

Marketing Needs a Seat at the Table

Having someone on your leadership team with a marketing mindset can help drive your organization's strategy and mission.

By Tanya Giovacchini

Say the term “marketing” and you might envision someone choosing logos, changing corporate colors and fonts, or even creating your favorite commercial. While all of these certainly fall under the headline of marketing, those who hold marketing roles in nonprofit organizations can often bring much more to the table. In fact, marketing can help drive an organization’s strategy and unite myriad stakeholders—internal and external—in meeting your organization’s mission. “Marketing is the magic of nonprofit organizations,” says Angela Geiger, chief strategy officer of the [Alzheimer’s Association](#). “No matter what that end goal is, marketing is what makes that happen. You either let people know that things are available that are going to benefit them directly, or that’s how you inspire people to change the world. ... The better you are at that, the better you are at communicating your vision, the better you are at giving people ways to engage in ways that they want to engage, the faster you’ll make progress.”

Many nonprofits have recognized the potential power of this “magic” and have built marketing roles into their top leadership. In the private sector this job is called the chief marketing officer (CMO). The titles of the individuals who hold these responsibilities in nonprofits vary. Larger nonprofits might have CMOs dedicated solely to the task, while smaller organizations might delegate or subsume the responsibilities under other leadership roles, such as development director. Regardless of who on the leadership team holds these skill sets and responsibilities, it is clear that nonprofits need effective marketing to achieve their missions.

Marketing Is about Mission

For marketing to work, the story it tells has to be true. Yes, hyperbole, theatrics, and half-truths may garner attention in the short term, but for nonprofits especially, marketing’s message has to accurately reflect the organization’s brand—the nonprofit’s core values—and make sure that brand is represented in every part of the organization. Graham McReynolds, chief marketing and development officer for the [National Multiple Sclerosis \(MS\) Society](#), says getting employees and volunteers to understand that marketing—the values associated with the organization and its brand—is part of what he and his team does.

“One of the challenges ... is to really help [the organization] get past thinking of a brand as a set of colors and marks, sayings, and styles,” he says. It’s about “getting at the core ... it’s who we are and how we act.”

Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02116
T. 617.572.2833
F. 617.572.2834

New York

112 West 34th St., Suite 1510
New York, NY 10120
T. 646.562.8900
F. 646.562.8901

San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104
T. 415.627.1100
F. 415.627.4575

And it's about making sure the entire organization lives up to those values. "When you do branding properly, it naturally links to strategy," says [YMCA of the USA's \(Y-USA\)](#) Chief Strategy and Advancement Officer Kate Coleman. "The decisions we made when we rebranded—our core promise, our areas of focus—are providing the frame within which we are designing our strategy."

As a result of this need to link strategy and brand, the person who holds an organization's marketing responsibilities and the people reporting to him or her must have the skill sets that can help drive what is strategic about an organization's mission. Their marketing skills can connect and inspire stakeholders to help advance an organization's mission. They also bring to the table skills and strategies that can help drive change and results by reinventing and reinforcing an organization's brand promise.

Skills CMOs Bring to the Table

The ability to connect, inspire, and even persuade stakeholders is a key skill set many CMOs possess. "Marketing is really about engaging people with your cause, whether it's as advocates or program participants or donors," says Y-USA's Coleman. "We think about marketing as a process that helps people move along a gating path of increasingly active involvement with our organization."

[Feeding America's](#) Chief Brand and Development Officer Johanna Vetter reinforces the importance of having this critical skill on a nonprofit's leadership team. "The ability to influence how the brand should be communicated throughout the organization and collaborate with organizational stakeholder so they embrace the value of that, to better engage people is one of the keys to success," says Vetter of the CMO role.

This skill figured prominently in 2007 when the decision was made to rename America's Second Harvest, Feeding America.

"With the rebrand, came an opportunity to increase the public's awareness of the hunger issue and to more transparently communicate the mission of the organization, which necessitated the role of a newly created chief marketing officer," says Vetter. Historically, the CMO at Feeding America had overseen communications, cause marketing, and brand marketing, yet when Vetter took on the role a couple years later, the role transformed into a chief brand and development officer, in order to better link brand marketing and individual development. "The role was architected to better leverage brand marketing and individual fundraising because we know that awareness of hunger and Feeding America leads to engagement, and we needed to more consistently bring to life our organization (and brand) across all of our efforts."

From Marketing to Metrics

Leaders responsible for marketing not only can help make the connections, but can also possess the tools to determine whether they're having impact. "The biggest challenge for a chief marketing officer, or anyone in a similar role, is to be willing to not just take responsibility for the strategy, but be willing to be held accountable for the results," says Geiger. "Nothing will get you a seat at the table faster than demonstrating actual real value to the organizations, whether that's more donations, whether it's higher branding, whatever the metrics are that are important in whatever you're trying to drive."

Geiger and her organization focus on measuring five strategic objectives in their strategic plan. Marketing, specifically, is measured in two ways. First, whether there is increased concern in

the general population about Alzheimer's disease; and second, whether there is increasing awareness of the association as a resource for those concerned about the disease. "What I find the biggest mistake people make is just creating a campaign or the messaging but then not being held accountable on the other side for driving results," she says. "That's one of those things I really enjoy about the way my job is structured: not only do I have the opportunity for all the marketing strategy, but I also get to implement it."

But coming up with metrics isn't enough. Vetter, for instance, knows that part of her role also is to refine and re-test what Feeding America is measuring.

"We regularly measure top-line brand metrics from our brand tracker, from brand awareness to brand attributes to 'would you tell a friend' type of metrics, but we have also developed a whole second layer of metrics as it relates to drivers to brand awareness," Vetter says. "After finishing our strategic plan, we relooked at our outcomes metrics. One of things we are exploring is 'How do we develop an engagement index across some of these metrics?'"

Engine for Organizational Change

Taking key marketing skills and demonstrating the effect they are having on an organization can lead to even bigger things, such as wholesale organizational shifts in strategy. For example, when McReynolds became the National MS Society's chief marketing and development officer, the organization "was suffering from an identity crisis." Creating a chief marketing officer position was aimed at solving that.

"I think at that time in the organization, we were suffering from an identity crisis, pending where we were and who we were with," McReynolds says. "We were different things to different people... I think it was clear that it was limiting us from being a powerful force for change."

As a result, a success in one area was usually isolated, a collection of individual achievements but nothing that was sustainable or that would fuel other successes. So McReynolds' mission was to create a brand that would serve as a rallying cry, something that would bind people together and then become the platform for change across the organization.

"I really think that was the early work in my first two or three years on the job," McReynolds continues. "That work of getting internal stakeholders to come together, to find a place to stand together and to begin to use that to drive other needed organizational change in how we were structured and how we approached our work," he says.

Because the National MS Society had never had a CMO before, McReynolds first had to help the organization understand how marketing could help them. The organization, according to McReynolds, committed itself to the fact that the brand was centered on people with MS, how they coped with the disease, what they valued, and their hopes about what the MS Society could provide them. "One of the first things we did was establish coping archetypes and did just a baseline, which people would not probably consider brand research, so that we could actually understand that our brand was built on the trust of people with MS and that your willingness to do something for the MS cause and specifically for the National MS Society is going to rely on what the person you care about or love in your life with MS says about us. That was sort of that center point, that truth that we worked from," he says.

The organization grew to understand that it served a spectrum of people with MS, from new diagnosis to those with advanced symptoms, and it had to be true to all of them. "We had to be

an organization that they would say, 'I'm reflected here, so I can belong, and therefore, I can tell others it's the right place to support this cause,'" says McReynolds. "We needed to authentically show all the different ways that you could live with MS," he adds. "Our issue was really to shift from the poster child syndrome of disease organizations to something where people living with the disease were powerful," McReynolds adds.

The organization started to infuse this sense of identity into all that it did. Most organizations see brand as positioning and a set of assets and the people who do the communications, says McReynolds. "We were actually changing who we were, how we hired, how we trained people, what personal interactions looked like," he says. "Marketing was embedded into research, and it was embedded into programs and services and advocacy and fundraising and every element of the organization it became the core for those strategies around it... it goes well beyond branded communications, right? It's about making that identity at the heart of how you actually approach and do work. Now you have a revolution."

Tanya Giovacchini is The Bridgespan Group's chief engagement and marketing officer. She works out of Bridgespan's Boston office.

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