

Too Good to Fail:

How Nonprofits Can Meet the Communications Challenges of a Pandemic-Altered World

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4 Things Every Nonprofit Needs to Do

1. Throw away the blueprint.
2. Plan both long-term and short-term.
3. Don't underestimate the power of content.
4. Expect a “phyrtual” future.

As the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic ramp up without any clear picture of what the near future holds, nonprofits are facing existential challenges. With fundraising events canceled, income streams terminated or deferred, volunteers unable to serve in person, and the world's needs greater than ever, it's natural for nonprofits to feel anxious about their organizations and uncertain about how to communicate with stakeholders. When the [Charities Aid Foundation of America](#) surveyed 544 global nonprofit organizations to learn how the pandemic is affecting them, almost all (94.4 percent) said they were negatively impacted.

But the pandemic has also served as a reminder that constraints can breed innovation. For nonprofits, this is the ultimate test of creativity and adaptability. It's a chance for them to show donors, volunteers and communities served who they really are—how they're taking care of people, changing their mission to align with the realities and constraints we now face, protecting employees, and building support in new ways.

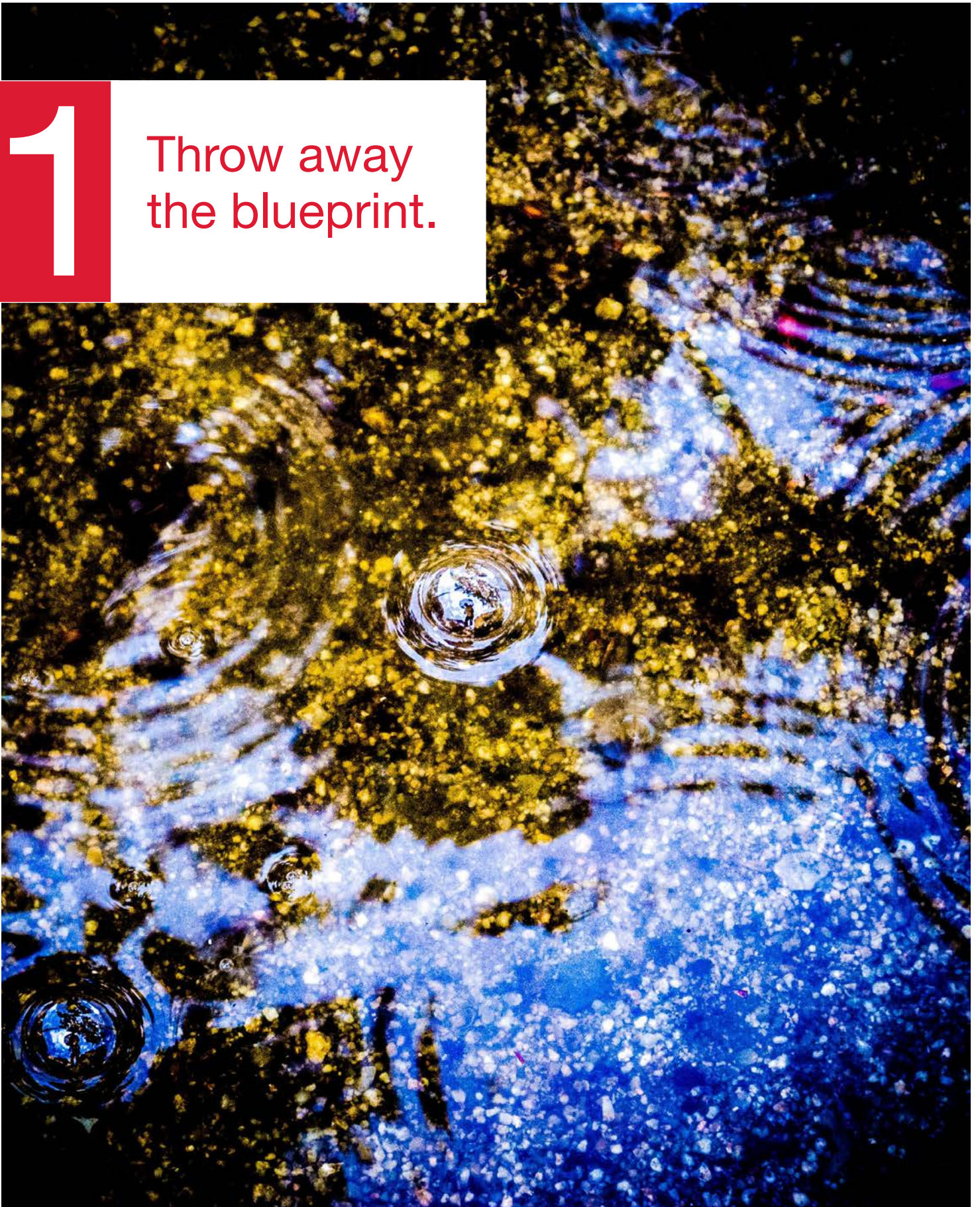
There isn't a playbook to follow in this situation, but the stakes are too high for nonprofits to not respond and adapt. Community-based charitable organizations in the U.S. deliver more than \$200 billion in services each year, touching more than one in five Americans. The nonprofit sector simply can't be allowed to fail.

As a global micro-network specializing in earned, social and experiential storytelling with content and data at the heart, Red Havas leans on actionable insights to inform our communications every day. This report is our high-level look at the landscape of nonprofit communications messaging both during and after the global pandemic. To inform our recommendations, we surveyed 20 U.S.-based nonprofits in a range of sizes, sectors and missions; reviewed third-party data from The Nonprofit Times, Nonprofit Alliance and Fidelity Charitable; analyzed nonprofit media coverage from March 1 to April 30, 2020; and conducted phone interviews with nonprofit leaders.

Our insights make it clear that nonprofits must remain in regular and open dialogue with their stakeholders throughout this crisis and into the future. They must think in new ways, embracing our current circumstances and making intelligent plans for thriving in the uncertain times to come.

1

Throw away
the blueprint.



The COVID-19 pandemic has upended just about every part of the [nonprofit sector](#). Staff members suddenly had to figure out how to work remotely, donors are dealing with a precarious economic environment, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. The cancellation of in-person events has had a particularly massive impact. In the U.K., where the [London Marathon](#) raised £66.4 million for charities last year, it's estimated the charity sector will lose £4 billion in income during the pandemic. And in [New York City](#), the Metropolitan Opera has canceled the remainder of its season, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art has said it expects a \$100 million shortfall. Worldwide, the entire sector is surrounded by uncertainty.

Communicators progressing through this fluid situation must acknowledge that there is no blueprint for dealing with this crisis. They need to pivot and course-correct from their existing strategic plans and contextualize their messages to focus on what is top of mind for each key stakeholder today. Communication strategies must be revisited to ensure that all messaging mirrors the current state of affairs. It also must evolve as the situation progresses.

Organizations should take a realistic look at themselves and how the need for their services has changed.

Fundraising consulting firm [Schultz & Williams](#) suggests that nonprofits consider which of three categories they fit into: “hibernators” that will be essentially unable to operate for the duration of the crisis; “responders” that have seen their program demands increase in direct response to the crisis; and “hybrids” still meeting crucial needs that are not directly tied to COVID-19.

For example, responders are in a good position to step up requests for emergency funding, while hibernators and hybrids may need to tone it down in this environment and focus instead on stewardship of their mission and communicating how they are responding to challenges. An article by [Harvard Business Review](#) explains how nonprofit leaders can keep stakeholders close by anticipating needs, creating new programs, nurturing their people and asking for help. The ability of an organization to recover once the clouds lift will be directly tied to how well it does all this.

It's imperative for nonprofits to take control of their story and make sure their supporters know how they're responding to the crisis. They should communicate thoughtfully, and frequently evaluate their own efforts' ability to reach all relevant audiences. A nimble communications strategy has never been as important as it is right now.

“We can't just duplicate what we had planned. We have to create something new that reflects today's reality, building in flexibility given how fluid the situation is.”

— **Margaret Bailey**, Board VP,
Make The World Better



88% of nonprofit organizations in the Red Havas survey say their primary immediate need is funding. According to a recent Nonprofit Alliance survey, 75% of nonprofits have adjusted messaging in their fundraising appeals to acknowledge the pandemic.

2

Plan both long-term and short-term.



Nonprofits operate with [razor-thin margins](#) even in the best of times. And now, everything about how they work and communicate has changed. Things will remain in flux for the next three, six, nine months or even longer.

This is not the time for any organization to make set-in-stone plans. Instead, nonprofits must think in phases. Short term, they should look at what they should be doing during the crisis and how they can connect their mission and program to current events. Even if they are not part of the front line, nonprofit work matters just as much as it did before. However, it might no longer be a priority for some volunteers and donors unless the nonprofit can pivot to address more immediate needs. In the medium term, nonprofits should consider their plans for the recovery phase and how they can contribute to a return to normalcy while maintaining the safety of stakeholders. Finally, they should consider what the organization

will look like on the other side—their unique “new normal” in a world after the pandemic.

Whatever path nonprofits choose with fundraising, they shouldn’t stop talking to donors and other stakeholders.

They should look for new ways to engage to keep the momentum going with relevant messaging on what the community needs and how they can help. Audiences are likely spending more time than usual online, so it may be appropriate to continue to invest in donor acquisition to grow the list of people who can potentially help the organization recover from the crisis.

Once a communications plan has been established, nonprofits should look at their strategy and planning just a week at a time to make decisions in the here and now. Communicators will want to stay agile, analyzing risks, evaluating changing attitudes and behaviors, and reassessing communications plans accordingly.

“It’s important as an organization to contextualize your mission and programs in the context of what is happening today and how you’re relevant, particularly when your connection to the pandemic isn’t inherently obvious.”

—**Anne Marie Dougherty**,
Chief Executive Officer,
Bob Woodruff Foundation



61% of nonprofits surveyed by Red Havas have canceled or postponed fundraising or gala events; they will face losses unless they can find creative alternatives. But according to a Nonprofit Alliance survey, 44% of organizations did not have a plan to replace these events.

3

Don't underestimate the power of content.



Social distancing and stay-at-home orders have created a captive audience for the news media, brands and nonprofits alike. Research from [Kantar](#) indicates that social media use is up by 61 percent since the pandemic started, which means audiences are more present there than ever—providing nonprofits with a unique opportunity to deepen relationships with existing stakeholders and engage new ones.

Capitalizing on this requires a “business as unusual” approach. It’s important for nonprofits to review their content—from key messages used in an interview with the press to social media posts to e-newsletter copy—through a pandemic lens to be sure it is relevant and meaningful in the here and now.

One other point to consider: According to the Kantar research, consumers are choosing brands that put their employees first. Nonprofits, too, should be sure they are speaking to their audiences about how they are taking care of their staff and volunteers.

For many nonprofits, events serve as an important pillar for content—from pre-event promotion to in-the-moment celebratory content to post-event highlights. With many events and other group activities on pause, nonprofits are searching for ways to close this gap.

One tactic to consider is mining the content library and sharing flashbacks to showcase previous milestone events and accomplishments. Facebook kick-started this trend back in 2015 with the launch of its “Memories” feature, and this commemorative content-sharing mechanism has become a popular and effective means of sharing content that looks backward and, at the same time, forward to better times to come.

Another tactic for nonprofits to consider is how they can harness their internal expertise, combined with that of key partners, to bring forward informative thought leadership—in the form of bylines, blogs or white papers—that speak to the short- and long-term implications of COVID-19 on the communities they serve. For example, if an organization’s mission is high-touch, in-person mentoring programs for youth in underserved communities, it might write a white paper on the implications of social distancing on mentorship programs and share a framework for tackling these new challenges.

These materials can then be “serialized” for sharing on social media and also leveraged for outreach to individual donors and corporate partners as a springboard for starting conversations or funding new initiatives.

“We are even more active on social media these days. We used to focus on sharing facts and stats to substantiate the need or advocate for support for our communities such as SNAP benefits. Today, we are reporting on what we are doing on a day-to-day basis in response to the COVID-19 crisis.”

— **Melanie Cataldi**, Chief Impact Officer, Philabundance



Before posting, pause to ask:

- How does this content meet our audience’s changed needs during this period?
- Are we communicating with compassion for people struggling with lost lives and livelihoods?
- Will this enable people to access critical services?
- Does this help people understand how we are responding to COVID-19 or adjusting our programs to better serve our stakeholders?
- Does this offer information or answers people are missing or provide them with a resource they can learn from?
- Will this inspire people to take action (e.g., share the information, donate to the organization)?

4

Expect a
“phyrtual” future.



Prior to the pandemic, nonprofits were beginning to embrace a digital transformation, as 64 percent of them worldwide were planning to invest in new technology in 2020, according to the BDO Institute for Nonprofit Excellence's [third annual "Nonprofit Standards: A Benchmarking Survey."](#) The pandemic has accelerated this shift beyond what anyone could have expected.

As once-in-person events are forced online, society has rapidly ramped up the necessary technology, as well as our comfort level with this kind of gathering. Nonprofits are rapidly turning to digital fundraising platforms and have reshaped traditional peer-to-peer events to be online. We're expecting that in the post-pandemic future, such stakeholder experiences will no longer be either "physical" or "virtual," but both.

March of Dimes, for example, has transformed its signature March for Babies walk series into a virtual program, [March for Babies Step Up](#). In [Houston](#) and [Minnesota](#), nonprofits are getting creative with virtual fundraisers and gala events as spring ushers in the biggest fundraisers of the year.

Major social media platforms have launched or extended new fundraising tools during the pandemic. [Instagram](#) now allows organizations to easily create fundraisers on Live, meaning that nonprofits can conduct the social equivalent of a telethon. And [TikTok](#) has created "Donation Stickers" for users to add to their livestreams to raise money for selected charities—including the CDC Foundation, the James Beard Foundation, Meals on Wheels, MusiCares, the National PTA, the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation, No Kid Hungry and The Actors Fund. TikTok also pledged to match the initial donations raised, automatically adding "#doubleyourimpact" to the captions. These new donation tools are sure to be permanent features that nonprofits will want to continue to use after the crisis is over.

COVID-19 has also pushed nonprofits to rethink volunteering. While there is still a need for in-person opportunities, organizations such as the [United Way](#) and [New York Cares](#) have created online volunteer programs to help communities. As these systems are tested and perfected, they should be expected to continue into the post-pandemic world.

"Our program is high touch, offering individualized mentor support and group tutoring through weekly in-person sessions. While we've moved to a virtual program this spring, we are having to rethink how we can deliver a comparable experience for mentors and mentees if current conditions persist through the fall."

— **Jordan Koslosky**, President, Minds Matter of Philadelphia



In the Red Havas study, 61% of nonprofits have offered new remote services in response to COVID-19, and 94% now offer remote work opportunities.

»» A final call to action

As nonprofits find their footing in this new environment and learn to adapt their ways of working and communicating, they must also think through how to do a better job of proactively preparing for all types of emergencies in the future. Nonprofits frequently operate in a reactive mode, with the energy and resources to do little more than put out fires. As a result, many organizations have been caught completely off-guard by the coronavirus pandemic. But this will not be the last crisis we face as a society.

In times of crisis, nonprofit leaders must learn to act with speed to innovate, execute and deliver not what people have needed in years past, but what they need today. To communicate this evolving mission requires a fresh look at existing best practices and the skill set to adapt on the fly.

As a result of this pandemic, we can expect some nonprofits to collapse, others to merge and still others to be supported by governments that step in to help keep these crucial organizations afloat. Those left standing will use the new ideas and resources that come out of this crisis to permanently improve their ways of working and communicating. They will go forward with a stronger support network and renewed commitment to their vital missions.



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