

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL MESSAGE

One of the most important requirements for "marketing" your organization to potential funders, volunteers, and other potential supporters is a clear, consistent, effective organizational description -- an organizational "message" which communicates the nature of your organization, including its purpose and scope of activities, its target population, and its uniqueness. The "message" can help you gain positive visibility and support from other nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and individuals. It is especially important as part of your fundraising efforts.

The organizational message should be accurate and it should be effectively stated, communicating to funders what your organization is and does, and why it is important. Put in a letter of inquiry, a letter accompanying a proposal, or near the beginning of a proposal, an effective organizational message encourages a foundation staff member or trustee to learn more about your organization by reading the materials you have sent.

Following are some suggestions and hints for developing an effective organizational message.

An organizational message should:

- **Provide a clear understanding of the organization's purpose or mission** -- why it exists and its long-term goal.
- **Provide basic information about the organization's legal status or affiliation.** Is it an independent nonprofit organization with its own tax-exempt status? A project of a larger organization? Was it started by, or is it closely associated with, some other entity that may be known to funders?
- **Clearly define the organization's service area or target population.** Is the organization national in scope, or does it serve a particular geographic area (e.g., a particular city or metro area or a region of the country)? Does it focus on a particular target group -- e.g., people with HIV/AIDS or a subgroup of such individuals, refugee and immigrant families, children or youth of a particular age, women, individuals from a particular racial/ethnic group? Differentiate between the organization's location (where it has offices) and its service area, since organizations may have only a single office but serve a large area.
- **Clearly describe the scope of activities or program focus of the organization.** Does it provide direct services, training for teachers or other

service providers, advocacy, public education, and/or some other function? Does it focus on a particular program area, such as HIV/AIDS, education, women's issues, primary health care, or employment?

- **Explain what is special or unique about the organization.** Is it the only organization of its kind, the only one in its community, the only one using a specific approach, the only one with a particular kind of structure? Whatever is special, unusual, or unique should be clearly stated.
- **Make the reader want to learn more about the organization** -- both through the content of the message and through effective presentation. A well-written message should sound interesting and exciting. For example, it should :

, Be clear and specific (e.g., *provide comprehensive services to people of color infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS, provide tutoring, sports activities, and other special attention to refugee youth to help them do well academically and socially and avoid problem behavior, not just provide psycho-social services to refugee youth*);

, Avoid cliches and vague terms (e.g., *consciousness raising, holistic approach, innovative treatment*);

, Use active rather than passive verbs (e.g., *The Children's Center introduces young refugee children to art and music as they take painting and sculpture lessons and perform in the Center's orchestra, not At the Children's Center, children are introduced to art and music through art lessons which are given weekly and through being given the opportunity to play in the Center's orchestra*);

- **Be clear and understandable to funder staff and Board members.** For example:

, **Your name may not automatically communicate anything, so explanation may be required.** Many names, including acronyms (for example, words or acronyms may have meaning in your culture or language, but have no obvious meaning to someone from outside your community; some acronyms are chosen because they also have a meaning, while others simply sound nice. Other names have a positive connotation, but will not communicate the nature of your work unless explained; for example: *My Neighbor, My Sister's Place*. Other names do suggest what the organization does or the group it serves, such as *People of Color AIDS Coalition* and *Vietnamese Cultural Center*. Some organizations

provide both a short and easy-to-remember name and a suggestion of what they do; for example, El Centro: The Family Educational Support Center.

Some non-English terms can be very helpful in explaining your organization, once they have been translated and explained.

Some Spanish words, like *El Centro* and *Salud* may be almost universally understood and help communicate your target group and the nature of your work. Others are likely to be unfamiliar to non-Spanish speakers. For example, an organization called Raices (*roots* in Spanish) may use its name to help communicate to Latinos its focus on culture as a means of helping youth develop self-confidence and self-esteem. Without explanation, the word does not convey any meaning to foundation or corporate officials who do not speak Spanish. However, explaining the word provides a positive message that funders are likely to remember.

Some concepts important to your work may be clear to people familiar with your culture and community, but not to most funders.

For example, many funders know very little about the diversity of the New York Latino community, the large Dominican population, or even the fact that since 1917, Puerto Ricans have been citizens by birth and therefore do not come to New York as immigrants. You may want to provide summary statistics and historical information about your constituency to help funders understand your organization's missions and program focus. Some explanation may be needed so that your organizational message will be understood "in context."

Your organizational message should be consistent, helping to define your organization and used in all your proposals to help provide a clear image. The specific wording may need to be "tailored" for various funders, and you may emphasize different aspects of the organization if you are seeking funding for a particular project or type of activity. However, maintaining a consistent basic content and key words helps you increase donor knowledge about your organization and communicate a clear message to all outside groups and individuals.