

A GRANTCRAFT GUIDE

# COMMUNICATING FOR IMPACT

How can communications add impact to grantmaking?  
How can program staff use communications strategies to support their grantees?

## IN THIS GUIDE

A good communications strategy can amplify a grantee's program and message in critical ways. Although some grantmakers readily embrace communications and its related technologies to meet programmatic goals, others are unsure about where to begin. Contributors to this guide – grantmakers, grantees, and communications professionals – share strategies that can help you add a communications lens to your grantmaking. They also offer tips on evaluating impact and using new technology, whether or not you have a communications department to lend a hand.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Using a communications lens
- Four grantees, four funders, four goals
- Making the most of consultants



"We always try to remind ourselves when we use the latest technologies – whether we Twitter or blog – that it has to be in the service of our mission. It's easy to communicate for communication's sake, especially with all those gadgets that are out there."

—A foundation communications director

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# A sample from the guide:

## The Voice of the Foundation

A foundation may have good reasons to shy away from using its voice, at least some of the time: to keep the spotlight on a grantee and avoid creating distracting controversy, for example, or to honor the preference of a donor or board of directors. Some funders communicate regularly, but only in limited ways – through annual reports, grant guidelines, occasional press releases, and other routine vehicles. Other foundations communicate more freely and often, cultivating a public role, developing new messages in response to changing situations, and experimenting with new media.

A foundation's communications activities are means rather than ends, and any of these approaches can advance a foundation's mission and benefit its grantees. A key to success, grantmakers said, is to be intentional in using three distinctive assets that a foundation brings to the public arena: *reputation*, *relationships*, and *institutional resources*.

■ **Reputation.** When a foundation cultivates its reputation deliberately, it does so because it wants to deploy that reputation in a particular way. Preferences for using the foundation's reputation – when, how, and why – are built into the culture of an institution; they're intimately connected with mission, priorities, and style. Some foundations want to be seen as highly objective, for example, while others make no bones about taking strong positions on problems and how they should be solved. Some want to act behind the scenes only; others are willing to be publicly acknowledged actors, even leaders, in their fields or communities. Some want to be known for careful research; others want to be known as bold supporters of new talent or high-risk projects. The list goes on. "Every foundation has habits and traditions regarding the use of its reputation," a communications director noted.

A communications activity that might seem like an obvious and easy use of the institution's voice – writing an op-ed, signing a petition – actually requires "frank conversations about why this issue and not that one, what kind of precedent we'd be setting," and other strategic questions.

■ **Relationships.** It's often true that foundations have more freedom and pull than other players – government, for example, or a grantee organization – to convene key people and get them talking. But the obligations are significant: when people heed a call from a funder and come to the table, they expect the purpose to be clear. The first step, then, in deciding to use a foundation's convening power is to nail down the purpose: to analyze a problem, seek consensus, develop a joint message, make a plan, launch a cooperative venture, learn from each other, or even just brainstorm. From there, it's important that the agenda be well crafted, the invitation list carefully considered, and the scope of the foundation's willingness to take follow-up action fairly well delineated. Foundations also have wider networks than most organizations, with contacts across sectors. For grantmakers, that can mean the possibility of brokering quiet communications – conversations among parties who have important things to discuss but can't afford to sit down together publicly.

■ **Resources.** Many foundations have a permanent communications infrastructure – a website, regular written and spoken communications with grantees and other constituencies, stated funding priorities – that broadcasts a set of messages to the field and the wider world. When the need or opportunity arises, foundations may also have financial resources that can be used with some degree of flexibility toward special communications objectives. Beyond money, there's expertise among foundation program or communications staff and the ability to augment in-house capacity with a well-chosen consultant or contractor. A grantmaker can help grantees tap those resources by offering personally to be a sounding board on communications or connecting them with colleagues. "If you've got a communications office, call upon them," one grantmaker said. "They'll have ideas, thoughts, and contacts. And think about what you can do to advance small projects. You might be able to fund a grantee to do something like publish a booklet – and help them cross the finish line on an important piece of work."

Communications *by* foundations *about* foundations is not the subject of this guide. But savvy grantmakers know that, when used well, the foundation's voice can be a powerful asset for bringing credibility, purpose, and a certain gravitas to a communications opportunity or agenda.