate with donors outside of the fundraising context: special events, news updates and more personalized communications.
- ❑ Give key audiences, including beneficiaries, a variety of ways to give feedback and help you wrestle through key business challenges such as reputational matters or testing campaign ideas. Perhaps through focus groups, social media councils, private phone lines, face-to-face forums, volunteer initiatives, or board member invitations.
- ❑ Engage in trust-building activities such as clearly articulating your organization's vision, mission and values, stewarding organizational resources responsibly and showing the positive results, and adhering to appropriate standards of professional conduct such as the *Better Business Bureau* or *Imagine Canada*.



About the Author

Julia Rim Shepard has worked in the nonprofit sector for more than a decade. Currently she leads marketing strategy for an international development agency, and she specializes in communications and business strategy. She can be reached on LinkedIn, on Twitter @juliarimshepard or email: juliarimshepard@gmail.com.