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Helping Your Nonprofit Organization Stay Viable During Tough Economic Times

Bradie Sheehan
Grand Valley State University

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***HELPING YOUR NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATION STAY VIABLE***



***DURING TOUGH
ECONOMIC TIMES***

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Preface

Everyone struggles during tough economic times, and no one knows this better than nonprofit organizations. They must attempt to provide the same quality services while taking in less revenue. During tough economic times, they are also usually faced with an increase in the demand for services. Unlike private businesses, they also face the unique challenge of serving clients who may not have the means to pay for their services. To fund their programs, they need to convince donors to give money without receiving something tangible in return. There's nothing that nonprofit organizations can do to ensure their success during an economic depression, but there are steps that organizations can take to increase their chances to remain viable. Through this guide we will look at four key areas of nonprofit organizations, and what these areas can do to weather an economic storm. We will look at the donation, volunteer, human resources, and advertising programs of current nonprofits and how these programs can work together to help the organization thrive.

Donation Program

A successful donation program is absolutely crucial for a nonprofit organization. It provides the necessary funds to deliver quality services. During tough economic times the donation program may need to work harder to get these funds because there is less money donated. Overall giving in 2008 dropped \$6.42 billion from 2007 levels, a 2% drop in donations. This 2% drop affected many organizations, with two-thirds of public charities experiencing a decrease in donations. Despite this drop in donations, giving was still 2.2% of the Gross Domestic Product in 2008. This means that there are funds available for organizations which are able to effectively navigate these troubling times (Bond, 2009). Tough economic times make the necessity of reserve funds clear. Nonprofits need to put away some money during the good times to help continue programs when funds are low. Estimates vary, but nonprofits are typically advised to have at least six months worth of operating costs in a reserve fund but no more than three years ("What Levels", 2008). Having these funds in reserve will help a nonprofit keep from having to close down when donations are low.

One way to help a nonprofit donation program access these funds is to be aware of the changing trends in giving. These trends fluctuate year to year as well as month to month. Being aware of these fluctuations can help a nonprofit know the best times to ask for donations as well as who they should be asking.

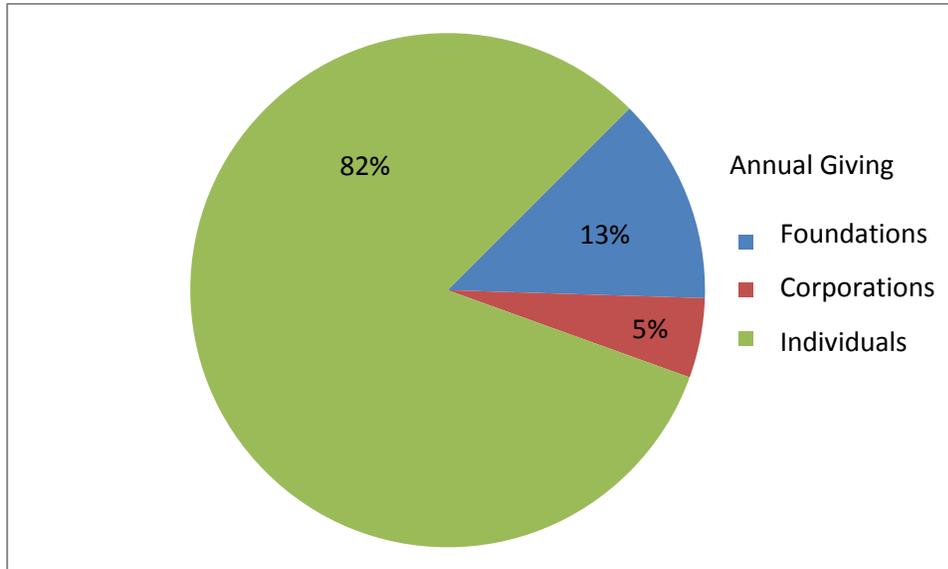
When to Ask

An expected \$75 billion dollars was given between Thanksgiving and New Year last year. This is part of a total \$300 billion which was given over the course of the year ("Philanthropy Statistics", 2010). This means that one quarter of all giving in America is done between November and December. Nonprofits who know this can plan end of the year requests for funding, knowing that they have a better chance for success than they would during other months. This doesn't ensure success for

nonprofits, “one problem for groups seeking donations from the public during the holiday season is the increased competition for people's attention” (Kibbey, 2008). This is something that nonprofits need to keep in mind when planning their appeals. Targeting funding requests is especially important during tough economic times. Funding requests cost organizations resources, including personnel time, which they cannot afford to waste. If an organization is going to put the necessary work into a funding request they ought to do it when they have the best chance for success.

Who to Ask

When making funding requests it is also helpful to know who is donating the \$300 billion so nonprofits can more specifically cater their requests. Of the \$307 billion donated in 2008 13% comes from foundations, 5% comes from corporations and a whopping 82% comes from individuals (“Philanthropy Statistics”, 2010).



It may seem more beneficial for nonprofits to solicit donations from foundations or from corporations as these entities traditionally have more funds to give. Knowing that the vast majority of funds actually come from individuals, though, nonprofits need to be sure not to underestimate the importance of their

appeals to this group. Statistically it makes more sense to target individuals for funds, these individuals make up the base of a nonprofits funding. The nonprofit can cultivate relationships with these individual donors over several years. A nonprofit can then go to these donors and try to leverage larger gifts after these donors become more invested in the organization. Having a loyal base of donors also impresses foundations and corporations. They want to support programs that they can see the community is supporting. These individual donations are crucial, but this does not mean that nonprofits should overlook corporations and foundations all together.

Corporation and foundation donations may be more advantageous for nonprofits for multiple reasons. Primarily, these types of donations may provide more stable sources of funding for programming. A nonprofit can establish a relationship with a corporation or a foundation to get funding to provide services. An established partnership can give a nonprofit more reliable funding so they don't have to worry about being able to serve their clients from year to year. Corporation and foundation donations may also be less susceptible to small changes in the economy than individuals are ("Research Studies", 2010). It is important, though, for nonprofit organizations not to become too dependent upon either source of funding. If a nonprofit is solely dependent upon a foundation partnership then they will struggle, or even fail to continue to provide services if the foundation backs out. A nonprofit organization needs to solicit donations from all available sources while keeping in mind where the majority of donations come from.

A second important trend to take note of in national giving is that 84% of donations come from women ("Philanthropy Statistics", 2010). Statistically, single women give more than single men and when in a couple the women are more likely to decide where the donations will go. Nonprofits do not necessarily need to understand why this is in order to take advantage of it. This does not mean that nonprofits should ignore male donations all together, it simply means that they will probably have more

success when targeting their appeals at women. They can also use this information when creating donor incentives or appreciation events.

Knowing these trends can help nonprofit organizations be more successful at attracting donors but the most important tool for attracting a donor is the nonprofits mission. Finding donors who believe in an organization's mission will help that organization attract more long-term donors. Dean Karlan, a Yale professor who conducted a study to discover why people give found that "Giving is not about a calculation of what you are buying...It is about participating in a fight" (Pynes, 2009, p. 110). Finding donors who believe in an organization's mission will give them allies in this fight. Cultivating these relationships with long term donors can help ensure their continued support helping an organization maintain stable funding. It also opens the door for conversations about planned giving.

Only 10% of people leave money to a charity in their wills. Twenty percent of people have wills but do not include charitable donations, and the other seventy percent do not have wills (Cline, 2008). Nonprofits can approach donors with which they have relationships and talk about the possibility of posthumous giving. If the donor has been a longtime giver they may be very open to the idea of including the organization in their will. Since seventy percent of people do not have wills this is another large opportunity for nonprofits. Many people may be willing to leave part of their estate to charity but they just have not thought about it. Nonprofits can take advantage of this fact with long-time donors.

How People are Giving

Organizations need to be familiar with how people are giving. A possible new source of donations rests in the average American's pocket. It's estimated that 6.5 million people donated money to help with the Haiti earthquake relief efforts using their cell phones. This amounted to \$50 million in donations. Donating on a cell phone is a fast, convenient and easy way for people to give. A study found that 36% of respondents were willing to donate to a cause through their cell phones (Daw, 2010). Phone

donations can be an inexpensive way for nonprofits to collect revenue since they are not funding the papers, envelopes and the manpower it takes to sort them. By partnering with a cell phone service provider, nonprofits can set up this donation format. Individuals then simply send a text message which adds a predetermined donation onto their monthly bill. Nonprofits need to look at these forms of technology which generation y-ers are familiar with and comfortable using.

Online donations are another donation format that nonprofit organizations need to pay attention to. A 2008 study found that over half of all online consumers were planning on donating money online over the holiday season. The study also found that 50% of 25-34 year olds claimed they would give online. This giving was estimated to amount to over \$3 billion (Cline, 2008). This presents a big opportunity for nonprofits to target online givers, especially as 25-34 year olds age and become the primary donors of nonprofits. This will make online giving more and more important in the future. Other traditional methods of appeals, such as direct mail campaigns or advertisements should give donors information about how to donate online. Knowing that more and more donors are turning to new methods of giving can help nonprofits turn to these cheaper, more efficient and effective ways of collecting donations.

Case Study

Nonprofits need to adjust in order to keep the funds coming in. One Michigan nonprofit learned this the hard way. Building Better Families Through Action is a nonprofit dedicated to educating parents about how to be proactive on issues such as alcohol abuse and drug addiction in teenagers. Over the past few years they have seen donations and attendance at events decreasing. Over the past few years the donations from individuals have decreased, but, luckily, as one source dried up another would present itself. Unfortunately, in 2011 the nonprofit ran out of luck. They did not proactively go after

funding sources, instead relying on community supporters to step up to fund the programs. After 30 years of servicing the Bloomfield area they will be forced to shut their doors. (McClary, 2011)

Volunteer Program

In addition to utilizing donors to maintain quality services during economic hard times, nonprofits need to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them by volunteers. Volunteers should not be a replacement for paid staff, but they can help nonprofits by providing labor. They “typically perform tasks that otherwise would not get done or would have to be handled by already overextended employees” (Pynes, 2009). As people have less money to donate they are looking for other ways to give back to the community. One possible way is by volunteering their time. Nonprofits can make the most of this desire by advertising the possible volunteer opportunities available at their organizations. Nonprofits can advertise for the specific skills they are in need of. Volunteers can use their skills to perform jobs that might require skills outside of their staff’s abilities. They are becoming more and more valued because

They cost little, can give detailed attention to people for whom paid employees do not always have the time, often provide specialized skills, provide an expansion of staff in emergencies and peak load periods, enable agencies to expand levels of service despite budgetary limitations, and are good for public relations (Pynes, 2009).

Nonprofits who take advantage of all the benefits offered by volunteers will be in a better position to stay active during economic down turns. They will need to think about how to effectively utilize the volunteers to continue serving clients.

Recruitment

In order to benefit from a volunteer program an organization must first attract qualified volunteers. To do so, nonprofit organizations need to look at possible motivational factors. Why do they volunteer? What are these volunteers hoping to gain from their experiences? By meeting the volunteer’s needs and expectations, organizations can attract and retain valuable workers. When surveyed volunteers claimed that they volunteered for both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. The intrinsic

rewards included “satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and being challenged” the extrinsic rewards included “benefits granted to the volunteers by the organization” such as valuable training courses or free lunches (Pynes, 2009 p.119).

Nonprofits can even take advantage of this tough economy by targeting people who have lost their jobs or people just entering the workforce. These volunteers can gain the cited sense of accomplishment through volunteering instead of working. Volunteering also keeps them active in the working world while they are looking for a new job. Nonprofits can also advertise volunteer opportunities to recent graduates, college students, or recently unemployed people. The volunteer opportunities provide valuable experience that can help these groups get jobs when they start looking. Nonprofits can also provide letters of recommendation and be references for volunteers. Since the job market is currently so competitive these benefits can be invaluable. Volunteering offers six basic benefits to people “enhancing self-worth, learning through community, helping the community, developing individual relationships, making unique contributions, and self-healing” (Pynes, 2009, 117). Nonprofits need to advertise these benefits and also ensure that they are running their program in such a way that helps to foster them.

Volunteering offers many benefits to the volunteer themselves, but one trend that nonprofits need to be aware of is the increased need to recruit them. Unlike paid staff that will actively search out jobs, volunteers need to be sought out and convinced to volunteer and this task falls on the nonprofit organizations. *Human Resources Management for Public and Nonprofit Organizations* suggests a variety of outlets to advertise for volunteers including “word of mouth referrals from other volunteers or paid staff, newspaper articles and advertisements, radio and television spots, presentations before community or professional groups and tapping the relatives and friends of clients” (Pynes, 2009, 119). Adequate advertising and informational meetings about the organization can ensure that the nonprofit

attracts volunteers who can relate with the group's mission. This will help the nonprofit in their strategic human resources management and in working towards their mission statement. A strong belief in the organization's work and in the mission will also help with volunteer retention. When volunteers feel like their work is making a difference they are more likely to continue offering their time. This retention is especially important during tough economic times. Volunteer recruitment can be expensive so nonprofits do not want to lose the volunteers they manage to attract.

Training and Placement

Once volunteers have been recruited, nonprofits need to make sure they properly place them in tasks that match the wants and needs of the volunteer. For example, if a person is volunteering in order to get out in the community and meet new people then a nonprofit organization should not have them filing paperwork all day. Properly placing a volunteer can help ensure their continued interest in the organization. Giving them a task that meets their needs as well as the needs of the organization will help retain the volunteer. This type of a program requires that the organization really get to know the volunteers and learn what they are looking for from this experience. After placing them in positions, training is the next most important step in a volunteer program. A well planned training program ensures that a volunteer is capable of doing the job they are assigned. It also ensures that the volunteer fully understands the organization's expectations as far as quality of services provided. This is crucial for organizations if they want to stay viable. Volunteers provide their time and labor for organizations, but if this labor is not at an acceptable quality then the services are not doing anyone any good. Donors are not going to give money to an organization with a bad reputation in the community. Therefore ensuring that volunteers provide quality services is essential for a nonprofit organization to be successful.

Evaluation

Volunteer evaluations are also a key part of ensuring that volunteers provide continually quality services. It also stops volunteers from becoming complacent in their roles after years of services by giving the volunteers regular feedback about their work. Evaluations also provide volunteers an opportunity to voice any concerns they may have with the organization which will hopefully encourage volunteers to work through problems with nonprofits instead of just quitting. It also provides the nonprofit the opportunity to discuss changing expectations, organizational policies and standards with their volunteers. The notoriously high turnover rates in nonprofits make these evaluations all the more necessary. They ensure that the volunteer coordinator is touching base with volunteers at least once a year and if the volunteer coordinator has changed in the organization then it a good opportunity to make sure that both the volunteer and the coordinator are on the same page. As funding decreases during tough economic times the roles of volunteers in an organization may also change. Programs that had at one time been run by staff members may be handed to a committee of volunteers. These evaluations help to ensure that the quality of the organization's work is not suffering through the changes.

Recognition

A fourth important aspect of a successful volunteer program, after recruitment, training and evaluation, is volunteer recognition. Since surveyed volunteers claimed that they volunteer for satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment nonprofits want to make sure that volunteers are gaining these things from their experiences. Volunteer recognition is one way for nonprofits to help volunteers gain a sense of accomplishment. It makes volunteers feel like they are making a positive impact in their community, like they are a crucial part of a team. This feeling of importance may convince them to continue to help out at local organizations. Recognition events are an easy way for nonprofit organizations to work on volunteer retention.

Costs of a Volunteer Program

It is important to realize, however, that volunteers are not entirely free labor. The nonprofit will have to invest money in a volunteer coordinator, as well as in volunteer recruitment, training and evaluation programs. Volunteers who are mismanaged or inadequately trained can actually do more harm than good to a struggling organization. If these volunteers are providing sub-par services then this work will poorly reflect the organization and may hurt the nonprofits image. The damage to the nonprofits reputation may deter future donors or clients from partnering with the organization. In order to be effective donors must be properly supervised and trained to make the volunteer program beneficial.

Case Study

The costs of a volunteer program can go beyond those aforementioned when the volunteers are no managed well, as the Parent-Teacher Organization from Bellaire elementary school learned. They had a volunteer treasurer for their organization who ended up embezzling \$29,000 from the organization over her years as a treasurer(Miller, 2011). Since she was a long-time volunteer with the PTO she was not watched as closely as she should have been. Volunteers are a liability to organizations and need to be appropriately watched to ensure quality control. Having an embezzlement scandal within the organization can also deter future donations because donors will not trust that nonprofit to properly manage funds.

Advertisement Program

Effectively advertising a nonprofit organization is especially important during tough economic times when there are fewer funds available and a greater demand for services. The recent explosion in the number of nonprofit organizations has also increased the importance of advertising. There are more organizations competing for these limited funds. Between 1999 and 2009 the number of nonprofit organizations grew by 31% in the United States, from 1,202,573 to 1,581,111 (“Number of Nonprofits”, 2009). Adequately advertising an organization can attract donors and help an organization stand out when the sector is swarming with competition.

Advertising Outlets

First and foremost an organization needs to advertise itself on its own website. The website is an important tool which can inform and influence individuals about an organization. The organization’s website even beat out personal solicitations from friends and coworkers in influencing giving. A recent study found that an organization’s website is the most helpful factor in deciding which charity to support with 27% of respondents citing it (Cline, 2008). An organization needs to post updates, showcase pictures and flaunt all successes on their website. The organization needs to make themselves look as impressive as possible on their own website. This is can be especially beneficial when, as cited before, more and more donors are moving towards online donations. People want to donate to organizations that are accomplishing things, and making a real difference. Nonprofits need to use their website itself as an important advertisement for the organization. It needs to look professional, be easy to navigate, be up to date, and provide a simple way for web surfers to donate to the organization.

The other side of this, of course, is that a poorly created or confusing website can deter donations. As online giving becomes the preferred way to give, organizations need to be sure that they have informative websites that encourage online donations. This may be tricky for smaller or older

nonprofits that may not have the funds or in-house skills to create a website, but in order to stay relevant they are going to need to adjust. Even if donors are not using an organizations website to make an immediate donation, they are learning about the nonprofit from it. The website needs to represent the organization in a positive way.

Social networking sites offer other free advertising opportunities. Nonprofits can advertise their activities on Facebook, Myspace or Twitter for free. They can also upload videos of past events they've held, rallies they've organized or samples of services offered to Youtube. Social networking sites can be a quick and convenient way to inform people. This can help individuals become more familiar with an organization before they decide to volunteer their time or money to it. In the long run this will help attract more long term donors and volunteers for an organization. Using the internet also allows an organization to contact a larger range of people on a national or even international level.

Advertising Mediums

It is important to remember that every document produced by the organization is a form of advertising. Documents which include spelling errors, are poorly made or are out of date can make an organization look unprofessional. During tough economic times this can be especially hurtful because of all of the competition for funds. Nonprofits need to positively advertise their organization in order to attract donations. The medium of the document may also reflect poorly on the organization. An environmental organization, for example, would do well to use recycled paper for their newsletters, or even to go paperless through e-mail updates. This provides a level of integrity which will help the organization impress and attract donors. It is also important to consider the organizations financial status when planning advertising. If an organization is struggling to provide services then spending thousands of dollars on a billboard tell donors that that organization does not manage money well and will deter future donations. The link between a nonprofit's advertising and donations makes advertising

a necessity for these organizations. It is no longer a luxury for nonprofits to inform people about their organization. Advertising effectively will help nonprofits stay viable. It helps attract the necessary donations to fund the organizations' programs.

Case Study

One organization which has used advertising to increase its effectiveness is the American Cancer Society. They have advertised themselves as "The Official Sponsors of Birthdays" through multiple commercials. These commercials help raise awareness of the organization as a whole. By advertising their organization they are putting it in the forefront of people's minds. This will make them more likely to think of the American Cancer Society when they are deciding where to donate. They have also used advertising to help them achieve organizational goals, such as raising awareness for cancer fighting legislation. They raise awareness about this legislation to get community support, they rally voters to help get the legislation passed. Their "Action. Now Not Later" campaign aimed at rallying support to change the healthcare system in America to move the focus towards preventative care (Weiss, 2009).

Human Resources

The human resources department of a nonprofit organization can be one of the most important aspects in keeping a nonprofit viable. Since nonprofit organizations are largely service based, personnel costs account for the majority of the average nonprofits budget (“Philanthropy Statistics”, 2010). Since personnel make up the largest cost to most nonprofits, it is crucial to effectively utilize them. The successful utilization of workers in a nonprofit organization can help the nonprofit survive even the toughest economic times.

Incentives

During tough economic times nonprofit organizations may not have the necessary resources to competitively attract or retain skilled staff through monetary incentives. Nonprofits are fighting for every dollar so paying staff the salaries they deserve may not always be a possibility. Unfortunately, since nonprofits are so dependent upon personnel for the services they provide it is absolutely crucial that they attract skilled staff. The necessity of skilled staff coupled with the difficulty in paying for it poses a large problem for nonprofits. They have to become creative in the other incentives they offer. These incentives have three goals: to attract qualified staff, to retain that staff and to motivate that staff to perform in ways which will help the organization reach its goals (Young, 2004, p.51).

Possible low-cost ways to attract qualified workers include offering more flexible schedules or even part time positions (“Number of Nonprofits”, 2009). Approximately 70% of the nonprofit workforce is female so nonprofits can keep this in mind when creating incentive packages. Offering flexible maternity leave or child care options may be a relatively inexpensive way for nonprofits to attract qualified workers (Young, 2006, p.50). Offering the flexible schedules may also allow parents time to attend school conferences or tend to sick children which could provide an incentive for the largely female staff. The relationship between staff and managers is also important. Having a positive

relationship can help attract and retain good workers (Schwartz, 2008). This relationship is based off of a matching process. When the organization is attracting staff they want to pick people who buy into their mission and their goals (Young, 2004).

Another low-cost incentive in a nonprofit organization can be the opportunity for advancement. Having an organization which has a history of internal hiring can inspire workers to not only remain with an organization, but also to work to the best of their abilities to impress their superiors and to receive positive evaluations. An organization which gives preference to their own employees for positions helps to build loyalty within the nonprofit (Schwartz, 2008).

Managing for Outcomes

The nonprofit sector is presented with unique challenges when measuring successes. Since they are largely service based they are more focused on outcomes than on outputs. The nonprofit sector is much less concerned with the profitability of the organization than the private sector is. Nonprofits aim to get funds to be able to provide necessary services, not to gain a profit. They also face the challenge of satisfying multiple stakeholders while the private sector is only focused on pleasing shareholders (Young, 2006, p.34). This is important for nonprofit organizations to keep in mind because they must provide satisfactory services to help the clients whom they are serving and they must also please donors to continue getting funds. The human resources department needs to keep this in mind while organizing their programs. They need to effectively use all resources to both provide quality services and to relay their successes to donors.

Managing for outcomes is especially important during tough economic times. There is much more competition out there for funding so donors have more choices in where they give. This is forcing nonprofits to be more impressive to get the attention of donors which is pushing the shift from measuring outputs to measuring outcomes. Stating the number of clients that an organization serves

has become less important than measuring the impact that the services have on those clients. This impact can be measured and directly related to the mission of the organization (Young, 2006, p. 35).

Nonprofit organizations need to advertise the real impacts they are having on their clients. For example, citing that six hundred students attend afterschool programs is less important than citing a decrease in dropout rates for students who attend an afterschool program. The latter fact shows a positive outcome of the afterschool program. Donors want to know where their money is going and how they are helping clients.

Taking Risks

Another important role of the human resources department is risk assessment. They need to assess and adequately adjust to changes in the nonprofit sector in order to remain viable. Older nonprofit organizations may be resistant to such change, believing that they will be able to weather the economy doing things as they always have. Dennis Young presents several changing trends which will make that impossible:

- More than 1 million nonprofits means increased competition
- Major cutbacks in federal and state funding
- Poor economy is creating increased pressure to deliver services to more people
- Two-career families is leaving people with less time to volunteer
- Recent scandals are hurting the overall image of nonprofits (p.57, 2006)

Nonprofits have to adjust to these changes if they hope to compete for funds, staff and volunteers.

Human resources departments need to assess the possible risks in making changes in today's environment and they need to be willing to take appropriate risks.

Staying True to the Mission

While making the necessary changes to stay open during tough economic times it is crucial that an organization stays true to its mission. “In nonprofits, the bottom line is mission achievement, with profit making sometimes instrumental to the pursuit of that mission” (Young, 2004, p.192). Nonprofits will need to adjust to remain open, but while making changes they must keep their mission and their goals in mind. After all, it is the organization’s mission which separates it from private for-profit businesses. Staying true to the mission is necessary for the long-term success of the organization as well as for attracting donors. The mission of an organization is what attracts the donors and what will keep them coming back. It is the job of the executive director, as well as the human resources department to develop programs and a plan which will keep the organization on track.

Conclusion

By addressing these four areas of a nonprofit, these organizations can help a nonprofit come through tough economic times. Nonprofits are dealing with increased competition for resources and have to adjust to changing trends to stay viable. 'The way we've always done things' is no longer appropriate for nonprofits. By focusing on targeting donation appeals, utilizing volunteers, advertising the organization's successes and having an effective human resources department, an organization will stand the best chance to provide quality services even while dealing with decreased funding. These areas of an organization can help the organization weather these tough economic times and come out on the other side as an effective and viable nonprofit.

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