



Where's the beef?

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Some of us are old enough to remember the 1984 Wendy's commercials featuring the now immortal Clara Peller. Handed an exaggeratedly large bun with a small piece of meat, the elderly and diminutive Peller asks in disbelief, "Where's the beef?"

This expression from an advertising classic has since become part of America's popular lexicon. When you see activity but no results, heat but no light, style but no substance, asking "Where's the beef?" poses a question that should make those queried uneasy.

Although they may word it differently, most donors today are asking the same thing as they consider the nonprofit organizations they support. And if you think that all nonprofits are performing well, think again. Here's just one case in point.

Years ago I was doing a feasibility study for a capital campaign. The organization was coming up on its 50th anniversary and was considering a capital campaign to leverage the significance of this historic milestone. To develop the executive summary of the case for support that I would use in confidential interviews that are always a part of such studies, in a meeting I asked the senior management team to provide a half-dozen names or so of its star performers over the decades, those who had been reached, impacted, and equipped through this organization's outreaches and subsequently had gone on to in turn impact others.

The response? Silence.

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Wondering, perhaps, if they were confused about the exact numbers I needed, I indicated that even three or four of these shining exemplars would suffice. The reply? Once again, uncomfortable silence. I left this meeting more than a little perplexed, uncertain of why I had hit a fog bank.

Days later, in an interview with one of the board members, I was told somewhat sheepishly, "You need to understand something. For 50 years we've been selling *hope*, not results."

While this speaks powerfully to the potential of hope – and why hope in some form should be a part of every nonprofit's value proposition – hope alone ain't gonna cut it these days. More and more, like Clara Peller, donors want to see the beef.

It's worth noting that in doing Donor Value Mapping (a process developed in the course of my doctoral research) with one client, *a single factor out of 28 causal variables explained 50 percent of donor satisfaction and loyalty!* The factor? **Results.**

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Let's assume for the sake of discussion that demonstrable results are a significant portion of *your* organization's value proposition for donors. Would knowing this -- and having hard data to back it up -- influence the content of your donor communications? If so, how?

Or, more broadly, how much of your communications with stakeholders and constituents is driven by actual research into what really matters most to them?

In a nutshell, organizations today should strive for a consistent stream of communications combining "hard" results and verifiable mission related outcomes with "soft" and emotionally moving human interest stories and testimonies. Too many organizations opt for testimonies because they don't have or can't get hard data on actual performance outcomes. Others opt for hard data alone, naively thinking that donors want "just the facts." The truth is, donors want to see both: hard evidence of verifiable impact *and* "humanized" outcomes as seen in stories of individual lives changed.

Today, with fewer and fewer exceptions, donors to nonprofit organizations want to see the results of their investments. Like Clara Peller in 1984, they're asking, "Where's the beef?" Organizations that can't answer that question to donors' satisfaction are becoming an endangered species.

If your organization wrestles with demonstrating its impact, you're not alone. Feel free to reach me at drlarryjohnston@aol.com or call me at 303.638.1827 for a complimentary consultation. We've been helping Christian organizations of all sizes for 40+ years to grow and excel and would welcome the opportunity to explore how we might help you and your organization.

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