

The Foundation Review

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Open Access*

2010

Assessing Nonprofits' Communications Capacity: An Online Self-Assessment Tool

Anne Reisinger Whatley
Cause Communications

R. Christine Hershey
Cause Communications

Julia Coffman
Center for Evaluation Innovation

Andre Oliver
Communications Strategist

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>



Part of the [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reisinger Whatley, A., Hershey, R. C., Coffman, J., & Oliver, A. (2010). Assessing Nonprofits' Communications Capacity: An Online Self-Assessment Tool. *The Foundation Review*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-09-00043>

Copyright © 2010 Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. The Foundation Review is reproduced electronically by ScholarWorks@GVSU. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>

Assessing Nonprofits' Communications Capacity: An Online Self-Assessment Tool

*Anne Reisinger Whatley, M.Sc., and R. Christine Hershey, Cause Communications;
Julia Coffman, M.S., Center for Evaluation Innovation;
and Andre Oliver, B.A., Communications Strategist*

Key Points

- Foundations increasingly recognize the importance of strategic and effective communications to advance their social-change goals. This article provides a framework that helps foundations to better understand the communications capacity of their grantee partners.
- Based on a detailed analysis of a survey of 529 foundations, universities and nonprofits, the authors created a six-point index that identifies the characteristics and practices of organizations that are ranked as highly effective at using communications to advance their goals.
- The six indicators are: Involvement of organization leadership in communications, communications planning and organization-wide planning, staffing and the use of outside expertise, donor understanding and support for communications, managing the communications basics, and the role of evaluation in communications.
- This article describes a self-assessment tool that allows organizations to compare their practices to those who participated in the national survey, and to the approaches identified in the index.
- Guidance on how foundations and grantees can use the self-assessment and Communications Effectiveness Index to inform planning, establish baseline capacities, direct or request resources such as funding for training, and evaluate effectiveness of communications efforts is also discussed.

Introduction

Increasingly, organizations in the nonprofit sector recognize the importance of strategic communications to advance social-change goals. For foundation staff seeking to integrate effective communications into their programs, knowing the baseline capacity of grantee organizations can be instructive for planning and implementing communications initiatives.

The timing is right for practical tools that can help foundations and nonprofits assess communications capacity. Several trends in the field – an emphasis on effectiveness, demands for accountability and good governance, diminishing resources for nonprofits, and a new technological landscape – increase the necessity for vehicles to help organizations ensure that their communications capacity and approaches are truly aligned to achieve their goals.

The research presented here and the resultant outcomes provide a starting point for tackling the issue of assessing grantee communications capacity. It begins with a summary of key findings from a 2008 survey conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI) of more than 500 executives at foundations, universities, and nonprofits. The goal of the survey was to assess participants' perceptions of their organizations' strategic communications capacity.

The intent was to gain a better understanding of the state of the nonprofit sector as a whole, and to use that information to develop tools to help foundations and grantees begin to chart a course toward more strategic communications. Analysis of the survey results pointed to six practices and approaches of organizations that are highly effective communicators compared with the total sample of respondents: 1) involvement of organization leadership in communications, 2) communications planning and organization-wide planning, 3) staffing and the use of outside expertise, 4) donor understanding and support for communications, 5) managing the communications basics, and 6) the role of evaluation in communications.

This Communications Effectiveness Index served as the foundation for the development of a self-assessment tool, a brief, 16-question online survey that allows respondents to gauge their communications capacity relative to the high-performing organizations in the index. The self-assessment highlights areas in which both foundations and their nonprofit grantees may need to improve in order to be more effective in their communications efforts. The self-assessment results are intended to spur discussion, inform planning and be a tool for re-framing the role of communications in organizations.

Rationale

The landscape in which foundations and their grantees operate has changed considerably in recent decades. Whether it is increased government and media scrutiny, shrinking budgets, or keeping pace with technology, the need for more effective strategic communications (often with less money) is ever present. Here's a look at just a few of the factors that are influencing operations and a drive to demonstrate effectiveness:

- Research indicates that building nonprofit capacity is a work in progress. For example, studies by the Aspen Institute (Salamon, 2003) and Johns Hopkins University (Salamon & Geller, 2008) of more than 2,000 nonprofit groups reported that the majority of organizations engaged in advocacy lack the money and expertise to effectively move their agendas. They found that organizations were largely reactive to legislative proposals, lacked sufficient staff expertise, and employed the least demanding forms of outreach to advance their policy goals.
- The bar for demonstrating good governance has risen consistently in recent years, fueled by government scrutiny of nonprofit activity and regular attention paid by the news media to bad actors in the field. In *Imagining the Future of Philanthropy*, a five-year project that examined major trends shaping philanthropy, Fulton and Blau (2005) argued that some people will always behave unethically. Thus, with each increase in philanthropic actors, so too grows the numbers of those who abuse the public trust.
- The nation's economic recession has wreaked havoc on foundation endowments and, in turn, money going out the door to nonprofits. In December 2009, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* reported, "The nonprofit world is about to face the toughest year in its history. By every measure, 2010 could be far more painful for charities and the people they serve than any other they have known." A key reason for this daunting outlook is that many of the nation's largest foundations and corporations, hit hard by the recession and investment losses since 2007, are continuing to trim their giving or are keeping their giving steady at previous-year levels (Barton et al., 2009). Just as with corporations, "doing more with less" is a mantra heard within the corridors of nearly every 501(c)3 today.
- Information technology has had a profound effect on the nonprofit landscape in recent years. As with every other sector, technology has reshaped the way we communicate with

The self-assessment results are intended to spur discussion, inform planning and be a tool for re-framing the role of communications in organizations.

donors, media, stakeholders, and the public. In particular, the emergence of social media calls for a fundamental change in how organizations view themselves and work within the social and policy landscape.

- High-profile business leaders are taking a hands-on approach to philanthropy and bringing with them the lessons learned in the corporate world. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Omidyar Network, and Google.org are just a few examples of organizations applying business principles to their social aims. This is a group *The New York Times*' Stephanie Strom termed "philanthropreneurs" (2006), a new generation that is helping to reinvent the way foundations and nonprofits carry out their work.

For organizations where robust communications is necessary – such as those seeking to shape policy decisions – research-informed planning tools are vital to charting a roadmap for success.

As a result, foundations – on their own behalf and that of their grantees – have raised their expectations of what it takes to communicate well: competence at garnering media attention, ability to effectively use technology to meet objectives, and skill at informing public officials and opinion leaders on key issues, to name a few. However, strategic communications itself is a relatively nascent field in the world of philanthropy, particularly when it comes to supporting grantees.

From our review of the nonprofit communications sector, there are tools that help organizations plan their communications, but there is little guidance available to help nonprofits assess their capacity as communicators – a necessary starting point for organizations to improve their strategic communications. Likewise, apart from funding

a communications assessment of every grantee, few resources exist to help funders understand the communications capacity of their grantees as a group, and where support might be needed to achieve programmatic objectives.

In short, this is a time of immense change and uncertainty, one that makes it imperative that foundations utilize mechanisms to better understand the capabilities and practices of the nonprofits they support. For organizations where robust communications is necessary – such as those seeking to shape policy decisions – research-informed planning tools are vital to charting a roadmap for success.

Methodology and Survey Sample

The survey discussed here was designed and conducted in association with PSRAI, an independent survey research firm. The survey polled nonprofit professionals on more than 80 questions to gather information on their communications capabilities and practices, levels of expertise, and levels of collaboration both within and outside the nonprofit sector.

Survey results are based on online interviews with 529 nonprofit professionals sampled from databases provided to PSRAI by Cause Communications. Data was collected online from June 16 to July 23, 2008. The margin of sampling error for the complete dataset is ± 4.3 percentage points.

Two lists were used for collecting data. The first was a list of 6,343 individuals provided by Cause Communications. From this list, PSRAI drew a random sample size of 3,000. The second list used was a database from The California Endowment (TCE) of 511 grantees. All of the individuals on this list were included, so no sampling was needed. The final dataset includes 424 responses from the main sample and 105 cases from the TCE list.

Respondents held senior-level positions at nonprofit organizations, universities, and private foundations. Representatives who completed the survey on behalf of their organizations play key roles in their organizations, with responsibilities

that include communications and marketing, development and fundraising, programs and services, and executive positions of chief executive officer, president, and executive director.

Staff and advisors at Cause Communications, in collaboration with PSRAI, developed the questionnaire. To help facilitate a uniform understanding of the survey questions, those taking the survey were provided with the following operational definition of marketing and communications:

Practices designed to inform, engage, or affect the opinions of individuals, institutions, or groups through various methods such as advertising, media outreach, the Internet, publishing, and personal contact. This includes activities that help with fundraising, but does not include direct solicitation of grants or donations. All references to communications are "external" communications.

Contact Procedures and Data Collection

While all of the data were collected online, PSRAI used three separate modes of communication to obtain cooperation from potential respondents: 1) a letter via U.S. mail explaining that the purpose of the research was to gather feedback and observations from nonprofit professionals on the role of marketing and communications in the nonprofit field, and identifying PSRAI as the research partner; 2) invitations to participate in the survey via e-mail; and 3) follow-up phone calls made by PSRAI to a sample of 1,000 nonresponders.

The online survey was programmed and hosted by PSRAI. Only data with at least 75 percent of the substantive questions answered were considered complete. Cases that had any more missing data were dropped. The final dataset included 424 cases from the main sample and 105 cases from the TCE grantee list.

Additional details on the design, execution and analysis of the survey are discussed in the findings report produced by PSRAI.

Key Findings

The survey provides a comprehensive look at the state of communications within the field today. It examines several critical aspects of nonprofit communications, including staffing and budgets, outreach methods, evaluation, use of outside expertise, transparency, accountability, and effectiveness. Among the key findings:

- *Communications is central to nonprofit work.* Communications is viewed as essential to the identity, visibility, and livelihood of nonprofit organizations. As many as 97 percent of nonprofit professionals surveyed say that it is important to their organizations' work – in raising awareness, maintaining their reputation, conveying value to members and constituents, and raising money.

Communications is viewed as essential to the identity, visibility, and livelihood of nonprofit organizations.

- *Leadership appreciates communications, but obstacles remain.* Eighty-five percent of those surveyed report that senior leadership (i.e., CEO, executive director, board of directors) is involved in communications efforts. The nonprofit professionals surveyed see leadership involvement as critical to the success of their communications work. Of the eight specific characteristics probed in the survey, leadership involvement is seen as the number one condition for success, with 74 percent of professionals stating it is very important. This view is held within organizations regardless of size, budget, and mission, as well as among professionals with varying job responsibilities and positions within their organizations.

However, the survey finds that the role of nonprofit communications staff in critical decision-making – on issues that affect the public face

of their organizations – is limited. Not surprisingly, CEOs and other top executives strongly agree that they have a seat at the decision-making table (71 percent). By contrast, just 39 percent of professionals with communications/marketing responsibilities who responded say they are involved in key decisions that affect the public face of their organizations.

- *Help is needed to move beyond the basics.* A majority of organizations say they perform well at what some might term the “basics” of communications – print publications, media materials, and managing Web sites, for example. However, more than half of those surveyed say their organization lacks capacity in areas that are commonplace in other sectors, such as communications planning, evaluation, and use of more interactive information technologies commonly referred to as “Web 2.0” – weblogs, wikis, podcasts, and social networking tools.

Key indicators for effective communications include having a documented communications plan in place and some staff who work exclusively on communications.

- *Lack of resources is the main barrier to success.* More than three-quarters of organizations cite the lack of financial resources as the main barrier to the success of their communications efforts, followed by a lack of communications staff and in-house expertise. Equally important, four out of 10 professionals say their donors don’t understand the importance of communications or provide the necessary resources to succeed.

Given this, it is not surprising that communications comprises a relatively small proportion of nonprofit organizations’ total budgets. About half (49 percent) of the nonprofits surveyed

currently allocate no more than 2 percent of their annual budget for communications, while less than a third (30 percent) spend 5 percent or more on communications. By way of comparison, for-profit entities with revenues of less than \$100 million – the revenue category most relevant to our sample – have been found to allocate an average of nearly 4 percent to public relations alone (Swerling et al., 2008).

- *Indicators of effectiveness emerge.* The survey provided PSRAI with a unique source of research data to identify characteristics distinguishing nonprofit organizations that are more effective at communications. Key indicators for effective communications include having a documented communications plan in place and some staff who work exclusively on communications. Additionally, more effective communicators do a better job at soliciting donor support, including leveraging online donations. More effective organizations are also twice as likely as medium- or low-effectiveness organizations to commission independent evaluations of their communications efforts.

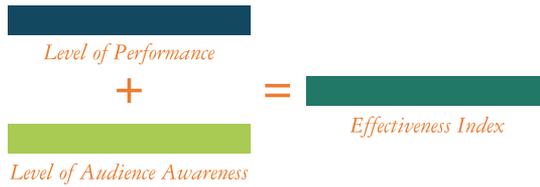
The Communications Effectiveness Index

In analyzing the survey results, we identified specific capacities and practices that were common to high-performing organizations. The index is based on answers to 17 questions measuring an organization’s perceptions of its own overall effectiveness with regard to implementing a variety of common communications activities and reaching key target audiences. (See Figure 1.)

The index itself is a “zero-sum” additive index in which one-third of the organizations surveyed are considered highly effective at communications. In this type of indexing, each gain is balanced by a loss – that is to say, for each highly effective communicator, there is also one rated medium in effectiveness and one rated low. To achieve this balance, positive answers (e.g., “very effective”) receive a score of +1, while moderately positive or missing responses receive a 0 and negative responses receive a -1. The end result is that only highly positive or highly negative responses move the index away from 0 and toward a high or low

FIGURE 1 Developing the Index

How the Communications Effectiveness Index Was Determined



Princeton Survey Research created an index summarizing responses to a series of items that rated organizations' effectiveness in achieving a variety of communications goals – such as informing people about what they do, raising money, increasing issue awareness and affecting public policy decisions.

Also incorporated into the index are nonprofit professionals' views of the degree to which key audiences – including the general public, the media, opinion leaders and other nonprofits – are aware of their organization and what it does.

Organizations were divided into three groups, roughly equal in size, based on self-reported assessments of communications effectiveness: high (33 percent), medium (33 percent), and low (33 percent). Analysis of differences in responses by the three Index categories revealed several keys to communications effectiveness.

Communications Effectiveness Rating Index Key



effectiveness rating. There is an added benefit in that the integrity of the scoring system remains constant even when the respondent does not provide an answer.

It is important to note that because the index is based on survey research, the organizations that were found to be highly effective at communications self-reported the attributes that led to their inclusion in that category. While follow-up research to confirm these findings would be warranted, the survey findings around evaluation support the validity of participants' self-identification. In particular, the most effective nonprofits are much more likely to be good at evaluation, and twice as likely to periodically contract for an independent evaluation of their communications. In other words, they may know they are effective because assessment techniques and outside

evaluations have told them they are.

A large body of scholarly research exists regarding the validity and reliability of self-assessment. One study found, for example, that self-evaluation results in scoring that is similar to, or in some cases even lower, than those of external evaluators (Gené-Badia, Jodar-Sola, Peguero-Rodriguez, Contel-Segura, & Moliner-Molins, 2001). Meanwhile, Van Der Wiele, Brown, Millen, and Whelan find that the rank of the respondent's job title correlates to greater reliability (2000). That is to say that the higher up managers are, the more likely they will be aware of – and report reliably on – their organizations' efforts as a whole.

While a thorough review of such work is beyond the scope of this article, it is useful to note that there is at least some agreement that the process

Perspective 1: Involvement of Leadership at The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

As Paul Brest, president of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, shares, “In the decade since I came to the Hewlett Foundation, I have seen a dramatic change in the use of communications by foundations to advance their strategic goals, and my own understanding of the role of communications has evolved significantly over time. Foundation communications was once a field that was synonymous with public relations, or even more narrowly, media relations. We are seeing a sea of change.”

A great number of foundation grants require a sound communications strategy in order to succeed. For example, policy analysis is only effective if policymakers use it. Brest continues, “Communications departments are increasingly working closely with program staff to ensure that grantees are clear about what their communications goals are and how they plan to carry them out as a part of the grantmaking process. There’s no question in my mind that this is a vital element of strategic grantmaking, and one that we will continue to work to develop at the Hewlett Foundation.”

of self-assessment is valuable to organizational strengthening. For example, a study of Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award winners found that self-assessment “helped them learn about their organization and identify areas for improvement.” However, the study’s author goes on to observe that this benefit is only achieved when the assessment itself is complete and honest (Blazey, 1998).

In all, six areas have been identified as indicators of organizations that are highly effective at communications:

1. Involvement of organization leadership in communications
2. Communications planning and organization-wide planning
3. Staffing and the use of outside expertise
4. Donor understanding and support for communications
5. Managing the communications basics
6. The role of evaluation in communications

We outline the indicators in detail below, and share the perspectives of six organizations to illustrate each.

Indicator No. 1: Involvement of Organization Leadership in Communications

We find that leadership involvement in communications is an important barometer of effectiveness. Our survey research shows that professionals at most nonprofit organizations believe their leaders understand the value of communications. When asked to identify the major barrier that

impedes their ability to communicate effectively, lack of leadership buy-in is identified by only 5 percent of respondents.

Yet, it is the degree of leadership involvement in communications that distinguishes highly effective organizations from their counterparts: Organizations that are highly effective at communications state that their leaders are very involved in their communications work. Significant leadership involvement is reported at a rate nearly 50 percent higher than their low-effectiveness counterparts. *See Perspective 1.*

Indicator No. 2: Communications Planning and Organization-wide Planning

Management literature confirms that an organization’s commitment to strategic planning and its level of discipline in carrying out those plans benefit organizational performance at all levels.

We find that this is equally true for communications: Nonprofits that are most effective at communications operate in a way that demonstrates a commitment to defining and focusing efforts on achieving their communications goals.

Our research has found that communications effectiveness is improved when there is a broader commitment to strategic planning within the organization as a whole, as well as a commitment to communications planning. A majority (61 percent) of organizations that are highly effective at communications have a documented communications plan, versus just 36 percent of low-effectiveness organizations. Equally impor-

Perspective 2: Communications Planning at Ashoka

At Ashoka, communications and marketing is integrated into every level and every program, demonstrating a clear commitment from its leadership. As Bev Schwartz, head of global marketing, shares, "Messaging and positioning have become an integral part of Ashoka's strategic vision to shape an Everyone a Changemaker™ world - one that enables the world's citizens to think and act as changemakers, where each individual has the freedom, confidence, and societal support to address any social problem and drive change toward social impact."

Ashoka's marketing and communications function is both a support mechanism and a program entity on its own. "Communications is intentionally stitched into the fabric of what Ashoka does - in all facets of our work at all levels. We see the communications side of the equation as responsible for a large portion of what enables our vision to be actionable and sustainable," adds Schwartz.

By placing organizational value and a coordinated and budgeted line item for marketing and communications into every program at both the global and country level, Ashoka is inculcating a communications ethic that weaves together vision, strategy, action, and growth as foundational ingredients in defining who they are, what they do, and what they seek to accomplish in the world.

tant, nearly two-thirds integrate communications planning into their organization's overall strategic plans, compared with less than half of the low-effectiveness group. *See Perspective 2.*

Indicator No. 3: Staffing and the Use of Outside Expertise

Navigating the multitude of communications needs within an organization – whether a non-profit group, university, or foundation – requires varied and, in many cases, specialized expertise.

Branding, design, speechwriting, media relations, strategic planning, direct mail, video production, web development, and evaluation are but a few of the skills needed to successfully communicate in today's diverse and dynamic landscape.

We find that organizations that are highly effective at communications have staff with greater communications skills and access to staff training. Less than a third (27 percent) of professionals in these organizations say that staff skills or training

Perspective 3: Staffing at The Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund

The Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund has found a new working model to meet its needs. For example, Denis Chicola knew he needed a fresh perspective. As communications officer for the fund, he was charged with sharing the news of some significant changes to the fund's priorities following a deep strategic planning process. "These were major shifts for us, and we were so close to the issues. It was overwhelming to think about all the moving parts involved in communicating the transition," Chicola says.

So, he called on communications consultant Holly Minch to craft a plan. "My approach was to help the fund surface the key information and implications for its grantees," Minch says, "all in the context of its larger vision." Together they developed a work plan for a short, intensive effort to share the news and shift the positioning of the fund. "The result was a cohesive, coordinated rollout of our new direction," says Chicola.

Building upon the success of that initial engagement, the fund has evolved a split structure for its communications work: Chicola acts as the champion of the fund's brand, and Minch serves as communications counsel to the fund's programs. Chicola manages day-to-day communications of the fund, including Web site and high-level organizational communications. On a parallel track, Minch develops strategies to advance the issues the fund supports, such as a recent public education campaign in support of same-sex marriage. "This approach leverages our respective strengths," says Chicola. "It provides a more robust communications platform for our work."

Perspective 4: Donor Support at Green Media Toolshed

When it launched in 2000, Green Media Toolshed had the support of a number of foundations that understood strategic communications. “In our experience,” shares executive director Martin Kearns, “how people define strategic communications is one of the key differentials in their success. Leaders who understand that communications is a lever for creating change actually integrate it into everything they do. It drives their interactions with staff, donors, policymakers, and their target audience. They understand communications includes listening, and they embrace a mix of new and traditional communications channels.”

Green Media Toolshed's initial funders could see the clear need for affordable communications tools and training. According to Kearns, “We worked carefully in those early years to help these donors understand the opportunity that our Internet service strategy represented. We planned on increasing the quality and distribution of investments in communications tools, services, and training. We planned on lowering the costs to groups. We aspired to build a self-sustaining business model in the process.” Green Media Toolshed is now supported entirely by the annual fees its members pay and the network consulting services offered.

Observes Kearns, “The more than 200 groups we support need foundations to continue to understand just how vital communications is to the success of any organization. Foundations must continue to provide the financial support necessary for all their grantees to expand communications work to improve their effectiveness as strategic communicators.”

is a barrier to their work, while 57 percent of their low-effectiveness counterparts cite a lack of staff skills as an impediment to success. Organizations that are more effective at communications also use outside experts more frequently. *See Perspective 3.*

Indicator No. 4: Donor Understanding and Support for Communications

Raising money is a responsibility that extends beyond the development office at a majority of nonprofits. More than three-quarters of professionals say that existing and potential donors are a key audience for their communications outreach. Lack of money for communications is a constraint for organizations regardless of their level of effectiveness.

However, organizations that are more effective at communications are significantly more likely to say that their donors understand the importance of communications and back them up with the resources needed to succeed. Among the most effective organizations, 72 percent say their funders understand the importance of communications. This compares with 52 percent and 32 percent of medium- and low-effectiveness organizations, respectively.

Whether these organizations are better able to solicit donor support for communications or if donors are more supportive of organizations that communicate effectively is less clear. But the relationship between donor understanding of communications and effectiveness is direct and beneficial. *See Perspective 4.*

Indicator No. 5: Managing the Communications Basics

The ability of organizations to manage the basic communications functions – from giving presentations to developing media materials or producing reports and newsletters – is important to their ability to manage broader communications agendas. Roughly eight in 10 highly effective organizations rate themselves positively in these areas.

We also see that highly effective organizations have significantly better capabilities in areas that are critical to advocating and promoting issues in the public domain. For example, nonprofits that are the most effective at communications demonstrate a high level of media savvy. They are significantly better than their counterparts at developing relationships with journalists and, accordingly, are more able to get stories placed in the media. For example, 72 percent of highly effective organizations say they are successful at

Perspective 5: Communications Basics at Saint Luke's Foundation

Saint Luke's Foundation seeks to provide leadership and support for the improvement and transformation of the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities of Greater Cleveland. "To accomplish our mission, the foundation employs four methods: grantmaking, outcomes measurement, collaboration, and communication," says Kim St. John-Stevenson, communications officer. "To us, highly effective organizations and strong nonprofit programs are buoyed by strong and strategic communications. Without strong communications, even the best nonprofit programs are challenged to succeed."

To that end, Saint Luke's Foundation places significant emphasis on enhancing its grantees' understanding of the basics of good communications. This takes many forms, including direct technical assistance from the foundation's communications officer. But mastering the basics is only the beginning. While activities like producing quality reports and conducting effective advocacy are important (and ranked high on the survey's Communications Effectiveness Index), the foundation goes beyond that. Shares St. John-Stevenson, "The key to strategic communications is understanding how these and other communications vehicles can work as a part of a comprehensive communications strategy that encompasses a wide range of communications vehicles, audiences, and messages."

getting stories placed in the media, while only 32 percent of low-effectiveness organizations report the same.

These organizations also do a significantly better job at targeting and reaching decision-makers, such as community leaders, policymakers and opinion leaders. *See Perspective 5.*

Indicator No. 6: The Role of Evaluation in Communications

Another area that distinguishes the most effective communicators is their willingness and ability to evaluate their work. More than half of professionals in highly effective organizations say they do an excellent or good job of measuring the goals and progress of their communications efforts, compared with 18 percent of respondents from low-effectiveness organizations. In addition, roughly one in three has commissioned independent evaluations of their communications work.

These findings support the notion that improving communications evaluation can be an important ingredient in improving organizational effectiveness more broadly. *See Perspective 6.*

Putting the Index to Work: The Communications Self-Assessment Tool

The usefulness of the index relies on its practical application. In this case, it forms the benchmark for an online self-assessment tool that helps organizations identify where they are relative to other

organizations. The tool itself is a short, free, and confidential online survey designed to encourage candor and participation. Through targeted questions, respondents can gauge their capacity relative to those in the Communications Effectiveness Index. (See Appendix.)

The self-assessment results provide an opportunity for reflection for each organization and its staff, and are intended to raise topics for discussion and encourage further thinking in the strategic areas highlighted in the assessment. The results can provide guidance on areas for improvement and growth and assist foundations and grantees determine where capacity development can be integrated into communications planning, as well as help assess grant requests.

How Foundations Can Use the Tool

The research adds further evidence to the view that foundation support for communications plays an important role in grantees' ability to leverage communications to advance their goals. As the Communications Effectiveness Index reveals, highly effective organizations have funders who understand the importance of communications and provide the resources to back it up.

The self-assessment tool can help funders to better understand where prospective grantees are along an effectiveness continuum and where additional support might be needed to achieve objectives. As Astrid Hendricks, director of

Perspective 6: The Role of Evaluation at The California Endowment

For The California Endowment (TCE), the importance of evaluation has become quite clear. Gigi Barsoum, program manager, states, “Our goals are focused on improving the health of children and families by changing the environment in which we live to create healthy communities. A major take-away from the work we’ve done so far is that evaluation is a tool and should be integral to the overall advocacy of which communications is a critical part. We don’t want grantees to do evaluation after the fact and rely on memory to assess impact, and we want to get away from the notion that evaluation is punitive. Rather, we want evaluation to be seen as a means to help the grantee reflect, in real time, on their advocacy and communications strategies and assess whether they’re working.”

The California Endowment’s interests are at multiple levels. On one level, the foundation wants to know how and where its grantees are having an impact in the policy process. On another, it wants to know which of the funded advocacy communications strategies are more or less successful. Finally, TCE wants to know which organizations are most effective and why, so it can learn how to build the communications capacity of grantees. TCE also wants to build the capacity of grantees to internalize this evaluative approach to inform their communications strategy development as well as refine and adjust strategy as they are being implemented to make them more effective.

evaluation at TCE, puts it, “We funded the development of the Communications Self-Assessment Tool because we see it as a helpful first stage of evaluating the starting point for each grantee’s communications capacity and areas that require development.”

The question now is how the tool can help more foundations support grantee success. We have two suggestions:

- *Use it as a resource during the proposal process.* For most foundations, grant-proposal development and review focuses almost entirely on the prospective grantee’s strategy and work plan. Proposal guidelines concentrate on questions of goals, objectives, timelines, and budgets. While having a coherent strategy certainly is essential, it means little if the capacity is not in place to implement it effectively. The tool offers a simple and user-friendly way to incorporate communications capacity assessment into the proposal process. First and foremost, foundations should ask prospective grantees about their communications capacity either in formal proposal guidelines or during informal pre-grant discussions. Foundations can then refer grantees to the tool so grantees quickly can self-assess and learn what capacities they do or do not have. The tool prompts them to think about how they treat communications in their organizations and what additional support they might need to be more effective. Assessment results can either

form the basis for further foundation-grantee discussions or be incorporated into grant proposals.

- *Use its results to identify the right capacity-building supports.* Once foundations have a better understanding of the communications capacities of their grantees, decisions can be made about how to address any deficiencies that exist. However, it is important that capacity-building solutions fit with grantees’ communications capacity needs. For example, if an organization lacks a leader who understands communications and how to use it strategically, training of communications staff will make little difference. In that situation, the capacity-building effort may need to target the organization’s leader instead. The tool was created both to help ensure that initial capacity assessment occurs and to help foundations appropriately target their capacity-building efforts once the results are in.

Next Steps – Building on this Work

At the end of the day, the index and self-assessment tool give a glimpse of the role that communications plays in an organization’s overall strategy. They were designed to help organizations gain a better understanding of the big picture in order to be more thoughtful about planning and execution. But this work only scratches the surface of what can be done.

Our mission, ultimately, is to have more data that point to what is working and why. It is our hope that others – scholars, funders, researchers, and communications practitioners – will build on this work. Qualitative research that digs deeper into the details of the survey responses, cases studies, and best practices, and work that substantiates what makes for an effective organization, are just a few ideas.

The work we have presented here is a first step, but in the face of all that is evolving in our world, we believe it is a very important one. A full report of the survey findings and the Self-Assessment Tool can be found at www.CommunicationsEffectiveness.org.

References

- BARTON, N., DIMENTO, M., HALL, H., PANEPENTO, P., PERRY, S., PRESTON, C., THOMPSON, C., WALLACE, N., WILHELM, I., & WILLIAMS, G. (2009, December 10). Daunting challenges face the nonprofit world. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Retrieved March 15, 2010, from <http://philanthropy.com/article/2010-Daunting-Challenges-Face/57634/>
- BLAZEY, M. (1998). Insights into organizational self-assessments. *Quality Progress*, 49. Retrieved June 1, 2010, from American Society for Quality database.
- CAUSE COMMUNICATIONS (2008). *State of communications part 1: Keys to effective nonprofit communications. Survey and summary report on its findings*. Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Princeton, N.J.: Author. Retrieved March 10, 2010, from <http://www.communicationseffectiveness.org/Keys-to-Effective-Nonprofit-Communications-Full-Report.pdf>
- FULTON, K., & BLAU, A. (2005). *Imagining the future of philanthropy: Looking back from 2025*. Cambridge, MA: Monitor Institute.
- GENÉ-BADIA, J., JODAR-SOLA, G., PEGUERO-RODRIGUEZ, E., CONTEL-SEGURA, J., & MOLINER-MOLINS, C. (2001). The EFQM excellence model is useful for primary health care teams. *Family Practice, Oxford University Press*. 18(4), 407-409. Retrieved June 2, 2010, from www.opas.org.br/servico/Arquivos/Sala5361.pdf
- SALAMON, L. (2003). *The resilient sector: The state of nonprofit America*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- SALAMON, L., & LESSANS GELLER, S. (2008). Nonprofit America: A force for democracy? *The Johns Hopkins Listening Post Project, Communiqué #9: Nonprofit Advocacy and Lobbying*.
- STROM, S. (2006, November 13). "What's wrong with profit?" *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 9, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/13/us/13strom.html?ex=1321074000&en=7b16652d1015449f&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>
- SWERLING, J., GREGORY, J., SCHUH, J., GOFF, T., GOULD, J., GU, X. C., PALMER, K., & MCHARGUE, A. (2008). *Fifth annual public relations generally accepted practices (G.A.P.) study (GAP V)*. Los Angeles: University of Southern California.
- VAN DER WIELE, T., BROWN, A., MILLEN, R., & WHELAN, D. (2000). Improvement in organizational performance and self-assessment practices by selected American firms. *Quality Management Journal*, 7(4). Retrieved June 1, 2010, from American Society for Quality database.
- Anne Reisinger Whatley, M.Sc.**, leads Cause Communications' research and training efforts. She has a background in coordinating public education initiatives and utilizing digital media to facilitate collaborative work groups of grantees and foundations. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anne Whatley, Cause Communications, 1336 5th Street, Santa Monica, CA 90401 (email: awhatley@causecommunications.org).
- R. Christine Hershey** is the founder of Cause Communications. She consults regularly with senior executives throughout the country in both the corporate and philanthropic sectors, advising on positioning, identity, and communications strategy. Her first book, *Communications Toolkit: A Guide to Navigating Communications for the Nonprofit World*, was published in 2005 has been distributed in all 50 states, 24 countries, and across six continents.
- Julia Coffman, M.S.**, is director of the Center for Evaluation Innovation, a nonprofit effort dedicated to advancing evaluation in new and hard-to-measure areas including advocacy, systems change, and communications. She is also an evaluation consultant to nonprofits and foundations and since 1996 has worked with the Harvard Family Research Project, a research and evaluation organization at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Andre Oliver, B.A.**, is an advisor to Cause Communications and an independent counselor to nonprofits and government, focusing on the intersection of policy and communications. He was formerly director of communications at the Rockefeller Foundation, and has led external affairs departments in government and corporate philanthropy.

APPENDIX 1 The Self-Assessment Tool and a full report on the survey results can be found at www.CommunicationsEffectiveness.org.

**Communications Effectiveness Self Assessment Tool:
Results of national survey listed after each response**

1. How many people do marketing or communications for your organization? (Please count people for whom this is all or only part of their job responsibilities.)

- 1 employee (22%)
- 2-3 employees (39%)
- 4-7 employees (19%)
- 8-10 employees (6%)
- More than 10 employees (10%)
- None (3%)

2. How many of those individuals focus exclusively on marketing or communications?

- None (35%)
- Less than half (19%)
- About half (9%)
- More than half (6%)
- All (6%)
- No employees/one employee do marketing or communications (25%)

3. How important is communications to advancing the mission or goals of your organization?

- Very important (81%)
- Somewhat important (16%)
- Not too important (2%)
- Not at all important

4. How would you characterize the level of involvement of senior leadership, including the CEO and/or Executive Director or Board of Directors, in your organization’s communications efforts?

- Very involved (51%)
- Somewhat involved (34%)
- Not too involved (11%)
- Not at all involved (2%)

5. Does your organization have an up-to-date strategic plan?

- Yes (63%)
- No (37%)
- Do not know

6. Do you have a documented communications plan in place or do you use communications as the need arises?

- Documented plan (16%)
- Actions developed as needs arise (49%)
- Have a plan but also respond as needed (35%)

7. How important is each of the following to the successful achievement of your organization’s goals?

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too important	Not at all important	No answer
Access to experts/consultants	30	41	24	4	1
Buy-in/support within the organization	64	28	5	2	1
Donor support/assistance	49	29	15	7	*
Financial resources	66	25	6	2	1
Involvement of peer organizations	22	45	26	6	1
Knowledge of best practices	56	34	7	2	1
Staff skills	70	24	4	1	1

Support from organization's leadership	74	19	4	2	1
Other	4	1	0	1	94

8. How often does your organization respond to a media crisis or pivotal news coverage of the organization itself or the issues it addresses?

- Always (23%)
- Often (17%)
- Sometimes (22%)
- Rarely (18%)
- Never respond (3%)
- Never face media crisis/pivotal news coverage of organization (16%)

9. What BARRIERS, if any, do you or your organization face on communications? (Please mark all that apply)

- Lack of financial resources for communications (76%)
- Lack of staff to focus on communications (68%)
- Other organizational priorities trump communications (51%)
- Lack of planning/coordination (43%)
- Lack of staff skills/training (40%)
- Lack of leadership buy-in on the importance of communications (17%)
- Issues are too sensitive for public communications (7%)
- Other (4%)
- Total may exceed 100% due to multiple responses.

10. How often does your organization use outside assistance for communications?

- Always (3%)
- Often (16%)
- Sometimes (34%)
- Rarely (31%)
- Never (16%)

11. What kinds of methods, if any, does your organization use to assess your communications efforts? (Please mark all that apply)

57	Observation (e.g. events, service delivery, audience behavior)
53	Web site use analysis
52	Media clipping/tracking
44	Surveys (phone, print, online)
24	Key informant interviews (phone or in-person)
26	Focus Groups
18	Content analysis (e.g. media, legislative)
8	Case studies
2	Other
19	NA/Do not measure our communications outcomes

Total may exceed 100% due to multiple responses.

12. How frequently does your organization use each of the following communications or marketing assessment activities?

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No answer
Conduct audience research	3	8	30	27	31	1
Track your organization's or its issues presence in the media	25	21	21	16	17	*
Track the number of publications or other materials you disseminate	27	22	24	13	14	1

Collect feedback from your audiences on the usefulness of your communications	7	12	33	30	18	1
Track traffic or usage on your Web site or other electronic communications	27	21	21	14	16	*
Track requests that come in for your expertise	17	18	25	20	19	1
Track blogs or social networking activity (Facebook, MySpace, etc.) about your organization	3	8	7	16	64	1
Commission independent evaluations of communications	2	2	14	20	60	1
Track donations	52	15	10	5	16	1

13. What is your organization's annual budget?

- Less than \$500,000 (26%)
- \$500,000 to under 1 million (17%)
- 1 to 10 million (37%)
- More than 10 million (14%)

14. How many people overall are employed by your organization?

- 1-25 (59%)
- 26-100 (16%)
- 101-250 (7%)
- 251-500 (5%)
- More than 500 (6%)
- No answer (6%)

15. In what state is your organization's headquarters located?

39%	Misc. other states
27%	California
6%	New Mexico
5%	District of Columbia
3%	Illinois
3%	Oregon
3%	Virginia
14%	No answer

16. Which of the following BEST describes the mission or purpose of your organization? (Please choose only one response)

- Service provider (25%)
- Educational (18%)
- Advocacy/Public policy (15%)
- Grantmaker (9%)
- Faith-based (6%)
- Membership/Trade organization (4%)
- Research (3%)
- Corporate (1%)
- Other (13%)
- No answer (7%)