



# It's All About the Delivery

Making Sense of Industry Research Results and Using the Insights to Inform or Enhance Your Strategic Communications Efforts

By Carole Arwidson

To borrow a quip from a Slack blog post from earlier this year:

**What do comedy and effective communication in the workplace have in common?**

**It's all in the delivery.**

*Ba-da-boom!*

As communications professionals well know, there are myriad ways to deliver key messages to the various constituencies you are trying to provide information to, inspire, and influence. Today, there are numerous communications tools at one's disposal, and plenty of platforms and channels to choose from to execute donor communications work. Week

after week, countless research reports and references to data points or findings in articles arrive in our inboxes, pop up in postings on social media, or get passed along to us by others, often directing our attention to an interesting point or something worth pursuing. Sometimes this plethora of information is insightful or illuminating, other times it's repetitive, once in a while it's contradictory, and often it's simply a different metric or perspective on a data point or finding you've come across before. Regardless, it's a lot of information to sort through and process. And more often than not, you're left feeling overwhelmed by it all and unsure what to do about it in the context of your specific communication efforts.



Not long ago I came across several research studies and articles featuring data points that, taken together, paint a picture of the utility and effectiveness of particular communication tools at our disposal.

- For instance, **despite reports to the contrary, direct mail is far from dead** (reports indicate it's getting a 6% response rate). According to MobileCause.com, 50% of donors are more likely to respond to direct mail when they receive multiple messages across different channels (like social media, email, etc.), and they are 3 times more likely to give online in response to a direct mail appeal than an e-appeal (in fact, 35% of donors say they prefer to respond to direct mail by giving online or via mobile devices).
- **For those who open email, it works.** The Blackbaud "2018 Benchmark Report" noted that fundraising email open rates declined 7.06%, while click-through rates increased by 4.35% (conversion rates remained steady). While fewer people opened these types of emails, those who did were more inclined to engage, which of course is the point. Nonprofits and education in particular are having success with email. According to Campaign Monitor's "Ultimate Email

Marketing Benchmarks for 2019: By Industry and Day," nonprofits topped all industries for open rates (20.39%), followed by education at 18.90%, which still bested all other industries (17.92%). Education fared best on click-through rate, at 2.82%, and click to open rate, 14.94%.

- Of course, we all know that **mobile is increasingly the device of choice**. Almost every report on email open rates concludes that mobile is responsible for at least 50% of all opens. Campaign Monitor noted in a July 2019 blog titled "7 stats that will make you rethink mobile email" that mobile email open rates are significantly higher among younger generations than older audiences and that more than 70% of people read their email in a mobile app, with most checking their email in the morning. A note of caution: In that same blog posting, Campaign Monitor noted that emails that display incorrectly on mobile may be deleted within 3 seconds, no matter how good the content is. Just using mobile technology isn't enough. You still have to use it effectively.
- **In terms of fundraising, it makes sense to include both mobile and desktop.** The M+R "2019 Benchmark Study" shared that mobile

users accounted for a larger share of traffic than desktop users in 2018, but desktop still dominates in fundraising. Desktop users made 68% of all donations and generated 71% of revenue.

- **Demographic differences exist in social media use and preferences, and these too are worth paying attention to.** Pew Research Center reported that 7 out of 10 adults say they use Facebook, with 68% of those ages 50 to 64 and nearly half of those 65 and older saying they use the site. Facebook use among US teens has declined in recent years as they have migrated to other platforms. YouTube is the only other online platform measured that matches Facebook's reach: 73% of adults report using the video sharing site. Instagram and Snapchat have an especially strong following among young adults. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, Instagram and Snapchat are used by 67% and 62%, respectively. Women are nearly 3 times as likely as men to use Pinterest (42% vs. 15%). Around half of college graduates and those who live in high-income households use LinkedIn, compared with 10% or fewer of those who have not attended at least some college or those in lower-income households. And WhatsApp continues to be popular among Hispanics: 42% use the messaging app, compared with 24% of African Americans and 13% of Caucasians.

- **Nonprofits and higher education show strong engagement measures on social media.** In Rival IQ's "2019 Social Media Benchmark Report," they noted that the average engagement rate per post in 2018 for nonprofits was 0.13% and 0.12% for higher education (across all industries it was 0.16% in 2017, which no industry reached in 2018). Engagement is the measurable interaction (such as likes, comments, favorites, shares, tweets, reactions) and is calculated based on all interactions divided by total follower

count. Nonprofits had standout engagement on Instagram as well, where their average engagement rate per post in 2018 was 2.4%. Higher education had a rate of 3.96%, which was also better than other industries. On Twitter, again nonprofits and higher education had top metrics, with 0.079% and 0.062%, respectively. All but media and sports teams posted about 25% less on Twitter.

- **Tools like digital ads, text messaging, and peer-to-peer fundraising are on the rise and are changing how organizations interact with their supporters.** The M+R "2019 Benchmarking Report" showed that nonprofits' increased their spending on digital ads by 144% in 2018, and that fundraising text messages had a 13% click-through rate, while peer-to-peer text messaging earned a response rate of 15%.

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And of course, there's much, much more in your communications toolbox that can help you deliver important content to your supporters, friends, and stakeholders. Print collateral, special events, the organizational website, paid media, blogs, editorials, public speaking engagements—all tools at your disposal and that can be employed in one way or another. (It's highly likely that all of these tools used by myriad nonprofits are behind why nearly half of Americans feel bombarded and pressured by communication from charities, something that must be guarded against and taken into account when developing communications plans.) No doubt, some tools are more effective than others, and that effectiveness likely changes over time for a variety of reasons—both internal and external.

So, what is one to make of it all? Like so much in marketing and communication, it ultimately comes down to the fundamentals.

### **Be strategic and have clear goals in mind.**

- Makes those goals SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic/Relevant, and Time Bound).
- Develop strategies to help achieve those goals. For instance, don't just create posts. If the goal is to drive traffic to the website, then set a goal to increase CTR by X percentage points and use tactics to encourage that traffic.

### **Target the audience.**

- Think about generational differences and how they might impact your choices.
- Segment by affinity group, behavior, or demographics.
- Donors want you to speak to them, to demonstrate that you know who they are, what they care about, and why they are important to accomplishing the organization's work and realizing its vision.

- Effective communication is ultimately good for both the donor and the organization, and of course it's essential to the people, places, and programs the mission supports.

### **Tailor the message.**

- Personalize your message for the target audience.
- Your social media donor demographic may be different than your email donor demographic, so use the right message to capture their attention in the right way.
- Create key messaging and then integrate it across touchpoints.
- While providing donors with the content they need at any given time is essential, it doesn't mean you need to give them all you've got at the same time. Focus on what's meaningful and necessary at any given point.
- Know your brand, be its champion, and ensure messages and tactics are on brand.

### **Use the right communication tool to reach your audience.**

- Survey your supporters and stakeholders to find out where they spend their time and what their communication preferences are—

and then use that information wisely. Facebook and YouTube may dominate the social media landscape, but if your audience isn't there, it doesn't matter.



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- Direct mail is most effective when integrated with other tools.
- The key to successful communication is matching the vehicle with the target audience. Simply put, the goal is to ensure that the message is delivered in a way that is most accessible, most easily understood, and most comfortable for the recipient.

**Focus on multi-channel and multi-touch.**

- Tailor content for the medium but push it out across channels to increase the likelihood that you'll reach your target recipient when he or she is ready to pay attention.
- Develop content that is compelling, authentic, digestible, and sharable.
- Don't invest in "shiny online" toys or bells and whistles if the website is hard to navigate and isn't user friendly.
- Enhance engagement through omni-channel marketing. Continuous engagement is essential.
- Remember, everything speaks (text, images, graphics, events, posts, staff).

It's challenging to try and stay on top of trends and new research while striving to be strategic and juggle the demands of your day-to-day job, all while feeling bombarded by all the different tools and platforms and new technology at your disposal. It can be hard to know what to

pay attention to for your organization and its circumstances, and certainly how best to leverage your budget dollars for maximum impact. Particularly for leaner staffs, it's hard to do it all, especially since many of the things you could do—or even should do—are time-intensive activities. Everyone has to figure out what's best for their organization and its mission, taking into account strategic priorities, resources (human and financial), target audiences, and timing. For some organizations, it's why they turn to outside counsel for their perspective, experience, and bandwidth to be strategic and get the work done. And sometimes it's also for the empathy and additional support.

Avrum Lapin and Andrea Sachs Otto got it right in their 2017 blog post titled "Matching the Message to the Platform: Best Practices in Donor Communication":

*"If you understand the motivation behind their support, their communication preferences, and the best times to reach out to them, your outreach will be more effective, and your donors will continue to be inspired and activated—ready to give of time, money, and general support when the time comes."*

Industry research, institutional research, and experience can absolutely all come together to inform and enhance strategic communication efforts. After all, in the end, it's all about delivery.