



# Is it Time to Consider New Ways to Communicate?



New technologies have come down in price and are now practical for smaller organizations. Use them to get your message to your constituents.

By Mike Strand

**L**ike it or not, we live in a world of ever-changing communication technologies. Many nonprofits have taken advantage of new technologies to serve their clients in traditional and not-so-traditional ways. For example, there are cell-phone networks for at-risk populations; staff operations are more efficient through computer and cell-phone networks; and administration, finance, and other support functions have been improved using technology. Nonprofits have given less attention to using the latest technologies to communicate with their constituents — what in the for-profit world would be called marketing communications.

Nonprofits have at least three constituencies: (1) funders (private, corporate, foundation, and government); (2) the community (local and, in some cases, regional, national, and international), and (3) clients or members. Here are some ways you can use technology to market your organization to these groups:

## Survey Your Constituents.

It's now relatively easy and inexpensive to survey your donors or other constituencies online to

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keep abreast of their wants and needs. Several services, including QuestionPro and SurveyMonkey, support online surveys. You can create and publish custom surveys in minutes and view the results in real time.

## Hold Presentations & Meetings Online.

If you make presentations for community outreach, training, or service delivery, you and your participants may find Webinars (online presentations over the Web) more convenient. People can participate from their homes, offices, or even when they're traveling. Webinars have a look and feel that's similar to a slide presentation. Webinar providers include Hot Conference, Raindance, ReadyTalk, and Webex. Prices are typically on a per-use charge with unlimited monthly usage as an option. Webinars will never completely replace live presentations but can become an effective alternative.

Online meeting programs, such as GoToMeeting and Microsoft Live Meeting, can be an effective way to bring together boards and committees or add remote members to standard meetings. At the lower end are traditional phone conferencing services. These have also become more convenient and cost-effective. In addition to the phone companies, other companies, such as Qwik Conference and Spiderphone, offer teleconferencing services.

## Create Digital Signs.

You see them everywhere — electronic billboards by the highway or at airports, promotional signs in banks and other service organizations. The applications are virtually endless because digital signs take advantage of people's acceptance of (and fascination with) television. As a communications medium, digital signs are completely passive — visitors don't have to do anything to see them.

Look at your Web site as more than an online poster board.

## How Digital Signs Spread an Organization's Message

Hope Gospel Mission (<http://www.hopegospelmission.org>) of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, is using a StrandVision digital sign in its Bargain Center to highlight its in-store specials and other services. The Mission also runs men's and women's shelters, a life skills program, an education center, a work training/placement program, and a used auto sales operation.

The digital sign presents a series of 30-50 text slides and images that describe the Mission's objectives and services. The sign also features job postings and special events, such as the recent opening of the Ruth House Women's Shelter. The StrandVision digital sign replaces a repeating PowerPoint loop that required frequent maintenance and was difficult to update. The digital sign is maintained through a Web interface and delivers the digital images over the Internet. Future plans call for adding audio and full video capabilities in order to "air" the Mission's public service announcements.

"The new digital sign plays an important role in our community outreach," explains Craig Pedersen, Hope Gospel Mission business manager. "The Bargain Center is the largest thrift store in the upper Midwest, with 33,000 square feet of display space. Yet, many who visit the Center don't realize that its purpose is to support our residents and our life skills training programs. The digital sign is an in-store advertising medium that lets people know why we're here and encourages them to support our mission."

You can view Hope Gospel Mission's digital sign at <http://www.strandvision.com/?hgm>.

Think about ways you can use digital signs for your organization. Beyond marketing and client services, they're useful for training and employee communications. You can set up TV displays in reception areas to do some or all of the following:

1. **Give** directions and hours of operation.
2. **Outline** services.
3. **Recognize** staff and client achievements.
4. **Post** job openings and volunteer operations.
5. **Show** videos of events.
6. **Feature** public service announcements.
7. **Provide** news and weather advisories.

The signs can display rolling text messages, graphics, or videos (with or without audio). As with other technologies, the costs have been coming down.

### Make Your Web Site User-Friendly.

Have you taken a hard look at your site in the last nine months or so? If not, it's time to check to be sure you're accomplishing your objectives.

Be sure you wouldn't mind reading excerpts of your e-mail in the newspaper.

The challenge is to see your Web site as more than an online poster board. Different sections should have specific communications objectives, such as service delivery or fundraising.

One misconception about Web sites is that they need to include lots of information. Research shows that people skim each page quickly, so keep information brief and change it often to keep visitors coming back.

### Use E-Mail to Connect to Your Stakeholders.

E-mail is constantly evolving, giving you new opportunities to raise funds, target specific groups with personalized messages, and build life-long bonds. A few things to keep in mind:

- **Be sure to accommodate** those who don't have e-mail or prefer to receive printed communications.
- **Remember** that anything that's put into an e-mail is public (this even goes for internal e-mail), so be sure

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## Blogs will fundamentally alter the way we communicate over the Internet.

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- **Don't send** blast e-mails that list all recipients. Many people don't like seeing their name in a long list because it makes the e-mail less personal and allows any recipient to "reply all" with information that's typically not of interest to the others. Either use a database program that hides recipients' names or send the e-mail to yourself and blind copy (bcc) everyone on the list. That way, recipients don't see a long list of names. Also, provide a way for people to opt out of receiving automated e-mail blasts. You can manage the process yourself or turn to outside services, such as Constant Contact.

- **Avoid sending** e-mail attachments. Many e-mail systems are set up to block or remove attachments. Your message is far less likely to get through. A good alternative to attachments is to use HTML (HyperText Markup Language), otherwise known as typical Web page format, for e-mail messages. It has the advantage of being much more graphically interesting, and you can include images, logos, and other elements without having to attach a separate document. Basic HTML pages can be created using Microsoft Word, Open Office, and other standard word processing programs. You can even use this approach to evolve your regular e-mail communications into online newsletters.

### Share News through RSS.

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is related to e-mail in that it's sent to a specific list. The differences are that recipients opt in and it's delivered via special readers available on the Internet. For a listing, visit <http://allrss.com/rssreaders.html>. If you have your own Web site, there are many programs you can install on your server that include the ability to create your own RSS feed. You can then share your Web content with anyone who subscribes to your feed.

### Consider Using Text Messaging & Podcasts.

Text messaging is the new e-mail. Podcasting takes advantage of the Apple iPod and similar technologies to distribute messages. Already, there are millions of podcasts available. See <http://www.podcastdirectory.com/> for a directory.

These technologies may or may not be useful to you today. Regardless, keep an eye on them because they'll continue to evolve and will likely become part of your communications portfolio in the future. Look to emerging businesses for guidance on how you can apply text messaging. Colleges and universities seem to be developing some special insights into podcasting.

## Start Your Own Blog.

The thing to realize about blogs, mobcasts, forums, and similar approaches is that they're truly interactive and enable everyone to participate in "conversations" that will fundamentally alter the way we communicate over the Internet. Blogs can help you spot trends, monitor people's feelings, and shape opinion. Just remember to have paid or volunteer "moderators" review posted messages to make sure they're appropriate and don't expose your organization to any liabilities. ■

## Your New-Technology Communication Toolkit

**Web sites:** There are many providers of the services mentioned in this article. This list is designed to help you see the scope of offerings available:

- **Live Meeting** <http://www.microsoft.com>
- **Open Office** <http://www.openoffice.org>
- **Constant Contact** <http://www.constantcontact.com>
- **Apple iPod** <http://www.apple.com/ipod>
- **StrandVision** <http://www.strandvision.com>
- **InfoCaster** <http://harris.com>
- **Hot Conference** <http://www.hotconference.com>
- **Raindance** <http://www.raindance.com>
- **ReadyTalk** <http://www.readytalk.com>
- **Webex** <http://webex.com>
- **GoToMeeting** <http://www.gotomeeting.com>
- **Qwik Conference** <http://www.qwikconference.com>
- **Spiderphone** <http://www.spiderphone.com>
- **QuestionPro** <http://questionpro.com>
- **SurveyMonkey** <http://www.surveymonkey.com>

**Articles:** Use these articles from past issues of *Nonprofit World* ([www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members)) to expedite the communication process and learn more about new communication technologies:

- **15 Tips to Optimize Your E-Mail Messages** (Vol. 24, No. 3)
- **Leveraging Your Web Site for High-Impact Marketing** (Vol. 23, No. 5)
- **Beyond the Single E-Mail Message** (Vol. 23, No. 3)
- **Using E-Mail & the Web to Acquire & Cultivate Donors** (Vol. 21, No. 1)
- **The New Marketing Model for Nonprofits** (Vol. 22, No. 6)

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