

The Importance of Being First

Barry J. McLeish
Vice President, McConkey/Johnston, Inc.



It is hard not to be aware of the enormous and irreversible changes sweeping through our world, the United States, and nonprofit organizations. These changes are not only redefining the ways in which we work, but also the ways in which we interact with each other, and the ways in which we market. In fact, change is happening so quickly that it poses real challenges to the way in which we manage our marketing strategies. How can you and I be effective in marketing our causes and products in an overcommunicated and rapidly changing world. There is a way and it has to do with being first in the mind of those we are marketing to. Can you tell what these three stories have in common?

A private school, using its teachers and administrative staff, personally delivers a thank-you gift (usually fruit, a book, or a framed photograph) to parents of children attending the school once a year. The visit affords parents, teachers, and staff a chance to get to know each other under pleasant circumstances and allows the School to be “personalized” in the minds of parents. No other school in the area tries this type of “thank-you.”

The highlight of the year for ticket holders of a nonprofit theater group is a specially produced play with three performances, staged solely for season ticket holders and their personally invited friends. Ticket holders take special pride in these private showings because it allows them the chance to not only see a production others will not see, but it also allows them to bring their friends to see an organization they are proud to support. The friends of the ticket holders are glad to be included; most of them have never heard of another organization doing this on behalf of ticket holders.

A seminary assigns two donor names to each member of its marketing team to telephone every day, first to thank the individuals for their donation, and then to answer any questions they might have about the Seminary. There is no request for funds by the Seminary during the phone call. Instead, the focus of the call is all on the donor, with the intent to treat the Seminary’s supportive constituency as “special friends” and thank them in a personal and unique way.

What do these stories have in common? First, each nonprofit organization is going out of its way to thank those who provide resources for them and enable them to continue their mission. This is an excellent marketing strategy and each organizations should be congratulated for doing this.

However, something more fundamental is also occurring. In being innovative and personal in their thanking

these supportive constituencies, each organization is also positioning themselves as unique in the minds of those they thank. They are unique because they are the first to thank the individuals who support them in this way.

Other seminaries, theater groups, or schools in the area may not be working this hard - or in such an expressive way - to thank their support groups. However, by paying attention to these donors and supportive communities in a way other organizations are not likely to imitate, the three organizations have positioned themselves as special in the minds of their friends and donors.

In putting donors and supportive friends first by treating them as special, this same group of donors and friends have reciprocally put the organizations "first" in their own minds. As a consequence, these organizations have become leaders in the minds of their friends. And in so doing, they have also created a category in which they are first.

The key to nonprofit marketing success in the latter half of the 1990's is going to depend on most nonprofit executives forgetting how they've done business in the past - and instead, concentrating on developing a new approach and learning a new way to market in the final years of this decade.

Tactical elements most nonprofit marketing plans are used to relying on - strong packaging, multiple requests for involvement and resources, style over substance, positive public relations, and cleverness - will have a harder and harder time working. As will strategies that are based on imitating others or waiting for markets to develop.

For example, what would happen if you and I ran a theater group and became the second theater group to offer free performances to season ticket holders. Do you think we could persuade those ticket holders from the theater group mentioned above to join ours? Probably not. Why? Wouldn't we be offering the exact same thing . . . free performances? Though we would be imitating another organization, most individuals and season ticket holders perceive something novel, innovative, or new as the best. In this case, the theater group offering the free performances first, became the leader. It is thought of first in the minds of constituents.

Instead, you and I will need to do what the three nonprofits I mentioned did. We will have to become first in the minds of our constituents. And, we will need to accomplish this by doing what other nonprofits similar to our own are not doing, whether that is by offering a program no one else does, thanking people in a memorable way, creating benefits for our friends others cannot imitate, or by embarking on a cause or concern other organizations have forgotten.

What are the advantages of being "first?": increased longevity and frequency, and decreased marketing costs to maintain the customer or donor. You can create an impression in your constituents' minds that cannot be swayed by your competition. Your advertising dollars will not have to work as hard to garner attention because your customers and donors have already given it to you. And, frequency of product purchase or donation is increased because your constituency already agrees you are worth listening to.

So, how do you gain a competitive "edge" in an overcommunicated society? Strive to be first in the minds of your constituents.