

Not too long ago, the former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Andrew Cuomo, spoke to a group of nonprofits and progressive organizations assembled together on the eve of the 2001 Presidential Inaugural. He said something that struck a particular chord in me: "Compassion and competency equal success."

Most of the work we do to improve the lives of others and the lives of generations to come is born of our compassion and stubborn hope that, if we just keep at it, we will make a difference. We will protect our natural resources. We will guarantee in practice that everyone has equal protection under the law. We will not let American children die in poverty. We will help the millions in far away places conquer the raging killer, AIDS.

But our persistent hoping and sometimes aimless grinding away, and yes, our compassion, are only good for so much. Ultimately, we are effective only when we are competent — when we buy or develop the right skills for a job, think creatively, focus resources, exploit opportunity and come out of our world long enough to listen to the people in the worlds we want to talk to. The change we seek will elude us forever if we do not bring the right skills and the right strategy to bear on the problems we so desperately wish to solve.

This report, written by Kristen Wolf of Fenton Communications, is about competence — and really, common sense in communications. Communication is not an end. It can be a powerful means to changing hearts and minds and changing votes. We live in the information age and negotiating our time and place in history requires good communications.

The "no nonsense" voices of communications professionals and advocates for social change, who were crucial in helping to develop "Now Hear This," challenge us to hold fast to our compassion and dedicate ourselves to competence.

— Maggie Williams

NOW HEAR THIS

INTRODUCTION



Good communication cuts through the clutter, it doesn't add to it. It does this by getting the right message, in the right medium, delivered by the right messengers, to the right audience.

Nonprofit organizations are at work on issues of critical social importance.

To succeed, they face the challenge of trying to educate, motivate and mobilize a public that is too often stressed out, overextended, even apathetic. This process has never been easy, but now it is harder than ever. Even interested and well-meaning people are cynical, confused, and difficult to reach. Public opinion is not easily moved. People hear more "noise" than ever and they tune out far more than they tune in.

This document is not intended as a blueprint for creating communications campaigns, but offers a way of thinking about campaigns from a strategic marketing and communications perspective.

*“It’s not only about being righteous,
it’s about being righteous and smart.”*

*— Bobby Muller, Co-founder,
International Campaign to Ban Landmines*



People working in the nonprofit world sometimes have trouble adopting a marketing mindset, but in the end, the goal is for people to “buy” our ideas — ideas for a better world. That means we need to find or create willing consumers. And we can’t simply hit them over the head. Browbeating is rarely a successful sales technique.

From a marketing perspective, when nonprofits conduct communications campaigns they have assets:

- They have tremendous public trust.
- They have credibility.
- They work on inspiring issues that by their very nature garner attention.
- They have a strong record.

“Nonprofits are experts on the issues that affect all of us, but are not always experts on the best way to communicate what they know. They have staff who believe, who care, and who are really passionate about what they do. They just need to learn how to harness that enthusiasm.”

— Candy Cox, DDB

They also face challenges:

- Sometimes they go from being right to being righteous, losing supporters along the way.
- They often want to win the battle and the war in one step, when history tells us this is not the way it works. They have to be committed for the long-term.
- They often build campaigns and initiatives on assumptions — not tested, well-honed strategies.
- They sometimes think the issues are too complex for simple, concise messages.

In preparing this report, we searched for common denominators that helped to define the most successful campaigns — as well as the Achilles’ heel of some failures.

One conclusion: there are three MUST HAVES for any successful campaign:

- 1) **Clear, measurable goals.**
- 2) **Extensive knowledge of whom you are trying to reach and what moves them.**
- 3) **Compelling messages that connect with your target audience.**

We all know this, yet too often we move forward on campaigns without using these three criteria as our guide. How do we ensure these three core components are at the center of the campaign?

- 4) Start with systematic planning that is reviewed and then revised.
- 5) Specify for people what to do, how to do it, and why.
- 6) Make the case for why action is needed now.
- 7) Match strategy and tactics to target audience.
- 8) Budget for success.
- 9) Rely on experts when needed.

What follows is a closer look at these common denominators, along with words of wisdom from some exceptional communicators from the nonprofit sector.